

*The Gentleman*

Edison Marshall

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*THE GENTLEMAN*

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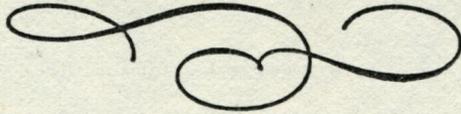
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*The* GENTLEMAN



*By* EDISON MARSHALL



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To John Farrar and Roger W. Straus, Jr.  
in appreciation of ten years of  
pleasant concert

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# The Gentleman

## BOOK ONE

### CHAPTER I

#### The Dream

This tale of a Charlestonian and his dream can well begin on a late fall afternoon on a street in my native city.

The street was not an alley, such as I lived in, off Marsh, in Upper East Bay: nor a cool, shady avenue of stately houses. It was a lane of once respectable but now shabby lodgings in a kind of no-man's land between. The year was 1841. I, Edward Stono, had recently passed my tenth birthday. The leaves of the neglected shrubbery and dying trees in the yards had the subdued but lovely colors of the Low Country autumn. The central figures of the scene were a group of boys, in their teens or younger, playing toss-at-a-crack for quarters. Not only the amount risked, but the clothes and appearance of the players showed they were foreign to this neighborhood. I knew them for youths from up about the Battery, some being bona fide Charleston aristocrats, others the sons of rich merchants, who had wandered here in unconscious quest of adventure.

Some neighbor boys and I stood back at a respectful distance, watching. Since I was more neatly dressed and better scrubbed than they, I did not want the resplendent boys to count me among them and had drawn off alone. The doings of their betters, especially when making such a display of wealth, never ceased to fascinate poor whites. A boy of about fifteen, Butler Mims, a Johnny-come-lately but a natural leader whose shrill laughter discomfited even his best-born companions, excited them by winning all the stakes.

His opponents fell away as their pockets emptied. Presently only two were left, and they soon drew back, shaking their heads. "You've got your rabbit's foot with you today, Butt," one of them said.

Butler jingled a big handful of quarters, squinted at the sky, then turned with a mocking grin to the cluster of ragamuffins.

“Any of you fellows want to try a toss? I’d just as soon take money from sow’s ears as from silk purses.”

I had heard a similar saying once before—mouthed by a customer of my seamstress mother. She had said, speaking of a new-rich man trying in vain to get invited to the Saint Cecilia Ball, that “you can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.” The woman had assumed that we were sow’s ears too, an inference we could not miss. Yet Mamma had not spoken, her mouth full of pins, then her eyes had filled with tears; and the gross insult rankled in my heart.

As Butler Mims used this expression now, a strange thing happened to me. It was some effect of fury I had never felt before. It was an explosion that did not change me outwardly, and which left me cold and capable.

“I’ll toss with you, Butler,” I said.

“To you, I’m Mr. Mims, but that won’t stop me taking your money. Let’s see the color of it.”

I brought four quarters from my pocket. Running an errand for my mother, I had collected them, along with a dollar bill, only half an hour before. I had not the least hesitancy over risking the money, in spite of our need. Truly I felt no sense of risk.

“They look all right,” the crude youth went on. “I reckon they’re not tin.”

He slapped a coin on the back of his hand.

“Heads or tails for first toss.”

“Tails.”

“I win.”

He tossed then, and the coin slid in the dust within eight inches of the line. I tossed with a concentration of mind, a power of aim, that I have never since been able to explain. The coin fell and lay still exactly on the line.

That was the first of eighteen throws. Not one of mine missed the line by more than six inches, or failed to beat his throw by at least half that distance. It would seem that the boys gathering about, boys who had never noticed me before, would ruffle me and break the run of deadly accurate pitches; but it did not. The game went on with the cold monotony of machinery; I did not invoke Chance because I did not need her, I played with a chill fury and won by some sudden endowment of co-ordination between hand and eye.

After the eighteenth throw, Butler turned his pockets inside out. Flushed and hot-eyed, he scraped the toe of his shoe in the dust, contemplating what he might do to recoup. Only the presence of his friends and companions, before whom he must not forsake all show of sportsmanship, saved me from his violence.

“You were just off your game, Butler,” said one of the younger boys, toadying to him.

“No, that was old Lady Luck, paying me off good and proper for playing with white trash,” he answered.

It was a very effective answer. He could have studied all day without doing better. It caused his companions to spit, look at trees, avoid one another’s eyes in embarrassment that they did not quite understand, whistle and grunt, and then suddenly collect in a compact band and hurry down the street. The ragamuffins who had watched me win, perhaps with glowing hearts, dared not speak to me, again not knowing why, and straggled away.

I was left alone. My noble fury passed. Over me fell a long shadow from the march of coming event. My face twisted, and I cried.

## 2

Christmas of that year had come to the Carolina Low Country, bringing raw, windy weather. It was being celebrated on the great plantations and in the mansions by the High Battery with a merriment, an easy grandeur, and a tradition worthy of the noble houses in England. If anyone had asked me, Edward Stono, I could have given a glowing and quite full account of the festivities there, despite the brevity of my years and my never having entered a plantation gate or crossed a mansion’s threshold. But I had listened with ears that felt as though they were standing up and out like the ears of a skittish mule to the boasting of Negro coach and carriage drivers, white overseers and bailiffs, and, occasionally, the gossip of harlots.

There would be dinners and balls and eggnog parties, and, if weather permitted, oyster bakes on the riverbanks. For the gay, lithe, handsome, outdoor-loving men, there would be duck shooting on the flooded rice fields, fox hunting on horseback, and deer and turkey shoots in the hills. For youths and maidens only a little older than I, there would be picnics, square dances, and kissing games. Although I could kiss, if I pleased, the raggedy but pert and pretty daughters of our neighbors, it would be in no way the same. There was a wall higher than St. Michael’s steeple between the alleys of Upper East Bay and the Battery. Still I need not fear its long, cold shadow for someday I would climb it.

Christmas was not so fine in our damp, mouse-ridden hovel, yet it had a saving grace, and that was love. In token of it my mother gave me a new coat, of a cut above my station, bought with silver earned by her tired fingers, and on one of them I slipped a ring, gold-plated with an imitation diamond, that Faro Jack had given me for running a delicate errand. I heard love in her soft voice whenever she spoke to me. I saw love in her face at every glance. It was once a beautiful face, I thought, with an olive skin, flashing dark eyes, and a wide warm mouth. A gentleman such as Charles Stono, my father, taking a tour through the West Indies, could think it was the most beautiful face he had ever seen. Although now it looked older than her years, love lighted it still.

She had got herself something, too—a double quantity of cheap West Indian rum such as she bought every Saturday. She had begun on one of the bottles on the morning of Christmas Eve; late on Christmas Day she had opened the second.

“Look out, Mamma, or you’ll get tipsy,” I warned her.

“Just a leetle—on Christmas.”

When she had swallowed the inch of pale liquor in a chipped teacup she caught a glimpse of herself in the cracked mirror hanging over the kitchen table. Then she picked up the candle and stared. When she spoke, it was as though she had read my mind.

“I’d not want him to see me now.”

“How could he see you, when he’s been dead—nine years?”

“Is it nine? Let me sink. My head swim.” She waved the candle in a circle.

“Put down the candle, Mamma, and sit down.”

“Yess, I had better. I am a liddle dizzy.” She smiled into my eyes and became less dizzy. Some strength I had seen before was taking hold of her.

“Tell me again about my father. You have hardly spoken of him since last Christmas.”

“Oh, he was as fine a gentleman as ever wore a gold ring!”

“And he came from Charleston?”

“From nearby. Is there not an island, no a river—a beeg creek—named for his folk? Oh, they had great plantation zair, in ze old days. Ze house, it was fine as Brickhouse, on nearby Edisto. Now she is burn down.”

“But the family must own some land there, yet. You told me the ten dollars Mr. Whitlow brings every month is rental from the land.”

“No, Edward. I tell you not so. If I did, I was not zinking what I say. Ze money, it come from a little land my fat’er family still own in Guadeloupe.”

“Still, it’s queer I’ve never heard of any other Stonos.”

“Zair is a family of great folk named Stony. Why, I sew las’ year—I mak a brocade gown—for ze beautiful daughter. I sink it the same name, wis a little change.”

I would be proud to be a distant kinsman of the highborn, wealthy Stonys. But I could not rest with that.

“But your family too were great folk, on Guadeloupe Island.”

“Yess, yess, on Grand Terre. My fat’er own a fleet of sponge boat and he was lost in the hurrican of ’25. Oh, she blow down ze whole town of Basse-Terre. Ze island is beautiful beyond compare!”

She began to speak in rapid French which I understand as well or better than English.

“I wish you could see the great mountain, La Soufrière! The forest is green as emerald and the clouds on its summit are pearl. Then there are the twin mountains that we call the Breasts. It is a good name, except that they give forth smoke instead of milk. And to speak of breasts makes me remember the *métisses* in their first bloom. I am a true Creole—all four of my grandparents came from Chalon on the Saône—but the good God never shaped more beautiful faces and forms than those He gave the *métisses* of Guadeloupe!”

“Didn’t some of the *métisses* work as maidservants in the villa where you were born?”

“Well, I remember! There was Louisa—and Jacqueline—and young Teresa—and old Cecile. There were black slaves too. They kept the chambers spotless—and the great silver service on the sideboard—I could see my face in it as in a mirror. The silver was made by François Germain in Paris, and my grandfather brought it to Guadeloupe when he settled there. My name is only Marie Aubry, but he was Viscount Edouard Aubry du Monsole before he fled the Terror. You were named for him, Edward. It is a great heritage.”

Then she sat dreaming, and I must wake her from her dreams.

“How did my father look? You told me, but I want to hear it again.”

“Oh, he wass tall and fine.” My mother lapsed for causes unknown into her dialectal English. “He wass brunette, like so many of the noblesse of Huguenot blood, and his eyes wass like yours, and his nose wass beeg—as my boy’s nose is growing!”

She laughed a deep throaty laugh, but only half of it was love of me and the other half was rum.

“But he died so young!” I reproved her.

“*Oui*, he die of ze plague when he wass marry only two year.”

“Mamma, tell me the truth, and don’t lie for my sake or for any sake. Was he a gentleman?”

“I swear ’fore ze Good God your fat’er wass fine gentleman as any in Charleston.”

“Then I am going to be one, too!”

“So, so.”

“Nothing can stop me! Do you hear? This can’t stop me.” I swept away the mean room with a wave of my hand. “Being called white trash won’t stop me.”

“Oh, they dare not call you that!”

“One of them might. A big boy, fifteen or so, like Butler Mims. And if he did I couldn’t fight him now. He’d get me down and tear all my clothes. But I’ll fight him someday, I swear before God. Maybe I’ll meet him a duel. Both of us would have our seconds, and we’d keep shooting till one was hit, and I’d die a gentleman, rather than bow down.”

“Oh, be still!”

The strange cry shook me out of the frenzy of my dream.

“What is it, Mamma? Surely you don’t doubt—”

“Drink a little rum, my boy. It won’t hurt you, and ’twill quiet you.”

She rose and mixed a small tot with water and handed me the cup. I drained it in quick gulps.

“It’s good,” I said in the long silence that followed.

“It will brace you for what I’m about to tell you, and that’s the truth.”

For a moment I could not speak. A dread was upon me, and a choke in my throat.

“The truth about—what?”

Then my mother could not speak. She could only sit, pale in the face, and stare at her worn hands.

“Go on!” I cried, running to her. “Tell me! You’ve got to.”

Her eyes changed in a curious way and she stole a quick glance into my face. “Oh, well, you might as well know it, first as last. It may be I haven’t much longer to live.”

“Mamma, don’t say that.”

“Old Dr. Sams from Beaufort told me so. He came into Charleston and Mr. Whitlow brought him to see me. And it didn’t cost me a penny, Edward. Mr. Whitlow paid him himself, more the wonder.”

“What did he say? Tell me the truth.”

“There’s a weakness in my—chest. If it gets worse, I’ll die soon—and then what will happen to my little gentleman? But the doctor says that sometimes it stays the same, year after year, or even goes away. So I may live till my hair is white as snow.”

Now it was raven black, fit for a young girl to wear—a highborn daughter of the plantation of Huguenot name and ancestral fame.

“You will, Mamma! You must. I’ll make you.”

She smiled and kissed me and nodded, and I believed the nod and went peacefully back to my dreams. Mamma sipped at her cup. And now there was only one little cloud in this blue and radiant sky. Somehow I was not sure what Mamma had told me was the truth she had meant to tell.

### 3

On every Sunday morning in fair weather, I bathed and dressed with great care and walked into the Battery. It would be almost deserted at my arrival, but later would come mammies caring for highborn children, and old gentlemen of renown taking the air, and, when church was out, whole fashionable families enjoying the sunlight before they went to the two o’clock feast in their mansions. I knew the names of almost all, where their houses stood, and the lordly appellations of their great plantations. Once in a while, someone would notice me walking alone, or even ask his companion who I was.

No one ever spoke to me, and I was not sure that I wished for such a happening. It might lead to questions to which I had no proud answer; and if I

lied, I would be found out, and all gentlemen knew that gentlemen did not lie. In a few years, the difficulty would be removed: this was the faith as staunch as my heart's beat, and which only rarely fluttered as did my heart. Meanwhile I was content to see the fine folk, take note of their dress, watch their ways with eyes as sharp as the jaybird's in the trees, imitate their accents, and dream great dreams.

I know now that loneliness is a pitiful state except for the very old, or the very wise, or the very brave; but great dreams substitute for those high situations, so I felt no need of pity for my solitude, and probably deserved none. I was pursuing a real and exciting ambition. My heart told me that I was making headway.

There came a morning of great gain. It was a cool, moist Sunday, with greenery bursting everywhere, not long after my eleventh birthday. Seated on a park bench, apparently in deep thought, was a middle-aged man in a black broadcloth coat, long tight trousers, silken cravat, and tall hat; and although I had seen him only a few times, I recognized him presently as Mr. Mason Hudson. He lived in one of the finest houses on the promenade. He owned an immense plantation twelve miles up the river known as Hudson Barony. He was a thin man with a high forehead and long, gaunt hands. As I came nigh, he rose and walked on, absently swinging his stick. I noticed that he had left a book on the bench.

I picked it up and ran after him. He turned to me with a smile.

“What is it, younker?” he asked in a kind voice.

“Why, sir, you forgot your book!”

“So I did, indeed! It's one that I treasure, too—not that particular volume, since 'tis a common edition, and worn besides, but I love the tale. Let's see.” He took it in his hands. “You've read it, I suppose.”

“No, sir. I've never read a book.”

“What's your name, lad?”

“Edward Stono, sir.”

“Do I know your father?”

“No, sir. He's been dead many years. He came from about Stono Creek.”

“Is your mother living?”

“Yes, sir. She's a French lady from the West Indies.”

I thought that his next question would be where and how we lived, and I would choke on the answer. But he took a different tack.

“Lad, can you read?”

“Oh, yes, sir. I go to the free school.”

“Then take this book and keep it. Read it carefully and soak in every word—especially the part where Robin is on the island. The going will be hard at first, then you’ll revel in it.”

“Thank ’ee kindly.”

“Do you come often to the Battery?”

“About every Sunday morning, it’s so green and pretty.”

I saw doubt come into his eyes but it faded out and he gave me a smile.

“Say in two weeks—about this time of morning—meet me here again. If you’ve liked Robin, I’ll have another book for you—maybe two or three. No boy’s mind can develop properly unless he reads, and it is one of the greatest joys our world affords.”

He walked on and left me staring at the printed pages, my heart leaping.

4

When I told my mother of the meeting, her eyes shone, and she had me recite every detail.

“But it is no wonder that the grand gentleman was attracted to you,” she told me in happy lilting French. “He could see you are a gentleman’s son. And maybe he has no son of his own!”

I gladly accepted the latter guess as a fact. Certainly no boy of this name had crossed my path. However, some of the loftiest of the old Charleston elite lived very quietly, raising their children mainly on their plantations, educating them under private tutors; and of these I had little knowledge. Only at our third meeting, when he came with a notably graceful boy about two years older than I, must I face the truth.

“This is my younger son, Mason Hudson, Junior,” Mr. Hudson told me in unmistakable pride.

I was instantly attacked by disappointment and jealousy. At the age of eleven boys may dream without shame of their own credulity—there is no cage of reason to confine their dreams—and I had pictured the rich planter adopting me, and making me his heir. Although I had dreamed, now my eyes

were quick and keen. They told me that this boy was the most aristocratic looking I had ever seen. I could not say that he was especially handsome, although I know now there was something of real beauty in the structure of his facial bones, the shape of his body and especially of his head and hands, and in his dark luminous eyes.

Rather lightly built, still he would excel at games—but he would not play rough enough. There was a kind of gentleness in his movements and expressions and voice that might bring him to defeat.

“I’m glad to meet you, Mason,” I told him, bowing my head a little.

“I’m glad to meet you, Edward, and if you like you may call me Mate,” he answered. “That’s what all my friends call me.”

“I’d be mighty pleased to call you Mate.”

“Have you any brothers or sisters?” he asked me presently—that question newly acquainted boys and girls so commonly ask each other.

“Not one.” And in my eagerness to make bond with him I had come close to saying “Not ary one,” the speech of my playmates of Upper East Bay.

“I have two. One is named Arnold Hudson; he is five years older than me. Then there is Clay Hudson, fifteen years older, but he’s only my half-brother. He was borned by Papa’s first wife, who died a long time ago. Clay has been gone so long I wouldn’t know him if I saw him.”

There came back to me some talk I had heard of a young man of this name, the son of a great aristocrat, who had left Charleston about eight years before and had never returned. He had got in some trouble, which I had heard related at a later time and which I could almost—not quite—recall. I noticed that Mr. Mason’s face fell and turned gray. It looked like a face just then struck by a heavy fist.

Mate did not see it. He did not watch faces as I did, and his eyes were not as sharp. He began to tell me about the book he had brought to me, containing pictures of most of the animals in the world. I could keep it always. But I did not pay much attention to what he was saying, being so surprised and pleased to find myself no longer jealous of him, and instead being drawn to him . . . Mate Hudson. He was a kind of mate to me. When he and his father went on their way it seemed that I had nearly—barely missed it, somehow—made a friend.

Yet I did not see the boy again for nearly a year, and our rare future meetings did not bring us as close together as we had come at first. Perhaps he had found out where I lived and that my mother was a seamstress, but I

did not quite believe in this. I had a feeling that he needed friends, yet could make none. Sometimes, I saw wistfulness in his dark eyes.

By the time I was fifteen I had forty books—occupying more space than our ramshackle house could readily spare—and read a hundred others. Almost all had been given or lent to me by Mason Hudson, and always in a careless way that saved me from accepting charity or incurring obligation. As for bringing them himself instead of having them sent by a Negro slave—he confessed a certain pleasure in discussing them with me, since I was of another generation.

I came to read quite well—even to be well-read for a youth of my years—because I had ample time. My mother had not been willing for me to accept an apprenticeship in some trade; and when I finished the free school, she made dresses for the wife of the schoolmaster in exchange for his assigning me more advanced studies in mathematics, the natural sciences, and law. In the first of these I shone. The good master was half-sorry he could not show me off before the ladies and gentlemen of Charleston. I did well enough in the second, but found the third tedious and hard to grasp. Even so, I kept at it, perceiving that of all my reading this alone held out any hope of material advantage.

My progress was snail-slow; so why did I not insist on going to work, to lessen my mother's burden of supporting me and instead lend a hand to her support? I stood five feet nine, weighed a hundred and forty-five pounds, and was patently able-bodied. No doubt I could obtain a minor clerkship to some merchant or professional man. I did not because of the power of a dream.

My mother fought for its survival as stubbornly as I did. She preached it when she was sober and pleaded for it when half-drunk. Nor was either of us content for me to be a "Nature's gentleman." The kind I must be owned a great plantation worked by gangs of singing, well-cared-for slaves, be dressed and lived with elegance, went to the Saint Cecilia Ball, no man could scorn him, none thrust him aside.

But the time for some benison from the skies to fall was getting short. Still my mother turned aside my questions as to our monthly revenue. When, without her permission, I politely asked Matthew Whitlow for some accounting, he threatened to drop the business altogether. He frightened me, because we needed those few dollars more than ever before. Instead of growing fat, as so many West Indian women do, my mother thinned with the years, the olive skin of her face drawn tight over the bone; and this slow loss of flesh reflected a slow diminishing of her strength. And with our deeper need Whitlow became increasingly careless about delivering the sum on time.

Sure that he was a rascal, I could do nothing but submit. He was too powerful and I was too young. A rather portly man, probably in his late forties, with expressive brown eyes, round cheeks, a coarse nose, and, rather curiously, a small, prim mouth, he had a bluff air about him that people took—or mistook—for candor. His plain dark clothes, setting him apart from our richly and rather gaily dressed aristocrats, no doubt brought him clients; and his resonant voice, somewhat like a preacher's at the poor-white churches, won him many cases. Even so, I knew I must come to some kind of grips with him before very long.

April of the year 1847 had half-passed, with me approaching my sixteenth birthday, without Whitlow's carriage stopping at our door. Mustering my nerve and dressed as neatly as possible, I went to seek him in his office; and, not finding him there, made bold to follow him to the courthouse. Directed to an anteroom, I found him seated with a client whom I had known ever since I had begun to roam the holes and corners of Charleston.

"Good morning, Faro Jack," I called to him.

"Mornin' to you, Edward Stono," he answered.

Matthew Whitlow seemed a little surprised that the gambler knew my name—but I was not surprised. I had stood for hours watching Faro play, and when he bought drinks for the house he had always ordered me a beer. He dealt faro only a small part of the time. When the customers were mainly countrymen from the back country he soon switched to blackjack, bluff, or craps, which were faster, higher, and handsomer as he put it, and, although the poor fools knew it not, caused a swifter parting between them and their money. He was a big ruddy-colored man with a gruff voice and broad, quick hands. One of those hands was presently bandaged—I thought it had to do with his business in court.

"What in the Devil do you want?" Matthew Whitlow demanded.

"Sir, the ten dollars my father provided for us every month was due a fortnight gone."

"You don't belong to come bothering me about it here," he said in his poor-white dialect. "Besides, I doubt if that property makes ten dollars a month since the price of indigo went down. That's six per cent a year on two thousand dollars." Matthew could do such sums instantly in his head.

"I've got one friend who'll look into it for us, if you haven't the time."

No doubt I was thinking of Mason Hudson, although I would hardly be able to bring myself to turn his attention to such a trifling matter.

“Well, I haven’t the change with me. But wait a minute. There’s Sheriff Matson, going past the door, and he’ll give it to me.”

Matthew Whitlow rose nimbly and hurried after the sheriff. At once Faro Jack spoke from under his bandaged hand.

“Wait in the yard for me.”

Mr. Whitlow returned with a handful of bills. When he had counted me out ten ones I bowed to him—not as deep as the bow I had learned to imitate from watching the ’ristocrats, but fine enough to bring a sparkle to Faro Jack’s cold gray eyes. In a little over an hour I saw the gambler come out of the courthouse. His gaze did not overlook me, sitting on the coping, and he gave me a guarded gesture. I followed him until I was close to his rooms, then went down an alley, and tapped on his back door.

It opened instantly. At once he poured a flagon of ale for me, and a glass of “shine” for himself.

“What’s this about Lawyer Whitlow giving your mother ten dollars every month?” he asked.

I told him, and of Whitlow’s neglect.

“What friend were you going to ask to look into it for you, or was it a bluff?” he went on.

“It was a bluff. But Mr. Mason Hudson might do it, if I had the nerve to ask him. Mr. Hudson gives me books to read.”

“Mr. Hudson is one of Mr. Whitlow’s clients. He’d believe anything Whitlow told him, and more besides. Anyway, I reckon Whitlow don’t take more than a reasonable commission—he’s very careful to stay inside the law. Anyway, it’s chicken-feed, while what I have in mind—But deal me a hand of stud.”

He handed me a deck of cards. I shuffled them carefully and dealt. He showed an ace, a pair of tens, and a four, I a pair of eights, an ace, and a six. My hidden card was likewise a six, giving me two pairs.

He bet half a dollar. I raised by a dollar, and he by another dollar. When I met this and raised again by a like amount—my total bet being three and a half dollars, a substantial portion of my mother’s remittance—Faro threw in his hand. His back card proved to be a useless king.

I did not have to show him mine, but I did so.

“That’s what I know,” he told me, “but when I kept raising, why didn’t you figure I had you beat?”

“If your card-in-the-hole was an ace, a ten, or a four, you would have,” I answered. “But I didn’t think it was an ace, since I had one, and that would have put three of the four aces in less than one-fifth of the deck, and that’s against chance.”

This was according to Faro’s own book as I had read it over his shoulder a hundred times. So was the rest of my play.

“Well, that might be. I grant it. But cards are like the Charleston aristocrats—they’re a law to themselves.”

“I didn’t think your back card was a ten, giving you three of a kind, partly because I had a ten and that would put all four tens in one-fifth of the deck.”

“There was nothing to stop it being a four, giving me two pairs that beat yours.”

“I figured it was a face card.”

“Why?”

“In the first place, none of the twelve face cards had showed up in the nine cards I could see, ’way below percentage. In the second place, I think—I’m not sure—I saw your king. At least I felt sure it was a face card and believed it was a king.”

Faro looked at me in an odd, startled way. “Edward, I don’t deny you saw my king, or else you had a hunch,” he told me earnestly. “I’ve played too long to deny hunches, but they’re a weak staff in time of trouble, such as a sucker gets in when he plays with a sharper. But seeing the card is something else again. A hawk isn’t in it, when it comes to seeing, with a born gambler. It’s a gift that can be quickened by play and practice, but a gambler who don’t start with it never gets it. The best card-reader I ever played agin was only seventeen years old.”

“I’ve got quick eyes, Mr. Jack, and quick fingers.”

“I saw them fingers. They go with quick eyes. And it happens I can’t deal no more. My right hand was stepped on in a fight—such things happen, sometimes, even in such high-class joints as Faro Jack’s gaming rooms—and my fingers are broken past mending. Could you use a job?”

“Yes, sir, I could.”

“ ’Twould be in Augusta, not Charleston—a hundred and thirty miles up the line. I’ve sold out my rooms here—the climate’s got unhealthy for me—and have opened up there. They’ll be the finest this side of New Orleans, more like a bank than a joint. There’d be nothing but straight play with a rake-off for the house, tables for customers, roulette, and a few dice games—until you learn to deal.”

“How much could I earn?”

“Not much, at first—say ten a week guaranteed. The hours would be long—four in the afternoon until four in the morning. A lot of that time you’d spend in practice—the same old thing, over and over, to drive you crazy. But in five years—unless I miss my guess—you could be one of the best this side of the Mississippi.”

I sat and thought a moment.

“I want to be a gentleman. My mother says my father was a gentleman.”

“I don’t deny it. You’ve got some of the earmarks. It’s a fine thing to be a gentleman—but I’ll tell you first and last, a gentleman without money is a carriage without a horse. You can’t ride in it. You can’t strut in it. Take the finest ’ristocrats in Charleston, take away their rice plantations and their money, and what have you got? One generation hanging on. They’ll be asked to Saint Cecilia—they’ll get together old togs and be seen at the routs—a few callers, patting themselves on the back for their charity, will go to see ’em. But in the second generation they’re freaks and drunks and crazy people. They can only look back to the glory that was. Take my advice, Edward. Get the money first. Then you can be a gentleman, and welcome. Maybe not in Charleston. They’re different here than anywhere I know—more haughty and high than in Richmond or even New Orleans. But you can go to Columbia and marry an heiress. You could make a go at Vicksburg, that brags she’s another Charleston, although she ain’t, or at Memphis, or old Mobile. Your sons and daughters could marry the best in the land. Some men couldn’t fetch it no matter how fat their wallets—they’re too crude—and I’m one of the crudest. But you’ve got an air about you.”

“I thank you.” And I could hardly keep tears out of my eyes, heaven knows why.

“Do you remember what Iago said? Get money. Get money. Get money.”

“I remember it well.”

“You’ve got something, Edward, that takes my eye. It’s your eyes, with light in ’em—eyes without light mark a stupid man, a man who can’t see—

and your mouth with strength in it—a mouth that can be cruel as a wolf’s in your need—and your quick, light hands. Stay with me for five years. By then, I’ll have enough to buy me a cabin on a little pond, a yellow wench, and a good boat, and then I’ll gamble with bass and bream for the rest of my days, and maybe my soul will be saved. By then I’ll give you a college education. You’ll be able to skin the pants off the suckers, and take the shirts from the slickers on the river boats. What do you say? You’re sixteen or so, and ’tis time you knew your own mind. Will you work for me and get rich, or be a would-be gentleman with empty pockets all your days? Speak out!”

“Sir, I’ve got to ask you a question.”

“Ask it.”

“A gentleman can’t cheat. It’s against the code. Would you want me to cheat?” But he had told me that already.

“That depends on what you mean by cheating. If you mean taking a sucker, then the answer’s yes. If he comes here at all, you know he’s a fool who’s born to feather somebody’s nest, and it might as well be ours. I’ve played for more than thirty years. I still don’t know what brings these jackasses through the door. Ask the grog-seller what brings the dolts who drink themselves broke and crazy, and if he’s an honest man he’ll tell you he don’t know, no more than I. The men who play in this house can add two and two, and yet they can’t add—or they won’t add—what a five per cent drag for the house will do to their stake when the game’s o’er. It’s rare that I deal a card from the bottom of the deck—it’s too damn boring. It’s boring enough to let ’em throw away their money on a so-called honest game. Don’t you know that a trained dealer can read a sucker’s face? His effort to look glum when he’s a hand of aces, or to look happy when he’s a pair of deuces. What do they take us for, boys in school? With other professionals sometimes the game’s worth playing! But with the run and ruck—among ’em these fine gents you want to copy—why, it’s child’s play.”

Still I thought of Mate Hudson and I could not speak.

“I’ll tell you what,” Faro Jack went on. “I’m going up the Coast for a month’s vacation—I’ll visit my brother who’s a light-house keeper off Hatteras—and watch the big seas and the gulls and the petrels for the good of my soul. Here’s ten dollars.

“Spruce yourself up a little, to see how you like prosperity. But when I come back I want my answer, without any fiddling.”

“I’ll have it for you, sir,” I promised.

After a fortnight of foggy, misty weather, my sixteenth birthday fell on a bright Sunday in mid-May. In thinking over the big seas and the gulls and petrels, none of whose doings would be safe bets for Faro Jack, I took a yearning to see wide waters and windswept beaches, and skimmers and oyster-catchers and little sandpipers, and perhaps swim a little, and maybe make a friend, for one is still hopeful of making friends when only sixteen. So, dressed in my best, I took the ferry to Sullivan's Island, about two miles from the city.

The ferry proved to be crowded, mostly with people of my own class. But on the beach, separated from hoi polloi by an invisible wall, were several families of gentry; and one of these, as I had half-expected, half-foreseen, showed at a good distance to be the Mason Hudsons. Invisible in the crowd, I drew nearer. Mr. Hudson sat under a palm tree, reading. His wife, a tall, gray-haired woman as different from my mother as a cool gladiola from a faded poinsettia, sat beside him, plying a needle on a little white cloth. Occasionally he would lower his book to speak to her of something, or to read her a passage. Sometimes she called him from it by a remark. I sensed a wonderful closeness between them that I could hardly believe I could ever have with any other soul.

Their older son Arnold and his beautiful young wife played in the surf. Arnold was a rather priggish man whom others called a snob; I did not, with a curious shunning of the word, perhaps because its use implies that one has been, or can be, snubbed. The fact remained that I shunned him too, walked wide of him in fact, and his presence seemed to wither any hope of my talking to Mr. Hudson or of making a good impression on his wife.

Mason Hudson, Junior, the younger son, about eighteen now, was strolling the beach with a tall girl whose clothes and hair-dress indicated she was about fourteen.

I had been told I could call him Mate. All his blue-blooded friends did so. But I did not. I was afraid he had forgotten and his face would change. Still I might talk to him, if I wanted to enough. He had never rebuffed me, only remained alone and apart as though he could not help it. I would have to run the risk of a silent refusal to present me to his young-lady companion. Upper-crust Charleston men often stooped to casual association with underlings, male and female, but they closely guarded their ladyfolk from any such contact.

As I watched them they stopped to complete an earnest conversation, then Mate turned back to join his family while the girl continued on up the beach. It was she, not that splendid but forlorn young man, who now gripped my attention.

After a little thought I knew who she was—a niece of the first Mrs. Hudson, lately come from an old manor on Edisto Island. It struck me forcibly that she was an orphan, her mother dying young, her father recently drowned in a boating accident. She had a very odd name, which for a moment I could not call to mind. Then it returned to me with a pleasant start—Salley Sass. Although both the first and last names stood for Low Country families of historic place, still a girl bearing it might not be so haughty as most plantation daughters of fourteen; it might serve to humanize her. When I saw her stroll off down a stretch of beach, forsaken by the bathers because of shallows and potholes and poisonous jellyfish, I fetched a big, quick loop so I could meet her.

It might be she would not know who I was. It might be that, even if she did, she would talk to me.

When she saw me coming to meet her in the little walking space between the grass and the waters, she started to turn back. But either because it did not matter to her, or else—a hundredth chance, it seemed to me, she thought it might interest her—she continued on.

The nearer I drew, the more I hated her. Hate was not the right word, I knew, for my resentment at her being so nearly in my reach and yet so distant; and it was all the greater for the grace with which she walked, and the little smile upon her face that was not for me. She was not even thinking of me. She could meet a dozen youths from town strolling the beach, but none could interfere with her privacy, which was with herself. She was looking at the water and the seabirds and the little bright shells left by the falling tide.

At sixteen I was more of a man than most youths of my age—especially those to whom circumstance was not always shouting, “Grow up, grow up”—but she was likewise more of a young woman. Dress her hair a little differently, array her in a low-cut gown at one of her uncle’s parties, and you would think she was eighteen. All who came could see her in that low dress. Seeing her, dancing with her perhaps, they could have a claim upon her—some day to go riding with her, some night to be her escort at dinners and plays.

The well-born bucks who came to her uncle’s Charleston mansion or were guests at Hudson Barony would not woo her openly for two years more,

but they were bucks as surely as the horned deer of the woods, and they would not overlook the young doe pretty as a picture; and every jest they made to her, every romping with her that her youth permitted, caused a warm little cloud to cross their brains. I knew that cloud already. I knew those bucks. I hated every one . . . .

She was not very pretty, I told myself. The skin of her face was too tight over its bones. But she was beautiful, and I might as well deny my own mother, full of West Indian savagery and half-full of West Indian rum, as to deny that. The trouble with me was, I knew beauty when I saw it. I would be better off not to know it, dwelling among the hovels of an Upper East Bay alley where it showed so rarely—and when we did see it, we could never have it. I would be better off if I mistook common prettiness for beauty, for now and then that would fall into my hands.

Yet as we passed, it was as though I had swigged courage out of one of Mamma's bottles, for I spoke to her.

“Good day, miss.”

“Good day, sir.”

She paused very slightly before she started to walk on, so I spoke again.

“I saw a porpoise just now. He gave his big sigh and went under.”

“I wish he'd come up again. I love to see porpoises.”

“There aren't many birds today. I guess the crowd has frightened them away. The last time I came to Sullivan's Island, there were dozens of flocks of pelicans.” This happened to be true.

“Do you come here often?”

“This is the first time this year.”

“It's the first time for me, too.” She had fully stopped now, and was looking at me closely. “Do you live in Charleston?”

“Yes.”

“What's your name? I haven't been there very long and have met only a few of the young people.”

“Edward Stono.”

“When we lived at Edisto, we went often to Stono Creek. But I didn't know that Stono was a family name.”

“I guess they've about died out.”

As I listened to her voice, warm and lilting, my eyes were drinking in her face. Her coloring was rather dark. The deep-green gloom of Edisto had worked upon her, I thought—cypress forest, shadow-filled ponds, dark rivers slowly winding. Her lips were dark red, her eyes were pale brown, her skin was olive.

“Will you tell me your name, please, ma’am?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s Salley Sass.”

“Are you going to live in Charleston?”

“There, and at Hudson Barony.”

“I’ve seen it. It’s a wonderful place.”

“My uncle’s very kind to me. He’s no blood kin to me—his first wife was my father’s sister, yet he treats me like a daughter. I don’t know what I’d do—” She stopped, and the distance between us did not seem quite as great as before. “Perhaps you heard I lost my father—”

“I lost mine many years ago.”

“That puts us in the same boat, doesn’t it?”

No, it didn’t. It never could. Still I must speak.

“I wish I could see you again sometime.”

“Are you occupied for this coming Friday night?” she asked.

“No—”

“Well, my aunt is giving a party for me. It’s for nine o’clock and we’ll have square dances. The invitations are already out, but that doesn’t matter. There will be plenty of room for one more, if you’d like to come.”

“I’d love to come.”

“I’ll see you then. So goodbye, Edward.”

“Goodbye, Salley.”

She went on up the beach. I avoided everyone the rest of the day, holding communion only with the ever-changing waters, the tide that mysteriously fell then started to rise again, the boldly winging cormorants, the great rapacious pelicans, the silver terns air-dancing over a school of menhaden ere they careened, the long-billed curlews flying in ordered flocks, and even the little sandpipers forever lighting and taking off along the sand. I saw a porpoise that came up and uttered his long, sad sigh, and since I had lied

about him, I thought his appearance brought me luck. I moved lightly as in a dream.

Sometimes a cold chill frost-nipped all my dreams. But a rush of hope, and it seemed more than that, soon restored my faith. My father had been a gentleman, My mother would not lie to me on that score. My mother was a West Indian girl, but none of the 'ristocrats had ever seen her as sometimes I had seen her. It was only a young people's party. We would bake oysters and boil shrimp or do square dances, and even if her uncle and aunt did not place Edward Stono as the well-spoken boy who borrowed books, they would let it go this time. And I would do nothing at the party to attract undue attention. I would linger in the background until Salley let me know that I could join the lucky group about her. No boy there would be better read, or have nicer manners. . . .

And the next time the Hudsons gave a party my name would be one of the first to be written down. . . .

All the next day I walked on air. The old, trite saying seemed literally true. And on the following morning, my heart missed only a beat or two when the old postman stopped at our door. Often the ladies who were my mother's customers sent their orders by mail. . . .

But the envelope was addressed to me. My hand was steady—fit for dealing blackjack—as I tore it open. The paper was very fine and heavy, bearing the engraving Hudson Barony. The handwriting was precise:

Dear Mr. Stono:

To my regret, my niece Miss Salley Sass made a mistake when she invited you to a picnic supper this coming Friday night. She did not know that the invitation list had already been filled.

My husband hopes you will continue to make use of his library.

With every good wish for your success.

Sincerely,  
Mildred (Mrs. Mason) Hudson

I had opened the letter in the presence of my mother, partly because I had been ashamed to do so in secret, partly in bitter pride. Now she heard me laugh aloud.

“What is it, Edward?” she asked, groping for her spectacles.

“It’s an offer of a job. It will begin in a week, but I won’t tell you what it is—I’ll let it be a surprise. And you needn’t have the least fear that I won’t make good.”

My voice had a resonant ring. Knowing my mother could read only French, not English, I dropped the letter carelessly on the table. With a shaking hand she poured herself a tot of rum.

“I feared ’twould be bad news, your face was so white,” she said. “Let it be a surprise.”

## CHAPTER II

### Captain of the Deck

It was a hard chore to tell my mother that the job would begin in Augusta. I came out with it in as casual a voice as possible, then, before she could grasp what I had said, I made haste to soften the blow.

“It’s only one day’s ride by train or two by packet steamer. I can come home every fortnight—at least every month. It’s a healthy city—very little malaria and no yellow fever—and growing fast with lots of chances to make money and get ahead. Cotton is king there.”

For a long space she did not speak, and I could not read the deep trouble in her face and became frightened. Then she smiled very dimly and spoke softly.

“Maybe it is a good thing, Edward, for you to go away.”

“It means a whole lot of loneliness for both of us.”

“We are used to it, aren’t we, Edward?” She spoke in a proud tone, and with that she always employed French. “You have never been other than lonely except for little intervals, little hours. They were like sunny islands that you touched on a long, lonely journey. Do you think I did not know? When you went to the park on Sunday mornings and the gentleman gave you the books—that was a happy isle—and the happiest of all was one you found the day you went to the beach. I do not know what happened but I saw your face when you returned, and heard your voice, and watched your quick step. I thought then maybe the long, lone journey was almost over. But I was wrong.”

“Yes, Mamma, you were wrong.”

“Except for you, I’ve been alone—for how many years? And some of the deepest lonelinesses were when you were in the room. It is not your fault, Edward. God knows it is not mine. But that is why—partly—it is best for you to go.”

I could not answer the awful charge, because I knew it was true. I could only ask, “What’s the rest of it?”

“This city. This Charleston. Here there is no mercy on the dead. They are not allowed to die, always they must haunt the living, whether a bright reflection in which the living walk proudly, or an obliterating shadow. It is by

the past that we are measured, not the future. Edward, it is terribly wrong. In Castile, in Savoy, in Tuscany it is less wrong. These are old kingdoms, and the crowns are old, and the castles, and the ways of thinking and believing, and those who are called lowborn have never been told that the very word is blasphemous beyond measure. The noble is a noble, and the peasant a peasant, world without end. But this is America, the new land, the land of hope. All who look upward may read the writing, written in fire in the sky, of men born equal before God. Is it a lie, Edward? In Charleston there is a philosophy, a cult, almost a religion, that makes it out a lie. And that is why —”

She paused, staring into my face. Knowing I must speak, I spoke too loud.

“Charleston is the most wonderful city in the world.”

My mother’s eyes slowly filled with tears. She rose then, and went about collecting my clothes for packing.

“No need of that, yet,” I told her. “Maybe Mr. Fargo has changed his mind—I won’t know till I see him tonight.” Only a few in the city knew Faro Jack by this name.

“I think not.”

“Anyway I won’t leave for two or three days.”

My mother stopped what she was doing and, with an effort of will, spoke with her eyes on mine.

“Edward, it is better that you go. Come back for short visits, but not every fortnight or every month—if I can see you every six months I’ll be more than content. And don’t come to stay until you feel sure you can win.”

“Don’t you mean, until I have won?”

“No, I feel you can never win except in Charleston—the kind of winning you crave. The gains won elsewhere will fall short until you have won here. That is a sad thing, yet I hold it true. But you can prepare yourself for winning here. Maybe you can earn a sword and a shield. They may be gold, but better yet they may be of steel.”

Only once or twice had my mother talked in this strange way, and then the bottle on the table had been half-empty. Now it remained unopened, and I tried not to understand.

The railroad from Charleston to Hamburg—the latter town lying across the Savannah River from Augusta—was the pride of the state. At its completion twenty years before, it had been the longest in the world—one hundred and thirty-five miles—and the first laid to carry passengers behind locomotives. Faro Jack and I rode in comfortable, covered, upholstered cars; and watching through the windows we saw the beautiful Carolina countryside hurtle by at a dizzy pace. My great venture was well begun!

Through the lovely, brooding low country, beside little ponds half-hidden by moss-draped oaks, into pine or cypress forest, we slowly gained the uplands rich with cotton and corn. True, the country looked newer and rougher, the plantation houses not nearly so grand, but towns and roads and bridges were a-building everywhere, the smell of money was on the breeze; and I meant to fill my pockets from the overflow.

Augusta was a mixture of the rough and the smooth. Rather lately it had become one of the great cotton markets of the earth; countless wagon trains and mule carts brought in the snowy stuff, and in season they rumbled all day and night in the chuckholes of Broad Street; Eli Whitney's gin, endlessly multiplied, seeded it and packed it into bales; most of these and thousands of their like brought in from the hinterlands were shipped by flatboat or flatcar to Savannah or Charleston and from hence beyond the seas; and the remainder were changed into cloth by the new mills on the new, broad, deep canal. Rivermen ate and slept and brawled with railroad and mill-builders in the river-front inns. Demimonde that you would almost mistake for ladyfolk had pretty nests on Jones Street; their coarse-voiced, hard-swearing but sometimes softer-hearted sisters plied their trade at the low-grade taverns and mug-houses; and along mud roads stood rows and clusters of shacks, some of them housing poor whites or free Negroes, and some beautiful mulatto and quadroon slave girls, visited by their owners in the dark of night.

But in handsome offices on Cotton Row sat many gentlemen with gold chains, readers of good books, and connoisseurs of wines. On Green and Broad and Telfair streets, above and below the markets, stood high, narrow houses, many of them brick, furnished—I was told—as elegantly as the mansions of Savannah. On the hill to the west, only an hour's drive from the city's center, rose the larger and finer houses of Summerville, already giving itself airs over the sprawling town below, and to the east, across the river, lay the old settlement of Beach Island, that sometimes thought itself a very Edisto Island when it came to rank. By and large, however, Augusta was not Charleston by a hundred and thirty-five miles of farm and piney wood. It was a hundred years younger, very much smaller and only a fraction as proud. There was a gentry here, but no aristocracy. Storekeepers and cotton dealers,

let alone doctors and lawyers, sat often at table with slave owning planters, and the latter did not walk, talk, act, think, or feel like the owners of the baronies of the South Carolina Low Country. Although some of them managed to dress much the same, still they did not look the same. I could not quite tell why. Perhaps holding themselves so high had stamped the grandees' faces. Perhaps Augusta was part of the United States while Charleston had become the island of a dream.

If so, it was the dream I meant to follow to the end.

3

I doubted if Faro Jack's new gaming rooms were the most elegant this side of New Orleans. Yet, occupying the ground floor of one of the more imposing houses on Washington Street, they were certainly the finest in the city, putting in the shade the more gaudy but tawdry resort of his only formidable rival, known as Memphis. The parlor was the grandest I had ever set foot in, with horsehair sofas and chairs, a crystal chandelier, and a marble fireplace. My bedroom was on the third floor, small and well back; Faro Jack occupied one of the front chambers, and five other rooms were made available for renters for one night—often for only an hour—at prices higher than current in the lodginghouses of the town. The renters were almost always couples, the lady veiled and the gentleman with his head bowed and his hat pulled low over his eyes, tiptoeing up the back stairs.

Within three months, I had made good as Faro Jack's assistant. The work itself was not difficult—selling and cashing chips, supplying cards and dice, collecting the house's share of the stakes on various play, acting as croupier to our roulette tables, and even dealing faro, the fairest to the player of all our games. I had no trouble with customers—Faro Jack called them patrons or suckers according to the degree of his misanthropy—and in fact I got along with them astonishingly well, considering my youth. Faro Jack soon learned he could leave me in charge of the rooms, with never, so far, my having to call on Hans, a burly, stupid, but loyal and completely honest German who was told to stroll about, his simian arms swinging in front of his huge chest, when a fight looked to be brewing. Faro Jack set much store on this development. He attributed it to the quiet of my voice, coolness in excitement, and good manners.

I could have told him that I had been a dedicated student of these things since I first began to imitate our great Charleston aristocrats. Instinct or experience told me that courtesy warms a customer, frightens an enemy, and very subtly suggests reserve strength. You would think my stylish dress

would encourage a river-front ruffian to try to break me in two. I believe that actually it tended to discourage the venture, if only through fear of the unknown.

To become Faro Jack's understudy was a far harder task. Happily he was a good teacher and I a tireless student. Hardly a day did I miss a two-hour lesson; on slack days or in slack seasons I often played or practiced the clock around. In two years I could stack decks and palm dice or deal an edged card as well as he and could empty his pockets at three-card monte. Still I had not put this prowess into play against our customers. The house did well on its share of straight games. To be caught cheating would have closed us up and caused Faro Jack and me too to lose face throughout the ghostly half-lit mirthless world of gamblers, even if it did not end his life or mine in a blaze of pistol fire.

In my fourth year I turned a little corner and came out on the road that led to great play. I could truly be called a "sharp," which in our gambling parlance was a little different from a "sharper," the former indicating a dependence on high prowess at straight play, the latter a master of trickery. The development was strangely sudden. Always good at calculating "percentage"—meaning the approximate value of my hand according to the laws of chance—I learned all at once to do it like lightning. Also I could see through almost every attempt at deception by my fellow players, as betrayed by remarks, voice, gestures and facial expressions.

When our play was slack, Faro Jack took to sending me where it was high and handsome. On these trips I did not play with suckers but with professionals who had already taken the suckers' money. The end of the fowling season might find me in Baltimore; the gathering of the shrimpers at Savannah might bring me there; the building of a new railroad or a river levee or a canal could fetch me up in Columbia, young raw Atlanta, Chattanooga, Nashville; or in the Blue Grass in the racing season, or as far afield as Mobile, when the planters from the fabulous black belt came to town with their purses stuffed. Wherever money jingled free I was one of a cold-eyed band that gathered like buzzards to a hog-killing. The only difference between me and most of them was that I was one of the kings.

Even so, I still operated on—and risked—Faro Jack's money. To him I made scrupulous account; and he paid me enough to eat and dress well, to keep my mother well supplied with rum and a few added comforts, and to save a little against a run of low cards. More than this, since he was my teacher, I did not ask.

None of this served to make me a gentleman. Indeed I had only to turn another corner to abandon all hope of becoming one, not of dismissing but of casting out my dream, as I fancied a Puritan father casting out a beautiful, beloved, but wayward daughter. Then, dealing or playing against all comers, I might make a fortune with my name renowned among all us gentry of the gaming tables, from here to new-found Frisco. I would not be honored anywhere but widely feared. Still I flinched from making the break with my childhood faith. It would mean a transformation, a kind of reverse transfiguration of my whole personality. So I clung on.

Meanwhile I had practiced in a few arts and crafts useful to gentlemen. My reading of books had been greatly curtailed since I took to reading pips, but several hundred I had read before had worked upon my mind, and hence I could talk of many things, and persuade gentlemen whom I met on my travels that I belonged to their caste. Traveling about the country called for much riding, and I cannot say I was a bad horseman considering that I was not raised on horseback as were the plantation children. It was partly a matter of my hands being strong from being quick—quickness cannot arise from weak, slack muscles. Besides, one cannot be a successful gambler without a certain deadliness, which even a dumb brute may feel.

In the summer of 1851, I made one of my flying, far-between visits to Charleston. I was twenty that year, but no one could guess it; I looked twenty-five and was often taken for a still older man of young appearance. Not quite six feet tall, finely made as a well-bred English hunter, I had almost every trick and mannerism of a Charleston aristocrat—these I had learned by imitation—and a certain physical grace I could not readily account for. Perhaps I had inherited it from my father, Charles Stono. Perhaps it had worked into my body from the extraordinary fluence and lightness of my hands.

I was somewhat more swarthy than most Charlestonians of Huguenot stock, although I had the big, aquiline beak characteristic of the breed. Dressed in the latest Charleston fashion, I wore a large, flashy, although flawed diamond on my right hand—it often served to catch the eye of an opposing player at three-card monte—and a fine gold watch, pawned cheap by a gentleman planter in temporary embarrassment—on a gold chain.

When my mother saw me in the door, she must dab her eyes. I took her in my arms, and so I hid the spasm that came and quickly passed across my visage. I wiped my eyes on her dark hair.

“You look better than you have for years,” I told her. And this was partly true.

“I don’t work so hard, now that you send me so much money.” She spoke gaily, in French. “Sometimes when ladies send for me to come to their houses to sew, I do not go unless they provide a buggy, and sometimes when they bring cloth to my door, and speak too haughtily to me, I tell them I am too, too busy to do the work. Oh, you should hear me, Edward. One of them whom I refused told me I was getting too big for my—what is *culotte*?”

“Breeches.”

“The very word!”

“Who was it? Surely not one of the great ladies—”

“She did not use to be, but lately she had moved with her rich son into one of the fine houses by the High Battery. It is Mistress Mims. Her son is Butler Mims, gentleman of the finest.” A note of irony crept into my mother’s voice.

I wanted to say something that took courage—and although I flinched, I said it anyway.

“When he was a boy, he called me white trash.”

“I knew someone did. He knew it was not true.”

“Not then, but it is now. Perhaps that’s the reason I can tell it. If a gambler isn’t white trash, who is? But I won’t always be. I’ll make my stake and buy a plantation as fine as Hudson Barony.”

“Why do you name that one? Aren’t there many finer—or some less fine that would content you?”

“I reckon it’s my ideal.”

“A fine plantation must have a fine-haired mistress.”

“I’ll wed and bed me one. The daughter of a great Charlestonian, poor as a churchmouse. Money makes the mare go.”

My mother made no comment. Her eyes brightened, but that might be caused by a mist of tears.

“Have you heard any report that I’m a gambler?” I persisted.

“Mistress Mims knew it. She didn’t fail to bring it up.”

“Butler Mims was a very knowing boy—and I guess he’s grown up to be a knowing man.”

Since Butler was a close acquaintance of Mate Hudson, Mason Hudson had no doubt heard of my occupation. I decided to write him a note of

“confession.” When an opponent suspected my tactics at draw poker I had often rigged it for him to catch a glimpse of my cards for several hands, meanwhile playing them in another fashion. In that way I could decoy him to the kill.

But Mason Hudson was not an opponent—he was a friend. I had never used subterfuge against a friend before; and it came to me with a mild pang of dying conscience, a little like that of a dying tooth, that he would not use it even against a foe. No doubt I had never envied the aristocrats’ rigid honor as much as their clothes, manners, equipage, and riches, yet it had appealed to my sense of romance. Truly, I had taken a devious way to become a gentleman!

The writing was too easy:

Dear Sir:

I am in Charleston for a few days, and I thought if you still walked in the Battery on Sunday mornings, I might have the pleasure of a word with you.

But I am afraid that you will feel you have given and lent me books in vain, for I have come to live not by my best mind but by my wits. I can only tell you that I deal fairly against fair players, and I hope to find another livelihood before very long.

Sincerely,  
Edward Stono

I dispatched the note, and that night I sat late with my mother over a bottle of Santiago rum. I had never done so before; it seemed I was trying to tell her something, if only that I was not ashamed of her or at least did not blame her for her deep draughts daily; but since John Barleycorn—in this case it was Juan Melote—had almost no part in my daily life, since I eschewed him, despite a certain yearning for his warm haze, solely to keep razor-sharp those wits by which I lived, tonight I could not bring myself to do more than sip at the glass; and my mother felt my sobriety as a wall between us, and all her bottle bubbles burst and all her boozy exultations fell to earth and cracked, and all I had showed her was that she was a sot.

In the morning I dressed and groomed myself with peculiar care. The weather was not quite hot but very warm and humid; greenery grew rampant; fever was starting to breed in the deep swamps, and it stood to reason that

Mason Hudson's family had come in from Hudson Barony to their town house and that he had received my message. If he did not come, it was probably a sign he was done with me. But he would not like to fail me. He would still help me if he could.

My hopes declined rather swiftly; he would come early or not at all. And then, suddenly, a curious and powerful thrill, not altogether pleasant, frightening almost, passed over me. I had felt something the same, although not as strong, as cards were being dealt for a critical hand. I saw a tall girl walking toward me fully a hundred yards away. That was too far for me to identify her, yet I knew, better than I knew my name, who she would prove to be.

She came closer and closer, and then four years crammed with little events vanished from my cognizance like a dream of the night, and I walked again the beach at Sullivan's Island, upon the yellow sand that glittered here and there with bits of shell, between the green of the shore, and the snowy, murmuring, curling, ebbing and flowing surf; and when I spoke to a tall girl whom I met there, she made reply.

She had changed very little. I had to look hard, to see where she had changed at all. She had been fourteen; now she was eighteen; her form had been mature, light with an upward leap; she held her head the same way; her black hair had the same elegance although it was differently dressed; her open throat showed its touching hollow and the delicate collarbones; her lips were dark red and her eyes pale brown and her skin a deep olive, as though the intense shade of the Edisto forests with their dark creeks and moss-hung ponds had worked upon her, and the skin was too tightly drawn over the small, delicate, lovely bones of her face for her to be pretty. But she was beautiful, with a beauty I could not dream of being in my reach. I would have denied it if I had not been so proud. It was beauty saved for a highborn son of the old order, and it was greater than before, and that was the only change in her since I had seen her last, and I did not know what caused it. I knew only that I hated her for that beauty unsharable with me—that I could only see, and long for, and lose. Even its touch of sadness, a sense of something lonely and forlorn, like the heart of a wood nymph forsaken by her fellows, could not balm that hate.

Her name—why, her name was Salley Sass! It was a plain name, what we Southerners called homey, and it had deceived me once. Instead you could not find a prouder name in all the Low Country.

She stopped in the path, her face still, so I could look at her. I thought to pass on—I wished I could be that hard and relentless—but my hate turned

inward, and I could not.

“Salley?”

“Yes, Edward.”

“Are you bringing a message from your uncle?”

“Yes, but I asked to bring it.”

“There’s a bench. Have you time to sit down?”

“I have plenty of time.”

She took her seat and made a little inviting motion with her hand. For a brief space she watched a game that squirrels were playing in the tree boughs; I sat beside her in the silence. My feelings were caught up in me in a curiously intense way.

“My uncle’s message was that he would have been happy to meet you here, but he was feeling poorly and could not come,” Salley said presently.

“I thank him for the thought.”

“I asked to deliver the message because—I had something to say to you. It doesn’t amount to much, perhaps. It is only to say how sorry I was that the invitation I gave you four years ago—to a beach party—had to be cancelled. But perhaps you’d forgotten?”

“Would you think what you said last to be very likely?”

She glanced into my eyes. “No.”

“You know then that I remember only too well.”

“Yes. I beg your pardon.”

“You needn’t. You mean it kindly. You were giving me a chance to pretend it didn’t matter to me—that it didn’t sting or at least leave a scar—and in that way save my pride. The truth is, I’m too proud to deny the truth. I think that’s the only true pride I have—not to try to bluff myself. As you may know, bluff is the old name for draw poker.”

“I want to say this too. Aunt Mildred—Uncle Mason’s wife—is a kindly, gracious woman. She wrote that note to you with deep regret and quite a few misgivings. I grant that was only human. But whether you understand why she felt she had to write it—well, that’s asking a good deal of you, still it seems to me possible that you do.”

Her voice was low and very young, and glimmering as are often the voices of rich-toned Negroesses.

“Let me see if I can tell you,” I answered. “If only the family and maybe a cousin or two and the sons and daughters of a few old friends were to be present, your aunt could have let the invitation stand. But, as it happened, that beach party was the first party given for you, and the young people invited were the pick of the Low Country—each one standing for a great name and tradition. It was a gathering of the younger generation of the *haut noblesse*. I did not belong there. Everyone present would know it—if not at first, before the party was over, for the biggest difference between old snobs and young snobs is that the young ones are more cruel; and the youth of the Charleston noblesse aren’t so noble that they wouldn’t get off together and talk. Their parents would know it later. They would feel that your aunt and uncle had not stood up for their own—that they had let down the bars that must be kept raised at all times, especially since Charleston is located on nominally American soil, where the mob is ever-threatening to get out of hand. Mind you, I don’t blame them, and only envy them. How I would have loved to be one of those youths you entertained that night—who doesn’t have to explain who he is, because all who matter know already, secure in his birthright, assured of his seat among the elite; and in spite of his graciousness and generosity and gaiety, always ready and duty-bound to put an upstart in his place. Let me be fair. Your aunt thought of what was best for me, too. I wouldn’t have had a good time, I would have had a most painful time. You would have been nice to me, some of the others would, but I would know I was being singled out for special treatment. I would also get many rebuffs, worse than kicks in the face. And after that, I’d have to go back where I started. I would be given a glimpse of high life, only to make me more discontented with low life. And pardon me for going into the matter to such length.”

Her eyes had grown big and she made a curious comment. “Edward, you seem much older than any young man I know.”

“I’m old already.”

“And you’ve expressed it very well. Much better than I could.”

“I’ve had plenty of time to think about it, lying awake at night.”

“Did it hurt that much? I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry I told you. It was a weak thing to say. Think of the poor devils lying awake at night from cold or hunger, not merely blows to their egos. Besides that, I have my ambition to stand by, and which stands by me. You needn’t ever pity a young man with a devouring ambition until he either wins or is kicked in the face so much that he’s groggy. God may pity him, because

He knows the upshot, but his fellow humans can envy him—at least he lives ten lives in one—and perhaps they had better fear him.”

“Edward, do you think you can win?”

“I don’t think about it. I don’t question it. You see, I’m bound to win.”

“But you’ve taken a strange road!”

“I thought it was the shortest and the most sure.”

“To money, perhaps, but not to position.”

“I had no position to lose, and plenty to gain.”

“Suppose I was giving another beach party, and supposing my aunt did not know anything about you—mistook you for a gentleman. Still I wouldn’t do what I did before.”

“You mean—invite me.”

“I wouldn’t invite you, Edward. I wouldn’t foist a gambler on my friends.”

“You spoke of your aunt but didn’t mention your uncle. In regard to your other party, would you care to tell me whether he too favored sending me the note of cancellation?”

“Since you ask—and it isn’t a fair question—I don’t think a gentleman would ask it about someone who had lent and given him books—Uncle Mason said to let you come. But he didn’t stand up for it. He was greatly troubled, and when Aunt Mildred made the hard decision, he—he seemed somehow relieved.”

“How about your cousin, Mate? It’s another ill-mannered question, but I don’t fool you anyway—”

“Mate Hudson is not my cousin.” Salley spoke quickly and somewhat emphatically. “I am of no blood kin to any Hudson except Clay—a son by Uncle Mason’s first wife. And I’m glad to tell you that Mate was very much against canceling the invitation. And when it was done anyway, he wouldn’t go to the party.”

I felt a warm prickling across the back of my neck and along my temples.

“Your face has flushed,” Salley said.

“I can’t help it. I’m—astounded.”

“It’s quite like him, really. And I suppose it’s quite like your fellow gamblers to try to take everything he’s got.”

After a few seconds of sitting very still, my thoughts flying, I asked:

“Does Mate play?”

“Yes, and I can’t keep him from it.”

“Well, he’s free, white, and twenty-one, as the saying goes.”

“In this case it’s a heartless thing to say about someone who stood up for you.”

“I think I was trying to stand up for myself—but that’s no use.”

“Well, I’ve told you all that I have to tell, so I may as well—”

“I have something to tell you. You may not value it but I’ll tell you anyway. You were beautiful when I saw you and you have waxed in beauty. And, believe me, as a card sharp I have sharp eyes.”

“Thanks, Edward.” But her eyes said something else. They grew and shone more than I could possibly expect. It must be she needed reassurance of her beauty, since it was her main fort and fortune. Perhaps it was going to be put to a severe test in some project she had in mind.

“I wish to ask another question,” I said. “You were only fourteen when you gave the party and most of the guests not much older. If you care to tell me—did you play kissing games?”

“Quite late—when the grownups had left us—and the servants were all gone—we played kiss-in-the-ring.”

“So if I had gone to the party, I would have gotten a kiss from you.”

“Probably.”

“Don’t you think it would be fair to let me have it now?”

She gave me a long glance.

“Would you prize it?” she asked in low tones.

“Very much.”

“Would it tend to remove a little of what you called the sting—efface a little of the scar—of that rebuff?”

“I told you I didn’t want anyone feeling sorry—”

“This has nothing to do with that. I’ll put it this way—if we kissed, would you remember me more kindly and—if the chance came—be more kind? For you said something else, a few minutes ago, that was quite true, and which I won’t forget. You said that people shouldn’t feel sorry for a man with such

vaulting and ruthless ambition as you have, and perhaps should fear him instead.”

“If ever you need kindness from me—which is hard to believe and yet, under certain circumstances possible—you can buy it from me—now—with a kiss.”

She glanced quickly about. There was no one in sight except an old gentleman walking in the opposite direction.

“Lean toward me,” she murmured.

I did so and her lips met mine in an unstinted kiss. Within and without everything became a little changed; and the stiff little park, with its summery foliage, became a scene to visit in many dreams. It was my greatest victory. It was my sharpest moment and closest link with beauty. Before I could begin to divine or to grasp its newborn force, she had risen and walked away.

## CHAPTER III

### Creatures of the Night

Two years passed by with small varying events. In this same period I made two brief visits to Charleston, on the first of these finding my mother not quite so well, and on the second somewhat better, and I felt no inkling of a new haunting when, returning from booming Salem on an autumn evening, Faro Jack handed me an envelope of heavy, faintly scented paper such as was used by Augusta ladies of quality. It had been brought the day before, he said, by a liveried servant.

It read:

Dear Edward:

I am staying with my cousin, Miss Abigail Cumming, at her father's house, Pine Lodge, in Summerville, and I wish to talk to you on what is to me an important matter. Since I cannot come to your gaming rooms, would you be so kind as to call on me here at four on the first afternoon following your return to town?

From a former acquaintance,

Salley Sass

Next day of three o'clock I was dressed and groomed with care. Instead of following the somewhat more democratic Augusta style, I got myself up, to the last bootlace, as a Charleston gentleman of fashion, an insolence I thought that Salley would not miss. A hired carriage with a Negro driver waited at the door.

When I had knocked on the handsome iron-grilled door of big, rambling Pine Lodge, and asked for Miss Sass, the footman told me I would find her in the summerhouse, gained by a little path through the Cape jasmine. This structure proved nothing more than latticed arbor under an ancient scuppernong, but it might be nearly as important in the history of the mansion as the splendid parlor, for there the daughters of the house and their suitors could sit and make conversation, while here, hidden from all except amorous birds and butterflies, they could sit and make love. The South was full of such retreats, built by wise forefathers within walled yards, or by Mother Nature in woody patches by the road. Thus spring and summer and early fall are the

wooding seasons in the South, and so the land has brought forth a warm and passionate race.

Salley stood in the vine-girded doorway, and I saw her in relation to the autumn. It had set in—the slow fading of the summer ere its lingering death, the summer that we love, that is our mother, the brooding spirit of the South, its intrinsic element and meaning, whose departure we watch with sorrow ere the alien, inimical winter besieges our soft land. Our gay lascivious greens had faded and darkened, and there was much brown in the vines and trees and herbage, but it was a warm brown still, and it matched her eyes and her skin, and brought out the native elegance of her black hair. By the same token there was an obscure brooding sorrow in the scene, and in her lovely face.

“Thank you, Edward, for coming,” she told me.

“You’re quite welcome, Miss Sass.”

“Why do you call me that?”

“You signed your letter as a former acquaintance. I was not sure such a relationship entitled me to a more familiar address.”

“Please don’t speak so formally, and be the same to me as before. On the beach—and in the Battery. This is another informal meeting place. I chose it especially. Isn’t it beautiful?”

“It becomes you very well.”

“I’d talk some small talk, if I could—I mean before I get down to business,” she said when we took the rustic seats. “It would seem better manners. But it’s too urgent—and I don’t know how.”

“You can go ahead and deal from a cold deck.” For I was quite sure her errand concerned my trade and this might put her at ease.

Why did I want to put her at ease? She was a lady of Charleston, a child of the proudest island of all the proud sea islands of our shore, a daughter of the Low Country aristocracy that was, perhaps more by attitude of mind than exalted ancestry, the most real, the most high of any in America, including far-richer Boston’s merchant aristocracy and New York’s dying patroon aristocracy and rising money aristocracy, and Philadelphia’s industrial aristocracy. I stopped and reviewed the thought. The ancient, powerful families of the great cities would deny its truth, but the bloods of England would not nor would the high noblesse of France. Here they would recognize a branch of their own order. The aristocratic concept in the North had been weakened by democratic ideas. Stately Virginia stood too close to down-to-earth Pennsylvania.

Salley was a real one. She needed only to be herself, without a thought of herself, for the high or the low to know it. She was a highborn daughter of the plantation worked by slaves. It was in her face and form and voice and manner, and all of these were lit by beauty, and what the connection was I did not know. And for once I, Edward Stono, this particular person whom I knew so well and so often held in high contempt, had her at a disadvantage. I knew it by the look in her face and the tension in her tone. I had been booted from her door but at last she had had to come to me, as God's children sometimes have to come to the Devil for their soft hearts' sake. Why should I, of all people, try to put her at her ease?

It was a tribute to loveliness that I owed and could not help but pay.

"You look well, Edward."

"The nocturnal life agrees with me, as it must with foxes, owls—bats—and other creatures of the night. Today I came in from a raid, but ordinarily at this time of the day I'd be just beginning to feel wide-awake. You are more beautiful than ever. I didn't think it possible when you were eighteen, but behold—at twenty it is an established fact. You dress with great art—I could almost think with great cunning. Your attire is not a mere adornment to you; instead it becomes you in both meanings of the word—becoming to you and becoming part of you."

Today she wore orange to call attention to her pale-brown eyes, olive skin, black hair and in subtle regard for the browns of autumn. And there was no doubt that as she had looked into the tall, gold-framed mirrors in a spacious chamber in Pine Lodge she had thought mainly of its effect on me.

"You talk fluently," she remarked. "I thought gamblers were noted for their silence."

"On the contrary, I often talk a blue streak, to confuse an opponent. But I'm not trying to confuse you."

"I've made quite a study of clothes, if that's what you meant. I have to make a little money go a long way. In fact, like the milkmaid, my face—meaning my whole appearance—is my fortune."

"I think you will marry well in spite of it."

"I'm afraid I won't. I'm afraid I'll make a marriage that I and everyone else knows would be a terrible mistake. I'll get down to business—although it isn't business, it's a petition. Edward, did you know that Mate Hudson is in Augusta?"

To maintain something—I did not know what—I replied with a calm no.

“He came here about two weeks ago,” Salley went on. “He fell in with a girl—her name is Clara Day—and I think she’s a confederate, maybe the mistress of a gambler called Memphis. She’s got him—maybe he would have done it anyway—to play at Memphis’ rooms. The money he’s spending is some that he borrowed against his share of the plantation and has in a bank in Charleston—and he’s drawn heavily on it already. If it keeps up much longer, he’ll be bankrupt.”

The words caused a curious ringing in my ears. I knew Clara Day and I knew Memphis. As for Mate Hudson and Salley, it seemed to me suddenly that I did not know them at all, and perhaps could never know them, they being of a different breed, but both were in my life to stay, and that would put me to great trial and perhaps bring me to great sorrow. For God’s sake, why? What had they done for me? I knew the count of it perfectly well—such little caring in contrast with my great caring. Yet Fate seemed to be closing around me like a stone wall. I could not climb it—I knew no aperture of escape.

“Clara Day is one of the most skillful and attractive of our demimonde,” I said. I did not say that she was also one of the most predatory. “I’ve danced with her several times, and she is a beautiful dancer. She is Memphis’ skill but not his mistress. Memphis takes no interest whatever in women except as far as they help him to make money; he’s cold as a stingray. For that matter, Clara is no one’s mistress, nor does she take money from her occasional lovers; she hires out only to Memphis who pays her well. She came from a good Alabama family and Mate is not the first gentleman to fall into her hands. Her favors are hard to win and are greatly prized.”

“I want to ask what you may feel is an improper question—but you’ll see its importance later. Have you ever stayed with her?”

“It’s not only an improper question. It’s an unfair question—both to her and to me. But since you ask it—I never have.”

“Could you, if you wished?”

“I have no idea.”

“I’d hoped you would take her away from Mate, and then he’d come home.”

“I think that’s a very strange proposal, coming from a lady.”

“Why? You said her favors were restricted and greatly prized. You see, I heard that too. So I wasn’t suggesting anything unpleasant. As for the moral side of it, I don’t think I need consider that, in dealing with a gambler. Do I?”

“The facts—and common sense—appear to uphold your argument.”

“You’ve had plenty of other girls—” She paused slightly.

“I’ll not answer that.”

“Mate hasn’t. He’s never had one until now. That’s more common among young men of his class than you can readily believe; I know more of the seamy side of life than he does—remember my father was a rakehell if there ever was one. He’s no doubt infatuated with Clara. And I beg you to break it up and get him out of Memphis’ clutches and send him home.”

“That’s a rather large order.”

“It’s not an order. I used the word ‘beg.’ ”

“Coming from a woman as high and proud as you—”

“Women stop being high and proud when someone they love is in danger. All that goes by the boards.”

“You must love Mate a very great deal.”

“He makes my heart glow—or faint—or ache—or tremble all the time. If that’s not love, I don’t know what it is. Also I love Uncle Mason. He’s taken me in and treated me like a daughter and I can’t bear for this to happen to him. Will you save them, Edward? By saving Mate, you save them both; believe me, that’s true. Promise me you’ll try.”

She spoke quietly and her eyes looked deep and strange. But I hardened my heart and asked:

“Why should I?”

“I can’t give any good reason. There is one, I know, if I could find it. One reason is, there’s no one else I can call on. Arnold Hudson is mean and selfish—I don’t know how that happens, when both of his parents are so fine. Clay Hudson is worse than that—so bad I can’t tell you—and I understand that perfectly well from what I’ve heard of his mother, my father’s sister—and anyway he’s skipped the country for good. The young men I know in Charleston, my friends and suitors, wouldn’t know how to start. Some of them visit the underworld and get girls, but they know nothing about it. They could as well go into the African jungle. But you’re a jungle dweller. You can come out with the prize.”

“Your prize, not mine.”

“Remember he stood up for you. Remember Uncle Mason brought you books to read and helped to make you the cultivated man you are. Remember I kissed you in return for a future kindness.”

“I’ll be impolite and say it’s something more than kindness, for me to come to grips with Memphis, one of the deadliest sharpers that ever stacked a deck. You understand there’s a sort of truce between gamblers operating in the same territory. It’s a case of live and let live; otherwise we’d be at each other’s throats and the suckers would get away. Mate is Memphis’ sucker. He’s got him hooked—through Clara, of course—and he’ll play him for his last shirt stud, and then he’ll let him go. It would be dangerous for me to interfere; Memphis could well lay for me and have my hands crushed past mending, for the jungle you speak of is quite real. Moreover”—and I smiled into her eyes—“it’s a breach of professional ethics.”

“Don’t be sarcastic, Edward. It’s cheap.”

“I’m not a very expensive article, Salley. People like me come cheap.”

“You won’t do what I ask?”

“I didn’t say that. But speaking of cheap and expensive, where will I get the capital for this venture?”

She looked at me in deep dismay.

“Oh, does it take money?”

“Money is the ammunition. I supposed you knew that. I can’t risk Faro Jack’s money on a venture of this sort. How much has Mate got left?”

“He drew a thousand a week ago. It must have reached him about five days ago.”

“Then he probably has about five hundred left. Memphis’ policy is to take about a hundred a night from suckers with moderate rolls—if he took more it might scare them off. Well, I’ve got six hundred of my own. If I agree to undertake Mate’s rescue, I’ll risk half of it—about the same as Mason Hudson risked in the value of the books he used to lend to me.”

Mason Hudson had also given me his time, his attention, his interest. By speaking only of material values, I had laid myself open to a charge of vulgar ingratitude. But Salley did not make the charge. She dropped her eyes and her lovely hands lay forlornly in her lap and the beautiful olive skin turned pale.

“Before I give you my answer, I want to point out another reason for refusing,” I went on. “Mason Hudson represented an ideal—but so, in another sense, do you. When I’ve made my pile—it won’t take long—I expect to marry—I won’t be vulgar and say buy—a daughter of the Charleston aristocracy who happens to be very beautiful and very poor. For her sake I’ll be decently treated by the bloods, and find what in time will be a great house.

I'd picked you. You would be the perfect choice. There are many things in the way, and one of them is Mate. It would serve my campaign to let Mate go to the dogs. You see, I have a feeling that if you can save him, you intend to marry him. In fact, you've said so."

"In any case, Edward, I'd not marry you. I'd rather marry a poor cracker than a rich gambler. But as for the three hundred dollars—if you lose them, I'll pay you back. I don't know how or when, but I promise I will."

"No, you needn't. You'll recall I still owe you for the kiss. It was worth three hundred dollars, considering who you are, and who I am. But I must remind you again of the danger. That's the greatest risk I'm running, not the loss of the money. So if I undertake the venture, what will be my reward?"

She mused a little while, and I thought again of her walking the sunlit beach with its jewel-like inlay of broken shell between the greenery of the land and the white surf of the sea, in a lovely solitude; and behind that I thought of her in scenes I had imagined, scenes of her under the spreading live oaks, against the forest with its gloom of moss, and beside the dark rivers of Edisto. Under the olive skin of her face was a wonderful delicacy of bone. No mere choosing by her highborn ancestors of beautiful or distinguished mates had cast her in this mold; besides her birthright, beauty had wrought upon her in a strange and powerful way, and I thought it was the beauty of her own scenes, thoughts, and dreams.

"Edward, don't you know?" she said at last, replying to my question.

"No."

"I thought you might, judging from what you said the last time we met."

"No, I don't know."

"Your reward will be to feel—for a little while, and perhaps for the last time—like a gentleman."

My heart gave a great leap. I met her gaze with a great, proud glance.

"I think you are right. Under these circumstances—for that reward—I'll undertake the venture."

Salley said almost nothing more but a lonely and lovely half-smile was on her lips and a mist of tears in her pale-brown eyes. She gave me her promise to return at once to Charleston and walked with me to the gate, her hand in mine. It confided something to me—a sympathy perhaps, and a pledge not to

forget. It need not matter to me so very much, yet it did matter. Her hand was not small and fragile but long and strong, and beautiful and warm.

She stood in the gateway until I got in my hired carriage and started down the hill, then disappeared among the subdued colors of our autumn herbage.

Back in our rooms I asked Faro Jack for the evening off.

“You can have it,” he said, “but I’m a little worried about how you’ll spend it.”

“How is that?”

“I can add two and two. One of the figgers is that a young Charleston blood named Hudson, the son of Mason Hudson who lent you the books, has been hooked by Clara Day and is being fed in pieces to Memphis. The other is, your dressing up today in your best tucker and driving up to Summerville, where gamblers are usually as welcome as the smallpox. I think you’ve had a message from Mason Hudson, maybe a meeting with him. I think you intend to try to send the boy home. I wouldn’t blame you—the debts we make when we’re real young, before we find out that most of the cards are stacked, and to hell with it anyhow, well, those debts won’t let us be. Memphis plays his cards well. He has only one weakness that I know of—in trying to recoup losses, he takes reckless chances. He’s a bad enemy, so if you win for God’s sake do it politely. And Clara—well, she knifed a man in Mobile, and she’s not from a good family like she makes out when she’s drunk but up out of the piney woods, and she’s hellish proud.”

“Thanks for the tips, boss.”

I knocked on Memphis’ door—he had flashy rooms on McIntyre Street—about nine o’clock. A Negro named Julius, who had a long memory for faces, and whose deft hands when removing cloaks were peculiarly talented at locating concealed weapons, peered at me through a small glass, grew wide-eyed, and admitted me with a handsome bow.

“Mister Memphis, he will sho’ be glad to see you, suh,” Julius informed me.

“I’ve come to pay my respects to an old acquaintance from Charleston, Mr. Mate Hudson. Is he playing?”

“Him and Miss Clara, they just playin’ casino for quarters.”

Only now, with my meeting with Mate only a few seconds away, did I realize the large insufficiency of my own plans. My vague idea of taking all his ready money quickly and neatly, to return it later to a sadder, wiser man,

had left out human equations. But the pulse of panic, chill in my veins, did not last long. As I charged myself, such an ambitious and calculating man, with failure to plot the game beforehand at once I perceived its impossibility. There were too many factors that I did not know. My play would have to depend upon the deal.

My confidence was instantly restored. I felt the same feeling that had crept through me, alerting all my nerves, before previous big games; I called it excitement, but it was cold instead of warm. It could not be called pleasurable. It was lonely and somehow desolate. I wondered if booze hounds felt something the same as they looked at and toyed with the first glass ere they started their strange journey to their special hell-on-earth. All the great vices are allied with Death. I did not know how, but the old gamblers and drunkards and whoremasters perceived the fact; and someday I might find the answer.

I almost lost heart again as I paused in the doorway of the card room. I saw Mate long and plain without his noticing my entrance, and I wished to God it was somebody else who had to stand this gaff. I remembered that he was two years older than I: he looked five years younger. I had seen the same boyish freshness of complexion in a country cracker, then watched him lose his meager month's pay without much remorse. On the other hand, Mate was the arch type of the Charleston aristocrat—his body at once strong and graceful, his face of fine molding. There was no lack of maleness in either. Then why in hell, I asked myself, didn't he grow up?

He saw me, leaped to his feet, and almost ran to meet me. He held out his hand and his face lighted up.

“Why, Edward! I was hoping to see you! And how damned grand you are \_\_\_”

“I came here to see you, Mate.”

“Did you indeed! I'm so pleased. We must have a drink. But, first, you must meet my lovely companion. Clara, my sweet, may I present a boyhood friend, Edward Stono? Edward, this is Miss Clara Day.”

It is bad manners in the underworld for two of its inmates to reveal their acquaintance when being introduced by a “mark”—in Jack's rougher language, a sucker. Either might be playing a little game that the revelation might ruin. Clara's eyes only glimmered a little as she gave me a bow fit for a Legare Street parlor, for she remembered we had often danced to the playing of mug-house musicians and once came close to dancing to another piper. Those who knew Clara's ways would expect her to be cold-eyed and hard-

mouthed; instead she had big, soft eyes and a tender-looking mouth with a shy smile. Her form was fine, slender and tall. She hardly missed being a beauty. She dressed modestly. . . . But there is an ancient law, the poor man's *noblesse oblige*, that the pot must not call the kettle black. . . .

"Isn't she wonderful, Edward?" Mate asked with glowing eyes. "Clara, you must tell him the story you told me—of how you came to be here. He'll treat it in the strictest confidence, and he's one who'll understand."

"I'll tell him some time, perhaps, but not now," Clara replied hastily.

There came to me the stunning thought that Mate was being swindled far worse than I had perceived. By great cunning, Clara had chosen for her act that of an unstained rose blooming among brambles, had made Mate believe it, and he was paying the piper without even getting to dance. If so, she had gone too far. My immoral indignation grew and grew until it turned to an anger almost fine. I could play now. My brain felt whetted; I saw more clearly, as though in a wonderful glass; my hands felt light and free.

I needed them this way, for Memphis had not taken kindly to my coming. He did not waste a thought that I might have come in peace. He approached with his light, silent step, a thin-looking man, with sky-blue eyes, a short nose and a long jaw and a fine flow of ashen hair. He had no eyebrows that I could see, and no eyelashes, and he had been a great power on the Memphis waterfront, until the son of an old friend of the Blount family drowned himself for his losses in the blond man's rooms, and he had had to flee the state. He had never recovered that eminence, but he was still deadly.

"Well, Stono, this is the first time you've honored us with a visit," he remarked.

"I dropped in to see an old friend," I answered.

"I told you, Memphis, that when I took a notion to try my luck, I intended to play with Edward," Mate said, with his natural courtesy. "My only reluctance was that, if the cards went against me, he might throw some good ones my way. He was out of town—so I came here—and have had a good run for my money—winning many pots and failing to win a whole lot more by just a pip or two. Wasn't it remarkable, Memphis, how many times you beat me by a nose?"

"The cards have been running high as the Mississippi in June," Memphis said, turning to me. "Mr. Mate's hands were not quite up to mine, by and large, but the way he played 'em—man, I had my work cut out for me."

"Coming from Memphis, that's a great compliment, Mate," I said.

“I know it is. And I still expect to win back all I’ve lost and a bit more. That is, of course, with a little help from my Lady Luck.” He turned to grin at Clara.

“Mr. Stono, what can I offer you in the way of entertainment?” Memphis said handsomely as though business was done. “I’m sure you and your old friend would enjoy a drink together—”

“That, and a few hands of cards in your good company,” I answered.

At most expecting me to try to inveigle Mate to Faro Jack’s rooms—and this kind of piracy was greatly disparaged in the gambler’s world—he could hardly believe that I meant to meet him head on in his own joint. True, this would be almost certain protection against physical attack. Bloodshed here would close him out and bring him before the unbribable and severe judge of the Richmond court. But by what conceit did I imagine I could win?

I was counted a good player, but too young a hand to match that of seasoned, cunning, clever Memphis. Faro Jack and I had purposely encouraged this report, to draw trade away from him. Memphis believed it utterly. So he solved the mystery by the gambler’s way of thinking—either that I was enjoying a run of luck, or getting too big for my breeches. He believed he knew the right medicine for both.

“A social game, I suppose,” he remarked blandly.

“I thought we might put out two hundred each, and declare a reasonable sum.” The latter would represent the most any player could draw upon, and hence, plus table stakes, the most he could lose.

“Why, that would make a nice game. There’ll be no crowd tonight—the middle of the week and almost the end of the month—and we wouldn’t be interrupted. What do you say, Mr. Mate?”

“Clara, do you think I can win tonight?” Mate asked.

“I think your luck has hit the bottom and tonight will turn back.”

“Then I’d enjoy it very much.”

“What game would you choose, Mr. Mate?” Memphis asked.

“I’ll leave that to Edward.”

“Then I’ll say twenty-one. Then both luck and skill will tell. And I’ll declare two hundred above table stakes of the same sum.” And Memphis made the same declaration.

“I’m with you, but if I lose you boys will have to stake me to bed and board until I can draw on my long-suffering banker,” Mate said with his wistful smile. Then he turned to Clara and took both her hands.

“Memphis, do you agree to a head-to-head game?” I asked in an undertone. Clara was talking so gaily there was no danger of my being overheard.

“I wouldn’t sink to any other kind, tonight,” he answered, his placid blue eyes on mine. And I could take that any way I liked.

In a minute or two we were seated at a cloth-covered table, Memphis and I opposite each other, Clara perched on a low stool beside Mate. The table stakes were stacked in bills in front of each player. Whiskey and glasses stood in easy reach.

The play began—and I became aware of an old haunting. I wondered if anyone enjoyed gambling—taking real pleasure in it—and at my choosing it as a road to fortune. At best it was a most melancholy road. It was more lonesome than the path the mountain men took in the Far West to gain their pelf in pelts. The mountain man climbed mountains. He saw scenes of grandeur, forest and waterfalls and deer drinking and the herds of buffaloes, firelight at night instead of the monotonous lamps and the strained mirthless faces of his opponents and cards shuffling and falling. The cards were time-eaters. In most games, for most players, that was all they were good for. They did not make for human sociability as did the long silences of chess, but for withdrawal from one’s kind. There remained a strange, unpleasant passion, a kind of lust, that could not brook the least delay in the fall of the cards. The dealer must pick them up quickly and get on with the game. The winner must play fast, while his luck was in him. The loser must play fast, for his luck to change.

No luck was running in this game tonight, except Mate’s bad luck in contesting such players as Memphis and I. The deck was cold, and the cards fell about as the laws of chance would decree, when Chance herself had turned her back on the play. Such hands as Memphis and I drew we played with caution. Our stakes of bills grew slowly, fed from Mate’s dwindling stacks, but one was hardly higher than the other. Actually neither Memphis nor I was gaming in the true sense of the word. We were playing expertly but with no brilliance; perhaps we were both waiting for the coast to clear.

That would not be long. Midway our second hour of play, Mate lost the last bill of his table stakes and drew upon the sum he had declared.

“My luck doesn’t seem to be getting any better,” he said with a weary smile.

“It will now,” Clara mouthed. “You mark my words. Memphis could tell you how many times he’s seen it turn when a player has to dig down.”

But she did not look at him as she talked nor did she bother to throw any false conviction into her voice. He was hooked for what else he had; and her jaybird-sharp attention had become fixed on the play between Memphis and me. A thought had struck her that she could not credit but which brought a flush of excitement to her cheeks and a fascinating sheen on her eyes. Memphis and I were playing about even. Neither of us was crowding the other or burning up the deck, but she had thought to see Memphis far ahead by now. And so far, as no one knew better than she, we had played head-to-head. Was it possible he had met his match?

I grinned to myself and thought, “Has he met a sharper worthy of his steal?”

But I did not tarry long over the bad pun, nor with Clara’s foxy mind and carnivorous nature. I was arrested by Mate’s somewhat delayed reply to her hollow words of encouragement. Evidently he had considered them well and they had thrown a kind of shadow on the wall.

“No, my lovely little girl,” he said quietly. “My luck’s not going to change tonight and I doubt if it will ever change. I’m one of those fellows. You’ve seen some of us before. Fairies come to our borning. They bring us every gift man could desire. Fortune—rank—love—beauty in many forms. But we want none of them. We throw them all away. There’s only one thing that we want. Do you know what it is?”

“A drink, I reckon,” Clara answered pertly.

Mate paid no heed to the dreadful insolence. He never looked for anything like that or recognized it when it came. My hand quivered to slap her and refrained, not from the amount of gentlemanly training I had managed to absorb but because the end would be tragicomedy beyond bearing.

“Do you know, Edward?” Mate answered.

“Yes, sir, I think I do.”

“Well, we get it sooner or later, every damned one of us.” Falling silent, he looked at the two cards Memphis had dealt him, one of them a face card and the other, I thought, a seven, judging from my last glimpse of the shuffle. “Memphis, hit me again.”

Almost all high-ranking card sharps can predict, roughly or with amazing exactitude, the run of the cards as they deal. It is a matter of keeping track of them during the shuffle, recognizing many of them, predicting the position of many more. A highly expert gambler may appear to look you straight in the eyes as he shuffles, let you cut, and still know most of the cards he deals you. However, it requires intense concentration and an amount of mental labor which most gamblers cannot force themselves to exert, except during high and exciting play.

In an odd way it was comparable to rifle and pistol shooting, at which many of the Low Country aristocrats surpassed. Good enough shooting, even fine shooting can be pleasurable; but to achieve a great shot—holding with immeasurable closeness and touching off in the right thousandth part of a second—demands an expenditure of nervous energy and puts a strain on body and brain that few riflemen can endure.

A few gamblers can keep track of the cards while an opponent shuffles. The feat is far more difficult and rare, requiring vision and what seems an almost psychic interpretation of things seen. Often such players know where cards are without awareness of having seen them, either through a kind of unconscious vision or some mental process even more mysterious. I had demonstrated some such gift on my last visit to Faro Jack's rooms in Charleston. Since then it had undergone cultivation and enhancement. Sometimes, usually late at night, when my nerves were alive and tingling like those of a hunting wolf, I knew the positions of the fifty-two cards in a shuffled deck almost as well as a pianist knows the eighty-eight keys on his board.

Tonight I had proposed that we play twenty-one because it would employ only a small part of the deck and hence lend itself to the uses of this special skill. About two o'clock in the morning, when Mate lost the last of his declared money and withdrew from the game, the iron was almost hot enough for me to strike. Memphis' ordinarily pale face had darkened from smoldering anger that he had not downed me yet; his eyes had a sullen look and his voice had coarsened. At my next deal he raised his bet from ten to twenty dollars. I took that hand, he the next two, I the fourth, having won by blackjack. As it was again my turn to deal, he laid down a crisp fifty-dollar note. The air in the ugly garish room seemed to swirl from some unknown force. Mate sat brooding, hardly watching. But on Clara's face was a flush of excitement as red as her lips.

Luck gave me an easy victory with two face cards. But as I picked up the cards to deal again I had a feeling they were not right—perhaps a hunch, as a gambler would say—and I employed a little trick—actually nothing more than a free-hand lighting of a cheroot—that suggested confidence in a run of luck. Taking the strange bait, Memphis bet only ten. My hunch, or whatever it was, proved true; the first two cards I dealt him were a ten and a jack.

It was now again Memphis' turn to deal, and his fury at his puny winning brought out his old weakness, and I knew by his eyes that he had turned reckless. I laid down a hundred dollars which he matched with a quick, pugnacious gesture. I watched his deal with all the eyes in my head and did not cut. He dealt me an eight and a three. The next card—I knew it past all doubting—was a six, but close to it, perhaps adjacent, were a face card and, I thought, a seven or a nine. Also there was an ace somewhere near the top. Yet I felt fairly certain there was a red four between. I asked to be hit, got the six, and then was faced with one of the hardest problems I had ever met with in the dens.

Eight and three and six made seventeen. Another four—if it were really there—would make twenty-one. If Memphis got it, then was hit with a face card and a seven, he would have twenty-one. If the supposed seven proved to be a nine, he would break his hand. If the four was not there—if my vision failed me—his first two cards would give him a count of seventeen or nineteen, tying or beating me. Then if he were in the mood to deal himself another card, I thought it would be an ace.

My confidence grew that the top card was the four of diamonds. If Memphis knew it, he dared not palm or shift it, for my eye was on him. More likely he thought I had seen the ace, the most quickly visible of all cards, which he knew was on or near the top. So I let him sweat a few seconds more. I could have sixteen, more likely seventeen or eighteen, he thought. Call on sixteen, stand on seventeen—that rule-of-thumb was ancient as the game itself. The beads came out on his big bald brow and his pale wicked smile was a cheat. And he had settled it with himself—except for one cold little draft blowing on his heart—that I would stand when, replying to his smile, I asked to be hit again.

He had no choice but to deal me the card and there it lay, face up on the table. When he saw it was not an ace and instead a four, his eyes bulged and Clara uttered a stifled shriek.

The last play of the hand was bound to be anticlimactic, but I enjoyed it, sitting there with an unbeatable score of twenty-one. Memphis dealt himself two cards, which I felt sure were a black face card and neither a nine nor a

seven, but a ten. Now only an ace would improve his score; any other would break his hand, yet he feared to the depths of what served him for a soul that I had twenty-one. But I might have twenty, to tie him, or, fishing for the ace, I might have broken my hand.

He decided to stand—perfectly good twenty-one in any safe and sane play—and to his great bitterness and chagrin lost his last chance. This changed to wormwood, unspittable from his mouth, when he stole a look at the next card—the one he would have drawn if he had not stood—and it was an ace.

Memphis wondered if luck were running against him, for he still would not believe that I could outplay him. He bet only twenty dollars on the next hand, which I lost, but I placed forty on the following hand and won it by sheer luck on blackjack. Now he was growing rabid and restless, as was his wont when cards ran against him, but I did not expect him to break his given word, for that is the gambler's pride. There is honor among thieves and this, besides his skill, is his only pride, for his diamonds and fine dress are mockery before God and man, as he knows full well in his heart. But Memphis did break it. As he picked up the cards to hand to me, he palmed the ace. When, having shuffled, I let him cut, he slid it to the top of the deck.

It was a wonderfully deft maneuver—I had never given Memphis his full due as a sharper, but he was the least bit afraid I had seen him. Perhaps he was becoming suspicious of the sharpness of my eyes or that Luck, that fickle goddess of the dens, had turned her back on him. But his confidence was instantly restored as he looked at his second card. Color came back to his face and triumph to his soul. Even if I had not placed it for him, I would have known that it was a face card, giving him twenty-one.

Dealing myself a face card and an eight, I stood on them and lost. And now I was facing an entirely different opponent. He could take me, his hunch told him, any time he liked. What he had thought might have been card-reading was a piece of folly shot full of luck. To strengthen his illusions, I cut my next bet from forty to ten dollars, which I won on blackjack.

"I'll play you only one more hand," I told him. "You began the deal, and I'll end it. I intend it to be the *coup de grâce*."

"What does that mean?" he asked contemptuously.

"It's a French term. My mother is of French descent. It might be said to mean the satisfactory end of a conflict."

Then Mate, who knew perfectly well the meaning of *coup de grâce*, started up out of his lonely reverie and stared at me.

“So you’re an educated fellow!” Memphis mocked in polite tones. “Why, I’m glad to know it. And if this is to be our last hand, with you dealing, I’d like your opinion as to suitable stakes. My own idea would be to make it worth while.” For Memphis felt the power and the luck within him, and did not remember that the same feeling had set many a man on a course to ruin and despair.

“Thanks. Suppose you lay your bet, giving me the privilege of halving it or doubling it.”

“Then I say two hundred dollars.”

He smiled his strange, foxy smile into my eyes.

“Well, it’s late—and I’m playing a good part with Mate’s money, so I’ll double it.”

He stared, but remembered I was a fool and took heart. When I shuffled, I let him cut. That did not stop me from dealing him eighteen points; I was too vengeful to let him off with an easy defeat. I wanted it to sting. I planned to have it rankle many a night. I had only to look at Mate’s drawn face to be encouraged in this resolve.

As I dealt him the second card, I gave him a peek at the next, and it was a three.

“Hit me again,” he said.

As I did so, my hand moved a little, too quickly for him to see, and the top card that fell was a five. I dealt myself a ten and a seven, stood on them, and won. I did not flatter myself that the grim game was over. There might or might not be an aftermath of the duel with Memphis. I had taken him for more than four hundred dollars, about two hundred of which he had won from Mate, and that left a festering wound; but, like most gamblers, he knew a good beating when it came to him, he could read cards however they fell, and wharf rats avoid the company of other wharf rats whose fangs they fear. For the nonce he controlled his temper and even attempted a heartiness that must have hurt him like working a rheumatic arm. Only his high color and hot, dry eyes betrayed his fury.

The next hand, if it were played, would be the most crucial of the night. I had not thought of proposing it until close to the end of my game with Memphis; when I was drunk on cold excitement, when the brilliant interplay of hand and eye with the most powerful working of my mind had demanded too-long concentration, at the fringes of which lay half-madness as from a potent drug. Certainly the idea was wild in the extreme. I could not have

entertained it in a sane moment. It might prove the *coup de main*, for in it was a genius of great gambling, or a stunning disaster. The fact remained that Mate was not yet free of Memphis' and Clara's toils, he was only shocked and devaluated and left to lie awhile; and since I had undertaken the half-mad mission, I must not shrink from half-mad measures if they bid fare to win.

The time was now. The excitement in the air had not yet died away. Memphis was too badly beaten to act swiftly and boldly; Mate was deeply depressed and amenable to being led; and Clara, hardly believing what she had seen, felt cold and lost and ugly. Her eyes followed my winnings from the table to my hand to my wallet. The hunger in them was forlorn instead of fierce, like a child's whose belly aches in vain, for there seemed nothing for her tonight except an unearned cursing from Memphis and a dreary rewooling of Mate, the gains from which, if any, lay in a dismal future. The money made me, however, the central figure of her present world.

"I'd like to play one more hand, with Mate alone," I told Memphis.

"What for?" And this was a sensible question for a gambler to ask.

"That's the point. He's lost his money. Still, I think I should give him a chance for a consolation pot." I turned to him, and spoke in a voice as casual and commonplace as I could make it, for this was the most dangerous instant of the undertaking.

"Suppose I put up a hundred against—well, let's say Clara's favor for the rest of the night."

At first he was not sure he had heard me correctly. By the time he had reviewed the statement, a chill doubt of everything he held by slaked his fire. He got to his feet, but not in one angry bound, nor did his eyes blaze. He was disoriented and estranged by tonight's events and quite possibly he had made a great mistake. . . .

"What do you mean by that, Edward?" he asked, in a low, shaking voice. "As far as I know, Clara is a lady. If you've insulted her, you'll have to answer for it."

"Oh, sit down, dearie," Clara broke in before I could speak. "I'm not in the least insulted—Edward and I are old friends—and if he needs his face slapped, I'll tend to it myself. Anyway, you can use that hundred, and I feel in my bones you'll win it."

Clara spoke quietly, as she had carefully learned to do, but she could not keep a blitheness from out of her tone, and I did not think she tried. She had been suddenly revitalized. Her big soft eyes glowed quite beautifully and her

breast was high and she seemed to stand on tiptoe. Mate looked from her to me, and there was sorrow in his eyes, but behind the darkness was a glimmer that I thought might be hope. . . . Hope of what? Perhaps he himself did not know.

“I won’t play such a hand,” he said, as he resumed his seat. “I wouldn’t think of it.”

“Then I’ll play it for you, pard. Put out your hundred, Edward.” And when I had done so she asked with a faked cunning, “Will you let me deal?”

“Surely.”

“I’ll deal honestly, but you might as well kiss those bills goodbye.”

One of them, a ten, took its departure in Memphis’ resolute hand before the play began. Half of it represented the house’s rake-off when patrons play among themselves. This the old sharper was never known to forget or to forgive, and I thought that he found a little satisfaction, a small sop to his injured vanity, in the present strict attention to his business. The other five dollars was presumably room rent, soon to be owed by the victor. I wondered if Mate presumed the same, and whether his now numbed face could feel the smack.

In her countless hours of loafing about Memphis’ rooms, Clara had learned cascade shuffling. It was considered a pretty thing to see, but Mate took no joy in the sight, for it evidenced that his stainless rose growing among brambles had been in blossom a good while. Her next maneuver was not so pretty. I saw it perfectly plain, Memphis could have seen it had he not drawn off by himself to mope; and since it was unadroit, I was not sure that Mate did not see it. At least he might suspect it from her rapid talk as she played the trick, and that could be the dregs of his bitter cup.

As she toyed with the cards, she managed to pick four and place them on top the deck. In descending order they were an ace, a jack, a ten, and a nine.

“You don’t want to cut, do you?” she asked me gaily. “I know you trust me.”

Perhaps for my soul’s sake, more likely to palliate a turning stomach, I started to answer, “I’ll cut for luck.” I started to let Fate decide the sorry game. But if I did, the luck might be bad; and Clara, supposedly playing for Mate, might win. I could not imagine a more lame and impotent conclusion. I myself had intended to cheat if it were necessary to win, to fulfill some kind of a tacit pledge made to Salley and myself. Why should I blame Clara when the rich smell of money was in her nostrils?

Still I could not trust my mind or hardly my heart, and I turned to Mate.

“Will you cut, sir?”

“I wouldn’t consider it, sir,” he answered, his eyes on mine.

That was the real end of the game. The fall of the cards—the ace and the jack to me, the ten and the nine to her. We went through the motions of standing, and then showing our cards. Mate would not glance at them, I said nothing; and a look, perhaps of fear, perhaps of remorse, crept into Clara’s face. Whatever it was, its stay was not long. I saw her pull herself together and turn with faked earnestness to Mate.

“Edward won, dearie. And he won fair, ’cause I dealt the cards myself. When the luck’s with a fellow, it seems like he can’t lose.”

“Very well, and I’ll be on my way.”

“I hope I’ll see you again before long.”

“I’ll see you in hell, I expect.”

“Why, that’s no way to talk—”

“Be still, Clara, and go on up,” I ordered. “I’ll join you in a moment.”

She started to protest, but the cheapness went out of her face, God knew where, and she rose and walked with irrefutable grace to the stairs. These were white and broad and beautifully curved and had a mahogany banister, and belles had descended and brides had ascended in years gone by, when this house was a home instead of a pit of heartbreak. No bride ever mounted with a more queenly air. And the Devil was in Mate, too, for he stood in a kind of attendance upon her departure, and did not move until she vanished from sight.

“Mate, I don’t expect you to speak to me,” I said. “But will you wait in your hotel room for a communication from me? I’ll dispatch it in a few minutes.”

He nodded and went out the door. I had Julius bring me pen and ink and sealing wax, and going into an anteroom I wrote rapidly and briefly:

Dear Mate:

Once you stayed away from a party for my sake. I came to this one tonight for yours. I am returning the four hundred dollars that you lost. I most earnestly request that you keep the sum and return to Charleston; and you will deprive me of a great satisfaction if you refuse.

Putting four one-hundred dollar bills with the letter, I sealed and addressed the envelope and, going into the street, put it into the trusty black hands of a cabdriver I knew well. He promised to deliver it personally to Mas' Hudson at the Planter's Hotel within twenty minutes. Then I returned to the rooms to the desolate duty of winding up the game.

When I had climbed the stairs, a door opened in the hall. I entered it to find Clara ensconced in an easy chair, a drink at her elbow. Her eyes were alight and she could not wait to tell me something.

"It wasn't fair to Mate," she said, "but I stacked that deck."

"It's no news to me," I answered.

"Was I that clumsy? I hope Mate didn't see, because it would hurt his feelings, and I'd hate to do that." She paused and looked at me sharply. "You don't seem very grateful."

"I am, though. It saved me from rigging a deck against an old acquaintance. Now he's left the joint and you are free to go."

She echoed the last word—"go"—without emphasis. Then her breast rose and I thought she was going to burst out with something; instead she let go her breath slowly and in silence. She turned a little so I couldn't get a full view of her face. And suddenly I felt no longer vengeful for Mate's wrongs and only a desolate emptiness was in me and I was alone as on a desert island, and yet somehow Clara was with me there, and we had both arrived there in the same boat. It was like a bleak dream from which I yearned to waken.

"Let me get this straight," Clara went on, after a long pause. "You said I was free to go."

"Yes."

"I'm always free to go, or free to come. That's the one thing I get out of it—the life, I mean—perhaps I should say the only thing I've kept. I was born free and I'll die free. But what I want to know is—and pardon my curiosity—do you want me to go? It doesn't seem quite in keeping with the job you put up on Mate."

"I put it up on you too. I had to. I was paying off a debt. At first I didn't mind jobbing you—Mate would have gotten kinder treatment from a bitch jackal—but now I'm sorry it was necessary. You're not to blame for what you are. The fact remains I never intended to collect that bet, it would be a

physical impossibility, and if you'll take twenty dollars and get the hell out, I'll be greatly relieved."

She walked aimlessly about the room. She was pale except for a high flush on her cheekbones and her prettiness was so marked that it would be mistaken for beauty. After a moment she stopped and looked at me.

"You're not to blame for what you are, either."

"I don't know about that."

"Do you know what you are? A tin-horn aristocrat. A card sharp trying to be a gentleman. Well, you'll never make it as long as you live."

"Well, if Mate goes home—and I think he will—and you'd better not do anything to keep him, and I mean that, Clara—"

"What would you do, kill me? I think you might kill me. I'd about as soon have you do it as what you did."

"Will you leave him alone?"

"Yes, I'll leave him alone. I'm truly afraid not to. Now what did you say would happen when he goes home?"

"I'll feel like a gentleman—for a little while."

"You never can. That's the joke of it. If you can feel like one, you are one, but you never can. The white and the black sheep are separated before they shed their milk teeth, and all the king's horses—and all the king's men—"

"Do you want me to go down first, or will you?"

"I will, but will you do a gentlemanly thing for me before we go?"

"If I can."

"There's a book on the table. Somebody left it here. Will you read it awhile? I won't disturb you."

My head swam and I did not catch her meaning.

"You fool," she said in bitter scorn of my amazement. "Do you think I want Memphis to know you've kicked me out? He'd cut my percentage tomorrow."

"I'll be glad to read the book a little while."

The book was a slender volume of tales by a little known Virginian named Poe, and I soon lost myself in it. Before long, Clara rose and spoke.

“I’m going now,” she said distinctly, “and I want the twenty dollars you promised.”

“Here it is.” I handed her the bill.

“You poor bastard.” And with that, with her graceful carriage, she walked out of the room.

4

The walk home from Memphis’ rooms was of only a few blocks, with lampposts at the corners. There was no sound but my own footfall, weirdly loud in the silent night, and although I watched for wayfarers who might have grim business with me, I saw no living being but a homeless dog who gave thought to taking up with me, but after a tired wag of his tail abandoned the notion. The tall, locked-fast houses with their dark windows and sleeping inmates lent an uncanny effect to the solitude. It seemed to me deeper and more infiltrating than in any swamp of gray water and moss-hung trees.

My own lamps had never burned so dimly. I tried in vain to wish for something, to feel again the old and powerful sense of being and projection that had vitalized my boyhood, but I could get no farther than a lame wanting, a sick hope, for the night’s affair to be over. I knew better than to believe it when, coming in sight of our resort, I made out a cab waiting at the curb, no doubt the same I had sent to the Planter’s Hotel hardly an hour before. Its old black driver, Bruno, was not so quick in identifying me. I was almost to our gate before he climbed down from his high seat and removed his hat.

“Mas’ Edwood, suh!”

“All right, Bruno.”

“De gentaman, Mas’ Hudson, he had me wait, and after he’d done opened de envelope, he seal it up agin and sent it back to you.”

“Why, that’s fine.” But I was not saving face in front of Bruno’s black, manly, nigh to noble face. It was in the nature of a joke.

“He say to tell you he took somethin’ out of it, so he could go back to Charleston tomorrow, and he thank you for ’at, and for wantin’ to help him, but he was returning de rest, which he couldn’t noways ’cept, and you and he was square now, and he reques’ you don’t pay no more mind to him or his business.”

“All right, but I’ll pay some to yours. Who’s your master?”

“Mas’ Stephen Jones, who own de stable.”

“You’re not a free Negro?”

“No, suh, I’m a slave.”

“How much would he take to ’mancipate you?” I pronounced the word according to Bruno’s understanding.

“I don’t think more’n three hundred dollar, I being so old.”

“Would you like to be ’mancipated? Mr. Jones is a gentleman, and he’d care for you till you die if you remain his slave. But if you were set free, you’d have to look out for yourself.”

“Mas’ Edwood, you ask me, suh, and I’ll tell you. I was born a slave, which I couldn’t help, nor my mammy neither, but I’ve prayed to God in Heabin I could die free.”

I opened the envelope and looked in it.

“There’s over three hundred dollars here,” I said. “If you had it, could you deal with Mr. Jones yourself?”

“Yes, sah, I can!”

“Well, then, here it is. It’s money that doesn’t belong to anybody that I know of, now that Mr. Hudson refused it, and you are as good a one to have it as anybody I can think of. Don’t thank me, if you please. Don’t say anything, and get in your cab and drive off.”

“Yes, suh.”

He did exactly as I ordered him. As I turned through our gate I heard the cloppity-clop of hoofs on the cobblestones.

For the next few days I was a little anxious over every call of the postman at our door. But there was no other communication in the handwriting of the note I had received from Pine Lodge and no mail from Charleston of any kind, and I was greatly relieved that neither Salley Sass nor Mate had felt the need of penning a difficult letter. It would have taken away a little of the feeling that Salley had promised me as a reward.

## BOOK TWO

### CHAPTER IV

#### The Secret

Only a few years before, copper wires had been strung on poles along the whole length of the railroad between Charleston and Hamburg. By the brain of Samuel Morse, assisted by many other brains, electrical impulses were sent through these wires, whereby signals could be passed in the twinkling of an eye. Thus the explosion of a cannon in Fort Sumter might be known in Augusta before word of it had leaked to Upper East Bay.

On a bleak, biting, windy day in mid-January, when we sun-loving folk had already sickened of cold weather and longed for the spring, a boy from the telegraph office came riding wildly to our gate. The message borne as by a lightning bolt along the wires was for me. I opened it and read:

Your mother stricken. Come at once.

Dr. Sams

I held it out to Faro Jack. It was my pride, but an evil pride—maybe one the Devil recognized as his own—that the paper did not shake. He took it and read it. For a few brief seconds a mask dropped from his face and he looked like an entirely different man. Then it came back and he looked at his watch and spoke in his usual rather gruff tone.

“Well, you’ve got an hour and a half to catch the train.”

“I could do it in half an hour.”

“Yes, you could. We fly-by-nights learn to move fast, and sometimes it stands us in good stead. How are you fixed for money?”

“Over five hundred.”

“If you need more, telegraph me.”

“I don’t think I will.”

“Don’t hesitate, even if you know you’re not coming back.”

“I have no intention of not coming back.”

“Yes, but you may not. It may be you’ll lose the anchor that holds you in these parts. I had a sister whom I loved. Like so many gamblers, I had no care for sweethearts, but I loved her without end. Until she died, I never got far from Natchez. After that there was nothing to hold me there, so I roved and roamed.”

“I’ll call on you, sir, if I need you.”

“Meanwhile don’t try to stand too straight. Bend a little with the gale. When a man’s mother dies, he’s buffeted by a mighty gale. It’s as though the roots of his life have been torn out.”

I went to my room, dressed finely, packed my bag, and in due course caught the ferry across the river. Then I watched the countryside come rushing up and pass, and thought upon the great trees that never roved or roamed, yet attained great beauty and venerability, I would almost think a wisdom, and who extended Christian shelter to busy squirrels menaced by weather, hawks, and men, and to pretty blithe birds with fast, tremulous hearts; and I considered the rivers deep and wide, and the rains that lashed them and their freshets that tore their banks; and I looked across the fields, chill and lonely-looking with their dried stalks, dead grass, and frostbit stubble, but as surely as spring would come they would be green again, buoyant, and vivacious.

At the station in Charleston I did not run with the drummers, rice buyers, and sea-cotton factors to the line of cabs and hacks to hire, but walked at my leisure, like a gentleman, to his own carriage. A Negro cabdriver, scenting a big tip, waved away the early-comers to save the seat for me.

But his expectations took a great fall when I named a street and number. “And I want to get there as fast as your horse can go.”

The houses dwindled in size and drew in upon one another, until they were rows of shacks. The cobblestones gave way to half-frozen mud. Even the air changed, that free air of heaven of which the preachers ranted; and was fit only to give to the poor. But I made a handsome gift to the cabdriver when he stopped. Maybe I had a yellow girl, worth fourteen hundred dollars while he would not bring eight, stowed away here, and that would account for my haste. So he drove away with his nose a little pinched, but still held high.

But I had not come here to light a bright flame of life but to walk into the shadow of Death. And I knew that, as well as I had often known a certain card, greatly desired or deeply dreaded, would fall to my hand.

Quietly I opened the front door. Within I heard a man’s voice through the thin walls of my mother’s bedroom. I had expected to hear Dr. Sams’s voice,

which I barely knew; thus the familiarity of this voice blocked my mind. It spoke on—only half-hushed, in the speaker's harsh attempt to make someone hear—then my brain cleared, and I knew it for the voice of Matthew Whitlow.

“He's coming now, but don't you tell him,” the shyster lawyer was saying. “You hear me, Marie? You'll hurt him, and not help him. I tell you not to tell him!”

There fell a brief silence, and then a voice, already quiet in a strange way, came through the wall as clearly as a rat's scratch in the deep night.

“I will tell him! I wish I had told him eleven years ago, when once I started to.”

I had stopped in the doorway, unable to stir, then walked with swift, light steps. Matthew Whitlow stepped out of my way and did not dare speak as I made for my mother's bed-side. In a moment my arms were about her and her head was on my breast and I was hiding my face in her hair.

When the spasm had passed I turned, sat down on the edge of the bed, and spoke quietly to Matthew Whitlow.

“Where's the doctor?”

“He can't do any more for her, and has gone back to Beaufort.”

“No doctor can do anysing for me now, Edward,” my mother told me softly.

“In that case, sir, would you kindly get the hell out?”

“Will you remember what I told you, Marie?”

“I'll remember, but do as I please, and please get ze hell out, as Edward tell you.”

“Edward, whatever she tells you—don't do anything rash. You'll be sorry if you do. You're not a gentleman. You wouldn't have a chance in the courts.”

“Thank you. Excuse us, now.”

He left with a certain dignity. I looked again at Mamma, and a little color had come back into her wasted cheeks, but the skin was drawn too tight over the bones of her face.

“I'm going to call another doctor,” I told her.

“No, Edward.” She began to speak in her beautifully accented French. “It has been a long time coming, but, at last, it has arrived. There are clots of

blood in the little veins of my heart. These cause it to run fast, or slow, or miss its beat. Eight—nine hours ago there came a great attack, and I fell down, and the postman found me when I did not answer the door, and I had him send for Dr. Sams. The next attack—very soon, he thinks—it will be the last. It is an easy end for me, Edward. I will hardly know what hit me.”

“Should you be sitting up?”

“I feel better to sit up. There is only a little pain in my chest and arm.”

“Is there any medicine—?”

“Of course there is! See, the bottle on the table, almost full. Pour me what you call two fingers, and fill half the glass with water. I can breathe better, and talk with less effort, and feel less pain.”

I did as she bade me and sat down at her side again.

“Do you want to tell me now?”

“The sooner the better.”

“Are you sure you want to tell me—that you would die happier if you did? Otherwise keep the secret.”

“I will die happier, Edward. You can live a lie only so long, then it turns inward and gnaws at the heart.”

“What is the lie that you have lived?”

“There never was a Charles Stono.”

Strangely, my only reply was a long sigh.

“There was no great house in Guadeloupe, with old retainers, no silver on the sideboard, no horses in the stables, or carriages in the shed. There were no boats lost at sea. I was the daughter of a poor schoolmaster, brought from France to tutor a sugar planter’s children. He had married a governess, likewise brought from France. When my father died, there was no money, but his old friend brought me on a boat to Charleston, where perhaps I could marry a prosperous tradesman, or a foreman, or even the owner of a little farm. Meanwhile I went to sew for a lady here, for I was clever with my fingers. And—you can guess the rest.”

“It wasn’t Matthew Whitlow, was it, for the love of God?”

“No, the lady was the mistress of a great plantation, but her husband was tempted by a young and pretty girl—and I had grown up in the sun—”

“Who was it, if you want to tell me? I’ll tell you again, you don’t have to tell me. Maybe I’d be better off not to know—yet I want to know.”

“I thought you would know without my telling. It was Mason Hudson.”

“Mason Hudson,” I echoed, hardly knowing what I was saying.

“But I can hardly believe it. That he should be the one to meet me in the park—”

“He planned that meeting.”

“Then it was he who sent the—the—ten dollars.”

“Don’t look that way, Edward. That way lies evil. That way lies death for both of us—death of the soul.”

## 2

I would let that go a little while, I thought. I would not look at this mean room where my mother had worked and slept for twenty years, whose ugliness and dirt and squalor she had so often charmed away with loving lies; and I would not see in fancy a mansion on the promenade where prism-hung lamps shone on warm carpets and glossy deep-red wood and curtains of damask, nor of a barony beside the river, with its league-wide sweep of rice fields, and its hall reached by horsemen and by coaches and carriages stately moving up the driveway lined by ancient oaks. My mother, who feared not Death, looked at me with frightened eyes. I would allay that fright.

“Are you ready for another tot?” I asked.

“If you please, Edward.”

“What would Dr. Sams say?”

“He told me they might bring on the attack, or delay it.”

I brought the glass and held it to her lips. She drank greedily.

“How many know about you—and him—and me?”

“No one, I think, but Dr. Sams and Mr. Whitlow.”

“Not even Mistress Hudson?”

“No, she never suspected. She loves him greatly—and trusts him. They are a happy couple.”

I knew that, it seemed, from my view of them on the beach.

“Did he fall in love—for a little while—with you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Did you with him?”

“I tried not to, but couldn’t altogether succeed.”

“How long did—the affair—last?”

“One month.”

“Did he ever come to see you here?”

“No. Perhaps he would have, if he had not feared discovery.”

“Well, he’s coming here now—tonight.” My voice had changed subtly.

“No, Edward.”

“I’m going now and get him. I want him to see the mother of his bastard son for the last time—”

“I tell you no. It’s for me to say, not you. What I gave him was a free gift. I’ve never called on him for anything and I never will.”

“His free gift was a ten-spot every month, sent by a shyster lawyer—”

“Drink a little of the rum, Edward, and compose yourself.”

Hardly knowing what I was doing, I obeyed her. When I returned, she took my hand between both of hers.

“Listen. I will try to tell you something. How great was the wrong we did, that autumn month I stayed at the Barony, only the good God knows. The priests do not know, the judges would not know, he and you and I can never know. But since then I have done a wrong that I can hardly bear to go away and leave unrighted.”

“Whatever it is, I take it on my head.”

“No, because you are its victim. To make up for this”—her eyes moved about the wretched room—“I gave you a dream. It was a rainbow without a pot of gold. It was a bubble without substance. It may be that all your life you will chase it in vain.”

I marveled at my mother’s clear thought and good language, her tone low but distinct. I did not at once grasp the import of her words. Their full meaning went home to me slowly but with great power.

“I won’t admit the possibility,” I told her. “If I did, I’d be beaten now—and what could I do then? The dreams that men follow are hatched in their boyhood; they can’t switch to some more probable dream as they grow up.

Mason Hudson is a great gentleman—that was the basis of the myth—its solid foundation of fact. I think it eased your conscience in inventing the rest. Well, I've got to go far, even farther than I thought. I've got to climb high, up what ladder I don't know. What you have told me has heightened my ambition, not humbled it. Do you see that?"

I think she saw it, for her eyes filled with tears.

"Do you want me to speak of it?" I asked.

She nodded. "Who should you speak to, if not to your mother? Who has a better right to hear?"

"Was my father present at my birth?"

"No."

"But I presume he sent his old friend, Dr. Sams, to attend you."

"Yes."

"Did he care enough to look into my face?"

"He cared enough, perhaps, but he dared not do it until you were of an age to run outside and play. Then sometimes he came by in his carriage."

"I should thank him for muddying the wheels of his fine tack in the alleys of Marsh Street."

"Don't talk like that. Remember, he brought you books."

"Three hundred dollars' worth of books in all, I guess. I'll remember that, at the settlement. Did Dr. Sams tell him you were stricken with heart failure?"

"No, I asked him not to."

"Was it pride, or hate, or what?"

"It wasn't hate. How could I hate the father of my son? He had not taken advantage of me; I fell in love with him—he was drawn to me—and the rest —" She stopped, her eyes slowly growing round.

"What is it, Mamma?"

She looked at me in the silence of great surprise. Drops of sweat came out on her white forehead. Her mouth twisted in pain.

I sprang up but her hand still clung to mine, and that clinging became a last and desperate clutch.

I thought to break it and run for a doctor but it seemed that she guessed the impulse and, amidst her pain, she shook her head.

It was great pain that I prayed would quickly pass. I had seen the death throes of a cat knocked down with a club, and a dog run over by a wagon, and a rabbit dropped by a hawk, and their pain was of the same order, for all that they were dumb creatures, beneath the dignity of man; and I was as helpless now as then, and the only help that could come to her was by the hand of Death. He was reaching out now. He came into the room, this mean and squalid room not fit for one so august, and at last he stretched out his hand. It was as though it lay lightly for a moment on Mamma's forehead. The flexed muscles of her twisted body slowly eased. But there was still light in her eyes as they sought mine.

“Goodbye, Edward, my little gentleman, my son,” she whispered.

“I'll be true to you, Mamma. Goodbye.”

She lay shuddering for a long minute, while the light in her eyes dimmed. Finally it died, and her hand grew limp in mine, and she lay still. Then as I saw her lying there so quietly, this little remnant, the gale that Faro Jack had told me would break upon me broke with great force. It was as though the roots of my life had been torn out. But I bent to it, as he had bade me, and did not try to stand erect, and so I endured it unwrecked, as had countless millions of my fellow men before me, as would countless millions to come.

For a moment I gave thought to my fellow men, and it was as though a lamp had been lighted in a dark room, it seemed that I was on the verge of a great discovery, but the vision dimmed as I remembered the tasks before me.

I closed my mother's open eyes. I drew the covering of the bed about her shoulders. Then I went to the door and waited for a passer-by.

### 3

Hailing from Chalon, near the Swiss border, my mother's parents had been French Protestants. Happily there was a small Protestant church in our neighborhood, known as the House of Eli's Children, and the Children themselves were poor whites settling here from the Upper Piedmont, from the mountings as they put it, blond, blue-eyed, illiterate people, fanatical in their faith. I went to their minister, known as Preacher Gale, and asked if he would conduct a simple funeral service for my mother, since our house was not fit for it. Although never a member, she had gone to a few of the night meetings, seeking I knew not what.

Preacher Gale was quick to assent. Moreover, since the word had got around Upper East Bay that Madame Stono had died, about fifty of its poor dwellers gathered to pay their last respects. They cried Amen to the fervent

prayers and the roof rang with their shouting songs, strangely like Negro music. But they did not understand why I would not raise the coffin lid to give them a last glimpse of the dead. I feared they would weep and wail—not at this particular loss, for they barely knew my mother, but at the travail of life they knew full well, and at the positive way it ended. But it was what they expected at funerals, an old and universal custom, and I wondered if I, being what I was, had the right to omit it. Perhaps instead of protecting some cold clay that had housed a being I had loved, I had guarded only my own vanity.

Matthew Whitlow did not come to the funeral, and for this I thanked Heaven. But a tall, thin man, gray-haired and plainly dressed, stood for a few seconds in the door, and then sat down on one of the empty benches in the rear of the church. He stayed only a little while, and I think he prayed, and I could not dream what his prayer might be. He rose and left quietly before the service ended.

Only Preacher Gale, an undertaker, and six Negro pallbearers who acted also as sextons accompanied me and my dead to the burial ground. When the grave was filled and the mound shaped, and the others had gone away, I stayed and mused awhile, wrapped in my greatcoat against the piercing east wind. Then I was grateful for one thing that Mason Hudson had done, which was not giving me life but giving me books. In them I had found Gray's "Elegy" and, a far lesser but still great poem, Bryant's "Thanatopsis," both pertaining to this occasion. In them too I had found Poe's eerily beautiful visions of the Unseen. These wrought upon me, as I kept vigil over the grave; and turned aside some of my remorse.

In the darkness I returned to our strangely silent, empty house, and there, when the streets were empty, came a caller. It was no one I did not expect before very long; it was only Matthew Whitlow. He came in, his blunt nose blue with the cold, and his small, somewhat porcine eyes shifty with some anxiety. He gave me stock condolences in a haranguing tone, then he sat down and sprawled his legs.

"I'm a fellow to get to business right away," he told me, half-defiantly, half-complacently.

"I'm sure of it."

"I take it, you heard me advising your mother not to tell you something, 'cause 'twould do no good, but maybe harm, still like enough she told you anyway."

"She might have," I said, wondering if this would be a kind of game of poker.

“I’ll ask you this. Did someone—a prominent person—a personage, I should say, according to Low Country counting—come to the funeral?”

“He appeared there.”

“I wish I knew when you are in earnest, and when you’re being sarcastic. I’m a blunt, plain-spoken man; I don’t put on any airs. It can’t be proven, there’s no money for you, and if you tell it around—you’ll make a lot of trouble and give a lot of heartache to a certain lady, and maybe break up a happy home. You wouldn’t want to do that, would you?”

“I wouldn’t likely set out to do it on purpose.”

Suddenly he grinned. Mainly bluff, devoted to sharp practice, still the hysther was not without charm.

“You’d make a good lawyer, Edward,” he remarked.

“Maybe I will, someday.”

The grin died. “Well, see here. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I want to remind you that both parties were free, white, and of legal age when it all happened. The same thing has happened to countless millions of people, high, low, and middling, some of the couples of the same station, some of ’em mixed as in this case; and usually nothing ever came of it or nobody heard about it; this is different only because a child was born. The gentleman didn’t have to admit he was the father, but he believed he was, and he did what he thought was fair. He didn’t have to do anything, mark you; he was a great somebody and the other party a nobody, as far as standing in Charleston went. If he’d wanted to be nasty about it, he would have tipped off the sheriff, and the other party wouldn’t have dared to say a word and would have had to leave town.”

I listened carefully. Far from his intention, he had waked in me a cold, cruel elation. It all stemmed from the fact that the “other party” was, indeed, as sure as hell, my mother. That changed everything. That knocked all of Whitlow’s facts helter-skelter and his cynical logic sky-high. I need not attempt to justify what I was going to do. I would do it naturally, as a wolf kills, a snake bites. It was useless to try to measure the wrong; only God could do that. But I had seen my mother’s struggles in my behalf, I had seen her take to drink and I had seen her miserably die; and now, taking a wicked pleasure in it, I could move powerfully in malice and in pride.

“For twenty-five years—” Then Whitlow stopped and stared. “No, it’s twenty-three. I can’t get it through my head you’re only twenty-two. But

twenty-two times a hundred and twenty dollars a year is two thousand six hundred and forty dollars.”

“Quite a high price to pay a month’s amour,” I answered.

“There you go. Being sarcastic. Well, it *is* a high price. I don’t say your mother wasn’t innocent when she went there to sew—maybe she was, maybe she wasn’t. But when the gentleman did wrong, she did wrong with him. Right behind the back of the woman who’d hired her. Edward, do you know the root of the word bastard?”

An interesting question had occurred to me—whether or not Mason Hudson had sent him on this mission. Presently I arrived at a negative opinion. Such an action would not be like my ever-gentlemanly parent. Still I could not penetrate Whitlow’s motive. . . .

It did not matter very much. I wished he would go, so I could sit by the fire alone. Yet to bait him an ace—to liven up the game a little—I asked him a leading question.

“Well, what do you want me to do? Bow and back off?”

“I don’t say that. You and your ma haven’t been treated exactly right. But it’s the class, not the man himself, who’s to blame. They have their own way of looking at things—they’re a law to themselves. His wife, now—she was a Ravenal. He couldn’t confess to her that he’d slipped—there wouldn’t be just a big fuss, and kiss and make up like plain folks—she might have gone home to her mother—at least there’d been a wall between ’em ever since. These Charleston aristocrats treat their women like they were queens—although that don’t always stop ’em from sneaking down at night to some little cabin in the Quarter—and I reckon the Missus would have come closer to forgiving that than his staying with her sewing woman in her own house. He did what he could for you without attracting attention. Just remember he was mighty scared.”

Whitlow paused a brief instant. I got the impression that he had said more, or had been about to say more, than his better judgment allowed. He went on in a haranguing voice.

“Edward, why don’t you take a little toll? At least it would balm your feelings, and line your pockets. Rent a room at the Bay Hotel, and start a little game. I’ll see that the management won’t bother you for a day or two, and I’ll pass the word around, and you needn’t worry but what you’ll have customers, and with the biggest names and bank accounts in the Low Country. The rice money’s in, and you could take one thousand easy, two thousand maybe,

before anyone thinks about bringing a horsewhip. Then clear out and call the whole thing square.”

“That’s a very sound idea. I’ll think it over.”

4

The lawyer moved as though to rise; I waited politely. But he thought of the cold night and my low, warm fire, and the Devil—or Destiny—prompted him to speak again.

“And think kindly as you can of the old gentleman,” he added in a somewhat sentimental tone which no doubt he often used in trying to clinch a jury. The fact was, Mason Hudson had hardly passed sixty.

“That’s right.” This was a Negro saying.

“I guess you’ve read the papers about the ball he and his wife are giving Friday night, at Hudson Barony.”

I had not read of it, my heart leaped once, then began to beat slowly and with great force.

“No, sir.”

“Well, you will. It’s for their adopted niece, Miss Sass. And, by an odd trick of Fate, your mother was making a new gown for the girl when she was stricken—Mistress Hudson often sent work to her, she being so expert, never dreaming of the truth. I wouldn’t wonder but the girl’s engagement is going to be announced—”

“To whom?” I asked.

My tone was low and you would almost think idle. I had been stunned and was not yet wide-awake. Yet I had long expected this very news. It must be that I had never, in my heart, accepted it; for the pang that followed the first shock went straight to my heart.

“I can’t say for certain, but I have a good idea,” Whitlow replied.

Evidently I turned white, for he looked at me in a startled, puzzled way. For a moment I did not care; everything had gone wrong. If Salley had told me herself in her warm voice, her eyes fixed on mine, her head tilted back a little in a mannerism I knew, I would have been saved this dreary sense of the cheapness of life and the crassness of Fate. Instead it had been dropped by this shyster lawyer, who was puzzled by my pallor because he simply could not imagine Edward Stono, Marie Aubry’s bastard, daring or even bothering to look up to Salley Sass.

A moment passed; then the dreadful devouring instinct to fight back, my dominant instinct, began to resurge.

“Well, what is your idea, unless it’s a secret?” I asked, with no feeling apparent in my voice other than the lively curiosity Whitlow would expect.

I thought he was going to say Butler Mims. My thoughts lighted on him because he was the most dominant young man acceptable to the Charleston aristocracy, the one I hated and feared the most. Instead he said, “To Mate Hudson, I reckon. They’ve been mighty thick. And she’s no blood kin, you know, to either parent, though she calls Mistress Hudson Aunt Mildred.”

She was no blood kin to Mason Hudson, but I was. Whitlow spoke on.

“Well, I started to say it’s going to be one of the most elegant affairs of the year. The beauty and chivalry of Charleston—and I guess you know Byron’s poems—”

“Yes, but I didn’t think you did.”

“You can never tell about me. Anyway, you may think it’s heartless of Mr. Hudson to go on with it, with the mother of his son hardly cold in her grave —”

“His bastard son, remember. As you pointed out, that changes everything.” My heart was beating slowly now, and with great force, and my nerves had begun to tingle.

“But what can he do but go ahead? The invitations are out. What excuse could he use for calling it off? Who would be benefited? He takes no part in those affairs anyway. He’ll probably greet the guests, then go into his library to read or maybe sit with a crony or two over a glass.”

Perhaps a little itch had made him speak of the glass, or speaking of it had wakened it. When he looked thirstily about the room, I went to look in the kitchen cupboard and returned with a half-filled bottle of rum. He braced himself against the raw and bitter weather, and took his leave. His manner was that of a man not quite sure of the success of his mission, but hopeful of it. Oddly enough, I still did not guess its motive.

At once I went into my mother’s bedroom, and, without gazing too long at the now unwrinkled quilt and undented pillow, I looked in a closet near a window where she kept her sewing. Salley’s gown was finished except for taking out basting threads, and being of scarlet velvet, as lovely a color as a scarlet tanager, it would set off her brunette beauty. Its bodice was cut rather low, I thought. That was only fair to the goddess who had endowed her with glossed and shapely shoulders and beautifully swelling breast; I knew of

them and had dreamed of them without ever seeing them unbared. Charleston bucks were to have seen them, the disclosure in perfect taste, under the chandelier.

About two yards of the rich cloth had been left over—a narrow strip not much more than a foot wide, but when beautifully stitched to other strips the effect was more beautiful than broadcloth could attain. Pinned to it was a bill of sale from Charleston's most prominent importer. The bolt had been eighteen yards, and the price, to my amazement, two hundred and sixteen dollars. This had not been paid but had been charged to Mistress Mason Hudson about three weeks before. Likewise, in all probability, my mother had not been paid for the work as yet, since she had never accepted wages until the dresses she made were fashioned, fitted, and praised. The reason that Salley had not called for the beautiful gown on which she had set such store was, plain as day, my mother's sudden attack. The Hudsons and their ward had heard of it and they could not be so crass and calloused as to make inquiries about a party gown at the door in which Death had set his foot. No doubt Salley was reconciled to wearing some other dress, letting this matter wait a more suitable time.

I held up the beautiful garment and admired it. I looked at the stitching of my mother's aching but still clever fingers. Since it was fitted for a tall, slender girl, designed for a brunette, did I know anyone else who could wear it with beauty and grace?

Putting on my greatcoat, I went out into the chill, windy night. After a short walk, I hailed a cab; after a brief ride, I got down at the telegraph office. My eyes felt small and withdrawn, but very sharp, as I asked the operator for paper and pencil; and my lips were smiling in spite of myself as I wrote the message to Faro Jack.

You remember the lady who was escort to my friend Mate in recent affair. Please give her private invitation to come to Bay Hotel, Charleston, by train at once, advancing her enough for her ticket. Tell her I need her help in an elegant enterprise here and she will be well rewarded.

Edward Stono

The operator counted the words and charged me the proper toll. His key was clicking away, dispatching the message at lightning's pace over the wires, as I went out again into the howling wind.

## CHAPTER V

### The Ball

I had no fear that Clara Day would not come in good equipage for the enterprise. In our circles and better ones than ours she was known to dress well and in ladylike fashion. However, I had not expected her to bring a maid. Moreover, the latter was no young high-yellow, too pretty not to catch the roving eye, but to all appearances a very mammy of the old school, fairly fat, black of skin and snowy of hair, suggesting the impeccable respectability of her mistress and herself. She was called Aunt Nelly, and I recognized her as the long-time dishwasher of one of Augusta's most notorious waterfront resorts.

She received me openly and properly in the hotel parlor—safe from servants' eyes. In her own eyes was a glitter of challenge.

"You sent for me," she began. "I took it in good faith, and came. I hope it's not a sell."

"God forbid," I answered, for the thrust was sharper than she knew.

"You were against me the last time we played," she remarked. "You sold me down the river—one of your own world—for the sake of a Charleston aristocrat who wouldn't sit down with you at table and, back of him, most likely, a girl who might let you kiss her on the forehead but wouldn't be caught riding in the same carriage with you. But I guess that this time we'll be on the same side."

"That's an excellent analysis."

"What is the layout?"

"You're just to be my partner at a very elegant affair, and you'll have no duties other than acting as a perfect lady."

"Will Mate be there?"

"Yes, I think his engagement to a belle of the Low Country is going to be announced."

"You want me to try to block it?"

"That's ridiculous." Then, watching her intently, "What makes you think you could? I mean—still acting like a perfect lady."

“I couldn’t if I didn’t. Do you understand that? I couldn’t fool you but I can fool him and a lot of other people. Mate doesn’t blame me for what happened that night—he wrote me and told me so. Fine men like him make up stories to tell themselves about girls like me. They are beautiful stories—about beautiful, greatly gifted, sometimes even highborn girls against whom—note the good grammar—the cards were stacked. They think they’ve found a treasure in the city dump. Usually they won’t marry us—they stick at letting us wear their proud names, showing they still may harbor a doubt or two—but they’ll spend their money on us, and get all excited about us, and sometimes break up with their sweethearts at home on account of us. Even dumb girls can put it over, if they’ll look sweet and keep their mouths shut. Smart ones like me can do wonders. Well, why don’t we then? Why do we have to be gamblers’ skills and so on, when we could be living on easy street? You don’t know, do you?”

“No, Clara, I don’t.”

“Because an adventuress can’t be happy unless she’s adventuring. Because the other game is so easy that it’s boring. Because some double-crossing cur like you comes along, who promises more excitement, and we let our easy fish get away to go upstairs with you. Sometimes even the smart ones figure it wrong. I thought you were jealous of Memphis getting all of Mate’s money when he was from your own brier patch—maybe he’d snubbed you a couple of times or you had some other old score to pay—and, fool that I was, I thought you’d taken a quick fancy to me. Of course I wanted to keep close to that money, too—that’s instinct in a girl who used to have to fight for a piece of a hoecake—so I played right into your hands. Well, you know what happened. You don’t know—you couldn’t—what happened inside of me. And I tell you you’re taking a mighty big chance in asking me to shill for you. It may be the chance I was waiting for to get even.”

“No, the game isn’t big enough for that.”

“What kind of a game is it?”

“I want to escort you to a ball. You are to look your loveliest and dance your best—although maybe the only one who asks you will be me. You don’t have to play any tricks. You’re not to try to steal Mate, although you’re to dance with him if he asks you. Don’t drink too much champagne, because it may raise the Devil in you. We won’t stay very long. You might say we’re just making an ‘appearance.’”

“Uninvited?”

“Of course.”

“What’s the rake-off? In general, what’s the idea? If you feel like telling me.”

“I don’t. But I’ll promise you a glimpse of Charleston society, all your expenses paid, and a present worth two hundred and fifty dollars.”

“If it isn’t spite, it’s hate. Love turned to hate—I read a book called that.”

“Neither one, precisely.”

“Then it’s malice, the worst of the lot.” Then her look changed, her eyes became soft, I felt the humanness of this predatory being, and when she spoke the mockery had gone out of her voice. “Edward, when Faro Jack sneaked me your message, he told me that your mother had been stricken. Did she die?”

“Yes.”

“My mother came out of the piney woods of Alabama. I barely remember her, but I feel—I believed—she loved me, and it’s saying a lot for anybody to love anybody in a cabin like ours. You ought to have seen my pa—and seen my brothers—and all my sisters but one. Well, you won’t tell me, and I won’t ask you, but I’ll make the guess that your dead ma is holding a hand in this game. I mean you’re playing it for her, probably all wrong. Where did you get that name Stono?”

“From Stono Creek.”

“What’s the name of the aristocrats giving the party?”

“Hudson.”

“Well, I’ve got to have a little time to decide. I haven’t got a dress that’s really—”

“Put on your hat and come with me.”

I escorted her to a cab and gave the driver directions. These neither astonished nor dismayed him; and in fact he drove cheerfully, confident of his tip. A neighbor woman peered out a window and shook her fist as I brought this lovely-looking girl, her cheeks flushed by the cold, to the door so lately hung with black. My purpose weakened; but when the door creaked on its hinges and scraped the boards, and Clara looked about her at the wretched room, it grew strong again.

“Oh, my God,” she burst out, “was this your home?”

“Yes.”

“Where your mother died?”

“Where she and I lived and where part of both of us died.”

“Raised in this hovel, you can still succeed in passing yourself off as a gentleman?”

“Don’t you sometimes succeed in passing yourself off as a lady?”

“Sometimes. Still, I don’t think I want any of your elegant pay-off games. They’re a good deal deeper than I want to go. If my guess is right, I don’t blame you—”

“Come with me to the next room.”

I brought from my mother’s sewing closet the scarlet velvet gown. Clara uttered a little cry, and a quite wonderful change came over her. Her cheeks that had been painted by the wind had turned sallow in this dank house; now they flushed again. Her eyes, sullen and sunken-looking, began to shine. She held up the dress with a child’s unbelieving joy in her face.

“I am to wear this?” she asked.

“Yes, and to have it to keep when I’ve paid for it.”

“Who did your mother make it for?”

“Whom. She made it for Miss Salley Sass.”

“The girl Mate’s engaged—”

“Yes.”

“Do you hate her that much?”

“In a way of speaking, although she’s never harmed me.”

“It’s people that don’t harm us that we guttersnipes hate the most.”

“Speak for yourself, please, Clara.”

“What did you say I had to do? Just walk around on your arm—and dance if someone asks me—and stay cold sober—and act like a lady?”

“That’s all, and no more. I don’t want any more. You understand that.”

“You have a way of making yourself understood. Let me try it on.”

Before me, smiling a little, Clara took off her own dress. Since it was a street dress, she removed a chemisette and a petticoat and slipped down and pinned the shoulder straps of her shift to accommodate the low-cut bodice. These actions she flaunted in front of me; and, as she expected, they

tantalized me greatly. Still she was not the least vexed by my restraint; something that she desired more, just now, than a lover's arms was about to embrace her; her maiden-like body thrilled to its touch; she could believe in her beauty for a little while, without one wretched doubt, and what lover could give her that?

She raised it up and it was like a sheet of flame in the chill, weakly lighted room. She pulled it on over her head and worked it down over her lithe hips and her hands glided over it in love and her fingers flew at the scores of tiny fasteners. Then she stood before a tall mirror that a customer had given my mother many years ago, gilt-rimmed, finely beveled, and utterly out of keeping with the house except for an ugly crack close to the floor. Many of my mother's customers had seen their reflections there. Only one that I knew of could have been so lovely as this in the glass now, and it had failed to appear. What was not lovely in Clara, visible to my inward eyes, did not pass over. In the glass she was as she might have been, holding better cards.

She turned to me, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

“Is this to be my present?”

“That's my intention.”

“What could stop it? The girl wouldn't take it, now that it's been on me.”

“I never can be sure what they will do. I think I can handle it all right. If I can't, I'll give you its worth in money.”

“I don't want the money. All I'd do is to live it up one way or another. I want this dress. I want to keep it always. I'll never wear it except for someone like—Mate.”

“I wouldn't expect you to wear it for someone like—me.”

“I started to say you, you fool. You're not a gentleman, but at least you know a pretty dress when you see one—and you wouldn't spill booze on it.”

Her face twisted and she turned away. I attended to other business, including pouring drinks for us both. When she looked at me again she was herself once more, and you would never know she was at bay against the world.

“I'll follow your instructions to the letter,” she told me gravely.

Quite a number of the guests who had plantations facing the river would come to the ball in their own slave-rowed barges. Almost all who came out from Charleston owned carriages; the few up-in-name but down-at-heels would be given rides by their old friends. Hence there was no rush for hacks, and I was able to hire the fastest two-horse phaeton in the city. Clara and I covered the twelve miles of well-packed graveled road in just over an hour.

The trees lining the driveway were live oaks nearly a century old, to whom God must have given dominion over common white and black oaks, for these remained green and blessed and beautiful while those let fall their leaves, and let their limbs go naked in the winter winds. It came to me that no living thing could ever pass the bounds God had set down, that we could never change His giving or His withholding; that if we threw away what seemed precious gifts, He had withheld from us good taste, sense, and gratitude; that if we pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps, it was because He had given us strong arms. It was a dark view for a man as ambitious as I. And I imagined the live oaks, planted to beautify and glorify the approach to the mansion, looking down at Clara and me, and looking down on us for the interlopers that we were.

Many lighted windows glowed in the dark. A great bonfire blazed on the riverbank a little back from the sloping lawns, around which two hundred or more Negro carriage drivers and boatmen assembled—laughing and talking and boasting, I thought, though, at this distance they seemed eerily silent—and the firelight flung out over the broad flood, and showed a dozen or more barges, brightly painted, with awnings or snug cabins, moored at the landing. The footman accompanying our driver helped us down in front of the veranda steps. I bade him remain alert for my call, since our stay might be short, and my voice had the easy, pleasant drawl, with a touch of Gullah, of the well-bred Charlestonian.

I entered the hall with Clara on my arm. Bowing black servants directed her to the ladies' dressing room, me to the gentlemen's cloakroom. Divested of my greatcoat, in a dress suit of black broadcloth with a frilled white shirt, I waited for her at the foot of the broad stairs. In time with the languishing music flooding the stairway, we ascended to the wide bright door of the ballroom. My quick eyes told me much about it and its inmates in one deep-searching glance. It was about sixty feet long and forty feet wide, with big roaring fireplaces at each end. No more than forty couples danced on its dark-red floor of warm, polished heart pine; and most of these were young, no doubt the generation of Charleston aristocracy that had grown up with Mate or with Salley, the same I would have seen if I had gone to a beach party six years before. Instead of Negro fiddlers that played for most plantation

dancing, the musicians were whites of practiced harmony brought out from the city. Negro servants attended huge silver punch bowls at opposite sides of the room, one of which would contain eggnog and the other champagne punch if the refreshments ran true to form. In chairs along the wall sat about twenty of the parental generation, including chaperones.

It came to me that Belgium's capital, or London, or Paris, or Vienna, let alone New York or Boston or Philadelphia, could not have gathered within this number beauty and chivalry surpassing these. The Carolina Low Country had produced an aristocracy worthy of the name. If it were not, I would have been long ago set free.

All the guests expected had already assembled. Their welcomers no longer stood in a beaming row, and now were dancing or had taken chairs. Our entrance was noticed first by the sitters; instantly their attention fastened on us, as we stood as though in complete ease, gazing pleasantly at the dancers. But I did not fail to mark the start of a thin, tall, gray man, with a high forehead and gaunt hands, as he recognized me. In that company he might have been the only one who did; but a gray-haired, distinguished-looking woman, chatelaine of the plantation, looked from me to her husband with mounting concern.

It must be that a wave of weakness passed over my father, Mason Hudson, on first recognizing his outcast son who had passed his door at last. After his first visible start, he sat utterly still for a space of three or four seconds. Then terror drove him to action. Leaping up, he hurried toward us. His frightened eyes and pale face did not wake my pity and instead hardened my heart.

“Edward!” he burst out. “Edward Stono!”

“Sir, I perceive you've not forgotten the name that I'm called by,” I answered.

“I didn't expect you here. I knew you were in Charleston but on a sad errand. You've brought a charming lady, but it can't be you expected to dance, so soon after—” He stopped with an anxious look toward the row of sitters, but none had moved to interrupt us yet.

“My mother wouldn't want me to sit at home, grieving for her. Once she was a gay French Creole girl who enjoyed dancing herself. And my coming here is different than going to some stranger's house. Why, I feel as though I've come home!”

He passed his hand once across his eyes.

“I see, now,” he said.

“It took me a long time to see.”

He stepped closer and spoke in an almost inaudible tone.

“What are you going to do? Ruin me?”

“Not tonight. I’m going to—I read the poem in one of the books you gave me—tread but one measure, drink one cup of wine—or at least only two or three of each. The reception that I and Miss Day receive, for that little while, I leave to you.”

“Oh, my God! Then I’ll tell the children and my wife that I met you on the street, and condoled with you, and said something about—like—well, that if seeing people would comfort you, to come out and call on me. No, that won’t do. You’re both in evening dress. Say I invited you to the ball, leaving it to you if—so soon—”

“Why not tell them we’re intruders from the street?”

“That’s a heartless thing to say. You might as well—”

“Look out. Here come Salley and Mate.”

The tall handsome couple had seen us, had stopped dancing, and were moving quickly toward us. There was no animosity on Mate’s beautifully cast countenance; I think welcome would have been there, if he had not been made aware of Salley’s profound dismay.

She walked gracefully, her head lifted, her brunette beauty startling even in this galaxy of beauties, but her eyes were more round and brilliant than their wont, and her beautiful young mouth was a little drawn. Pretending not to observe her approach, yet I saw that her gown was of a rich brown brocaded in gold. She wore a comb of ancient yellow ivory in her black hair; around her neck were pearls.

I spoke grandly to the gray and trembling man. “Why, I haven’t presented you to my partner of the evening. Clara, this is my benefactor, Mr. Mason Hudson of Hudson Barony. Sir, Miss Clara Day, of Augusta.”

Salley and Mate joined us then, and my father, the man I still thought of as Mr. Hudson, rallied in quite a praiseworthy way. I had not realized he possessed this inward strength. In Mate’s case, I thought that a certain boyish relish in the situation dulled his mature misgivings. When the music stopped, leaving all of us somehow exposed, Mate was the first to speak.

“Edward, I’ll greet you in a minute. Clara, what in the world brought you to these parts?”

“I’m here for a short visit,” Clara answered, in good voice. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“Is this Miss Clara Day?” Salley asked. She had caught her breath at last.

“I didn’t expect you to have heard of me, Miss Sass.”

“And that dress—it becomes you very well.”

“Thank you.”

“It was one my mother was making for a customer when she was stricken,” I said in the intense silence. “Clara finished and, at my insistence, wore it.”

“Salley, you’ll want to dance with Edward, and I with Clara,” Mate broke in.

“Will you dance with me, Salley, the dance after the next, provided Mate is free to dance with Clara?”

“With pleasure.”

“Clara, may I have the dance after the next?” Mate asked.

“I’ll be delighted.”

“She’s a lovely dancer, Salley, as you’ll see. Now you two go and have some punch or some nog—I recommend the latter after a cold ride—and we’ll meet you presently.”

As we strolled, Clara’s arm in mine, across the ballroom, we met with many a curious glance and a few admiring ones. We cut good enough figures, I being carefully and correctly dressed, and Clara’s gorgeous gown casting a certain effulgence over us both. If any of these bucks had visited Memphis’ gaming rooms, they did not recognize her as his pretty shill; it would have taken a bold leap of their imagination. I knew the faces of most of the young men and quite a few of the young ladies; but that did not mean that they knew mine; I had marked them of yore and could expect to see them here, while they had had little cause to notice or remember me. I did not see Butler Mims, who would not be misled, or Mate’s older and somewhat arrogant brother, Arnold Hudson.

We emptied our cups, and when the orchestra began to play a romantic waltz came forth to dance. There came a sharp lift to my spirits. The cruel game I had played had so far given me a hot, dark pleasure, curiously like

lust's, but I had found no gain but that, and to have it turn suddenly thrilling startled me greatly. Partly, of course, it was the joy of rhymed movement with Clara, one of the best waltzers in a good dancer's land. Couple-dancing, as practiced in western Europe and America, as separate from ritual dancing, is a subdued form of sexual intercourse, its only uncovert form except kissing games, and calling into play every natural beauty of the dancers, and sustaining in them a subtle excitement above and beyond their pleasure in melodic motion and in social intercourse; hence those backward peoples who wish to keep women in purdah, whether Indian rajahs or religious fanatics, do well to ban it. This form was enough to satisfy me, as far as Clara was concerned; I desired her beauty to this degree only. However, we had both entered into the dance with all our hearts, not muffing or skimping it.

Beyond that, I had a consciousness of power. It was not now, particularly, a power to hurt those who cast me forth from their lofty company, but rather a power to help myself in most adverse situations. I had never before played so boldly for the pure pleasure of winning.

My exultant mood did not wilt when two impressive-looking men, my seniors by only a few years, as I well remembered, but with the carriage of the great, came through a door. They were Butler Mims and Arnold Mason, and I guessed they had been to a buffet serving stronger drinks than these offered the young ladies. Arnold's darkly handsome face was slightly flushed. Butler looked somewhat pale as ever I remembered him, but this had never suggested weakness. They stood talking a moment; then Butler caught sight of me. He started incredulously and spoke in an undertone to his companion. Both glanced at us and looked away. Both stood differently now, giving the illusion of increased size. That I would hear from them both before very long, I had no doubt.

### 3

The dance ended. I led Clara to an empty corner of the room, where conversations between us and any accosters would not be heard. At once the two men came walking toward us. As they approached I was aware once more of Butler's natural force, as well as his strong features and big powerfully built body; and I held all in instant respect; but at least I felt steady and cool.

Arnold spoke first. He attempted a tone of cold politeness that throbbed with menace. With a kind of undisturbed amazement, I remembered that he, the same as Mate, was my half-brother.

But the latter seemed of the blood, and this only of the bedroom; and just now I had no time to weigh the difference.

“Do I know you, sir?” he asked.

“I’m doubtful if you do, but of course I recognize you.”

“My friend Mr. Butler Mims thinks he knows you—”

“I do know him, Arnold,” Butler broke in with a strangely happy smile, evil perhaps but by no means forced. “That is, I recognize him. There’s no doubt now.”

“In that case, I wish to talk to you on a rather delicate but serious matter,” Arnold went on. “The young woman whom you’ve escorted here may find it distasteful. If she wishes to retire to a chair—”

“I should have introduced you,” I said. “Clara, may I present Mr. Mason and Mr. Mims. Gentlemen—Miss Clara Day. And I’m sure she is as interested in what you have to say as I am.”

Clara gave them a fine bow.

“That’s her name as I remember it, Arnold. I think you can go ahead now, without fear of hurting a lady’s feelings.”

“Well, then, I’ll not mince words. The names of neither of you were on the invitation list. I want to know what in the Devil—I see no need to apologize for my language—you two are doing here.”

“Let us see first if you have the right to put the question. May I ask who’s giving this ball?”

“My father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. Mason Hudson.”

“And who is it for?”

“Miss Salley Sass. And if you think—”

“Suppose, before you put any more ill-mannered questions to us, you ask permission of Mr. Hudson or Miss Sass.”

These were high cards. The two thought about them and did not know how to respond.

“You’ve always had good nerve, Stono,” Butler remarked. “I’ll grant you that much. But I think you’ve overplayed it.”

“In any case, will you excuse us now? Clara has the next dance with Mate  
\_\_”

“Rot!” Arnold broke in, flushed with fury. “Mate is with Miss Sass—”

“Salley has promised it to me.”

“I don’t believe it—”

But Butler plucked at his sleeve. Coming toward us, hand in hand, were Salley and Mate. As they crossed the floor, Mate waved to the musicians. Instantly they began to play a minuet.

“My pleasure, miss,” Mate said, bowing to Clara. “You chaps will have to excuse us.”

“And Miss Sass and me also—if you please, Salley.”

“That was the agreement,” she answered gravely, holding out her hand.

I had acquitted myself so well with the belligerent pair only because their guns were presently spiked. I had no reason to believe that the tide of battle would not turn, for now my own guns seemed silenced. Salley would not sell anything she greatly prized in order to buy safety. She knew insolence when she saw it. She had learned to penetrate trickery, and would not bow to blackmail. Still I did not feel on wholly untenable ground, and one little stroke of luck amused my inner man. This dance was a minuet, for which I had a peculiar fondness and a marked skill as well. This was natural enough, since it was the most stately of dances popular in the South, the one that had most appealed to my sense of romance, the grandest and most aristocratic.

Tonight the orchestra played it as it should be played, slowly and gravely, with great dignity; tonight too I had a superb partner. Without trying—indeed she would have had to try not to do so—Salley danced it as it should be danced, eloquent of the prides and graces of her high order.

Her steps, curtsies, turns, and even smiles and glances were at once enchanting and highly formalized; hence in the pauses, when flirtatious conversation was in order, her blunt speech startled me half out of my wits.

“I danced with you for two reasons. Otherwise I’d seen you in hell first. That last is my father’s argot, but barely adequate to the occasion.”

“Whatever the reasons, I’m grateful for such an accomplished partner.”

“One of them is, what you did for Mate.”

“I didn’t do it for Mate. I don’t go around rescuing fools for their own foolish sake. Ordinarily I line my pockets with fools’ money.”

“What did you do it for?” she asked, completing her turn.

“Partly for that kiss you gave me. The price of it, you remember, was a future kindness. Partly for the promise you held out to me—that it would make me feel like a gentleman.”

“Did it?”

“It’s difficult for me to know how a gentleman feels, but it was a rather pleasant feeling.”

“I said—if you remember—for the last time.”

“I presume it’s the last time, for I’ve taken another course. I’ve another ambition, in fact. Perhaps I should say some important business has come up that I must attend to—before I can go mooning around any more after gentlemanliness.”

She curtsied and I bowed at the stanza end; then she came into my arms for the soaring sweet refrain, danced as a waltz.

“You haven’t asked my other reason,” she remarked in the next pause.

“Curiosity killed the cat.”

“I’ll tell you anyway. I have a request to make—before the dance is over.”

“A request won’t do it. I must have a fee.”

“Rascal though you are, you dance quite well.”

“The two are not in opposition,” I replied. “I have very quick, light hands, useful in my profession. Quick, light feet go with them, of course.”

“And you’ve had plenty of practice with Clara. She’s a beautiful dancer—as well as beautifully dressed.”

“Excuse me. I forgot an important business matter. I found where the cloth of that dress was charged to Mistress Hudson. The amount was two hundred and sixteen dollars, which I have put in an envelope. Since I sold the unfinished dress to Clara, I wish to hand the envelope to you at the conclusion of our dance.”

I made the long speech at the close of another stanza, when her ear was close to my lips. My fears as to its outcome—a sudden flame of fury, of which this high-breasted maiden, slender and graceful and almost as brown as a doe in the woods, would be perfectly capable—came to naught.

“I’m glad you took it off our hands. I tried to keep Aunt Mildred from ordering it—but she can’t learn things are not as they used to be.”

I was silent for a measure, and the dance flowed on, lovely and bright and almost as majestic as the Santee River, then I smiled and said, "I think things will be even more different in the future."

She heard me plainly and waited before she spoke.

"Because of you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Is it a declaration of war?"

"It's only an announcement of an intention. I'll couple it with a suggestion, more for Mate's good than yours, that you don't announce your engagement tonight. If you couldn't afford that dress—which I gather—I don't see how you can afford to marry Mate. You have no dower and I think he has lost most of his inheritance. You may see the need of marrying a *nouveau-riche* such as Butler Mims. Mate had better woo an heiress. The great rice fields of Hudson Barony won't be pouring treasure into your coffers for many more years. You'll get what money they'll bring above the amount of the debts—"

"That won't be much—"

"But the good lands, the great rich plantation, Hudson Barony and the mansion by the sea wall will belong to me."

Her hand lay lightly in mine. "I wish I could be sure you are mad."

"I'm sure of it, but that won't help you any."

"Well, I won't start wooing Butler yet. I've the next dance with him, but I'll cut it—if you'll come into the library. I'd like to finish this conversation before I either break my engagement to Mate—or ask Butler and Arnold to chuck you out for the imposter, card sharp, charlatan you are."

"I'm a card sharp, neither of the others as far as I know. And I'll come with you gladly into the library. I've been wanting to visit it for a long time."

Three sides of the library presented shelf after shelf of books all in fine leather bindings, their different tints and colors pleasing to the eye in the soft lamplight and the glow of a low, red fire on the fourth side. Salley dropped into a chair beside the library table, her chin in her hands, her expression pensive and strange; I walked about and admired the rare and costly volumes.

“I don’t see where any are gone,” I remarked in the stillness, barely and sweetly changed in mood rather than broken by distant strains of music.

“Perhaps those he gave you have been replaced by new editions,” Salley answered.

“I don’t think so. I think all of these editions are quite old. And the binding of those he gave me indicate that they never came from here in the first place. They were cloth and not leather—they’d been picked up for vacation or travel reading—they weren’t meant to be kept in a gentleman’s library. They didn’t rank with the aristocrats. They were by good authors, but they’d been got on a pack saddle.”

“I don’t understand that last.”

“It means, that among books they were bastards.”

She started to speak—paused—then spoke clearly. “And they went to the right person?”

“The right heir.”

“How many people know that?”

“None except a lawyer, a doctor, my father, my author, let us say, and you. And I didn’t intend to tell you.”

“You didn’t tell me. My father told me.”

“What?”

“My father was politely called a rakehell. He had some of his own, although he maintained that all were colored. His theory was, he was improving the Negro race. He was greatly amused that a Creole dressmaker from the West Indies had borne Mason Hudson—the soul of rectitude in Charlestonian opinion—a son on the so-called wrong side of the blanket. I don’t know how he found it out. And since he didn’t tell me her name—or the boy’s name—I never dreamed that you were he, when I met you on the beach that day.”

“When did it dawn on you?”

“I thought of it when Aunt Mildred said you were a dressmaker’s son of unknown antecedents. She said your mother was a wonderful dressmaker, but that didn’t entitle you to associate with the Hudsons, the Ravenals, the Rutledges, the Sasses, and their like.”

“You’re putting it up pretty straight.”

“That’s the way you want it, isn’t it, Edward? You yourself are not exactly subtle.”

“Right.”

“Then his being so disturbed over my inviting you—and I finding out he’d lent you books—and remembering your pretensions to being a gentleman—well, I jumped to the conclusion.”

“So you knew I was Mate’s half-brother when you sent me to rescue him from Clara?”

“Otherwise, I would have hardly found the courage.”

“Well, I didn’t know it.”

“Edward, that’s not true.”

“Didn’t you say we were to deal straight?”

“But I can’t believe it. Your mother would have told you long before that. Why should you have tried so hard to be a gentleman—”

“My mother didn’t tell me until on her deathbed. In fact she taught me I was one. So ‘pretensions’ wasn’t quite the right word.”

“No, it wasn’t. I beg your pardon.”

“Still, by asking me to save Mate, you assumed that I owed the family an obligation that the family didn’t owe me.”

“I suppose I did.”

“Naturally enough, when I was in cloth binding and they were in gilt leather. I had been blessed enough by this infusion of high blood. I ought to be grateful.”

“I’m afraid that’s the aristocratic viewpoint. You see, nobody sets such store on aristocracy as the aristocrats themselves, and their seeming so nice and simple about it—plain as an old shoe, they boast—is the last word in posing.”

“How did your father treat his natural children, if I may ask?”

“He thought he’d done enough for them in giving them bright skins. But I thought he was a little more reluctant to sell them than the others, when the shoe pinched. And he took care to get them good masters.”

“He should have a star in his crown for that!”

The sarcasm stung her.

“I told you he was a rakehell. Also he’d inherited some bad blood from his mother’s side—one of the highest lineages in the Low Country—although his sister, who went after and married Uncle Mason, got the lion’s share. Luckily, she died. Uncle Mason was set free, except for the son, Clay Hudson, that she bore him. He too is your half-brother.”

“I’m beginning to believe my aristocrat relations didn’t pan out very well.”

“Uncle Mason is essentially good. My father wasn’t, and that’s why I love goodness—you may not believe that—and probably partly why I love Mate.”

“My father sent my mother the handsome sum of ten dollars every month.”

“Was that all? I supposed it was more—at least the first few years. Later the money melted away. And that reminds me—give me that envelope before you forget it.”

I took it from my inner coat pocket and handed it to her. She put it in a drawer of a beautiful secretary, locked it up, and slipped the key into a little pleated square of her skirt.

“I suppose I shouldn’t mention it,” she went on. “It will only anger you more—but we said we were to deal straight. Uncle Mason always urged Aunt Mildred to send her sewing to your mother, even these last few years, after she raised her prices.”

“Knowing at last the aristocratic viewpoint, it doesn’t anger me at all.”

“And do believe me about the money. The family’s lived on a certain scale and couldn’t cut it down—everything they bought seemed a necessity. Everyone’s borrowed and borrowed—even Arnold who thinks he’s smart—and in trying to recoup, Uncle Mason’s lost a good deal in bad investments. Now, though, he’s laid a second mortgage on the Barony and put the money in some fine cotton lands in Alabama, at a fourth of their value. He’s going to make a real big haul, and pay off all our debts, and then everything will be as it used to be. And that’s why I think a gambler with a grievance—even if he’s as ruthless as a rattlesnake—can’t hurt us very much.”

She looked up at me with a half-defiant, half-hopeful glance, yet so touching that I must steel myself to answer.

“It sounds foolish on the face of it, but I know Lady Luck—and how to woo her—and I still advise you not to marry Mate.”

“One poor little bastard, against the power and the glory of the Hudsons. If I don’t announce it tonight, it will be because Mate is not quite over his affair with Clara. I love him dearly—I think I always have—but I get a little tired of his derelictions.”

“You may commit some yourself, but hide them better.”

“I’ve got to go now, back to my equals. Do you like to have me talk that way? I rather think you do. But let me tell you, Edward, you’re all wrong. I don’t know why—but you are.”

“Wrong or right, I’m going ahead. I’ll own Hudson Barony. I’ll appear, and the Hudson family will disappear.”

“Through card-sharping?”

“No, through my wooing of Lady Luck and challenge of Fate.”

“There’s only one way you can hurt us, that I know of. In that way you can hurt us mighty bad. That brings me to my second request. I make it humbly. I ask that you grant it, in the name of the—noble?—yes, I’ll say noble—blood that flows in your veins.”

“Ask it.”

“No breath of this has ever reached Aunt Mildred. She could not possibly believe such a thing of Uncle Mason. She has very many limitations, but she wasn’t to blame—Charleston was, her teaching was—for sending the note canceling the invitation to the party. She’s been as kind to your mother as she knew how to be. I ask that you guard the secret from her if you possibly can.”

“I promise that I will.”

“For that I’ll give you something to remember me by. You were entitled to it at the close of the minuet, according to the way it was danced in France. I want you to remember me as pleasantly as you can; I may have need of it yet.”

She rose and bent over my chair and kissed me on the mouth, again a lovely, unstinted kiss, then she hurried out of the room.

When I went back to the ballroom, Clara was dancing a lively polka with Jeff Legare, the best if not all that Mate had in the way of a friend. A shy and oddly awkward man, he was suddenly exhibiting impetuosity, self-confidence, and something very like grace. I knew that Jeff would revert to type after Clara had gone, but I thought he would never forget her brief

unlatching of his gates against the world, and it would do him a little good in the silences of the night, and that Clara had paid her passage.

When the dance ended I caught her eye and nodded. She joined me at once; all but concealed in the happy, laughing, moving throng we vanished from the ballroom. She went for her wraps; I went into a chamber used as a cloakroom. But now it appeared my movements had been watched. As a Negro footman was helping me on with my greatcoat, Butler Mims appeared in the door. The wan tint of his pale face seemed to accentuate the present frosty glitter of his blue eyes.

“Stono, would you step here a moment?” he said. “I’ve something to tell you that I don’t want the attendants to hear.”

“Certainly,” I answered.

When I came close, I watched his eyes that would signal any sudden action of his hands. This proved needless now.

“I know why you came here, and brought the woman,” he went on. “That is, your excuse for doing so. I’m one of the very few persons in the world that knows about you—I found out about it by accident, years ago—and I’ve never mentioned it to anyone through my friendship with this family. Your actions tonight show you’ve never properly gauged the difference between the two sides of the blanket.”

“Do you know them?” I asked, politely.

“As a lawyer, I do, and I know them as a gentleman.”

“Another lawyer tried to explain them to me not very long ago, but it may be I didn’t fully grasp the point.”

“That must have been Matthew Whitlow. He didn’t speak bluntly enough—but I will. A bastard son has no more relationship to a legitimate son than a mistress has to a wife. His standing in good society is precisely nil. Yet you forced your way in here tonight, and by frightening a great gentleman who once amused himself with your mother you have escaped punishment. But it’s coming yet.”

“Would you tell me when and where, and by what means?”

“You hired Bailey’s fast team of bays to come out here. Back of the stables there is a small paddock, walled in by some outbuildings. Ask Mr. Bailey to show you where it is, and meet me there at ten o’clock tomorrow morning. I’ll have some medicine for you of just the right kind. If you don’t

come—if you try to run out of Charleston tonight—you’ll regret it all your life.”

“You’ll be alone there?”

“Of course. What help would I need in doctoring you?”

“I’ll be there.” And then I thought—but I did not say it aloud, for my cunning warned against it, “It’s the opportunity I’ve been waiting for ever since a game of toss-at-a-crack when we were both boys.”

Clara was quiet and big-eyed when we started home, and before we had gone far she leaned her head on my shoulder and fell asleep. I could not account for it even by the great strain—perhaps far greater than I knew—that she had been under, for she too was a creature of the night, and I would expect her to be as wide-awake as a ferret. I was also somewhat touched by the action, she seemed so very young.

When we parted for the night I did not tell her of my engagement with Butler Mims. I had feared I would think about it a great deal and that when I went to bed it might easily keep me awake; but neither of these things happened; and the main reason was the fact that I had come close to telling him. I anticipated the meeting. I felt well equipped for it, physically and especially mentally. Many the time I had felt the same confidence when I sat down to cards.

When I had risen, I dressed carefully and had a leisurely breakfast. Exactly at ten I was at Bailey’s livery stable; the back of my neck prickled but otherwise I felt a curious inner coldness, often experienced before games for high stakes. Mr. Bailey hurried to meet me and his face was white.

“You were my customer last night, and a good one,” he said. “As for that other fellow, he’s never spent a cent here. If you say the word, I’ll call the police and stop this thing one way or another.”

“Mr. Mims is waiting for me?” I asked.

“Yes, in the old paddock.”

“Will you show me the way there? It’s an appointment I feel duty-bound to keep, although I thank you for your consideration.”

“Good God Almighty. All right. Just as you say.”

Mr. Bailey showed me the little gate. I went through, closed it carefully, and walked between two sheds to the old paddock. For the use Butler wanted of it, it was almost ideal. It was enclosed by windowless outbuildings, once part of the stable, and an eight-foot board fence; and it was far enough back

from the street that only very loud sounds would carry there. The ground was still as hard and free from vegetation as though horses had exercised and rolled only the day before.

Butler was waiting by the fence, a buggy whip in his hands.

Alone with me, on this closed ground, he loomed large—tall and powerfully made. I weighed a hundred and sixty, he about two hundred and ten. No wonder he thought he could do what he pleased with me.

“On time, I see,” he remarked.

“Just about.”

“I’ll give you credit for that, and for not trying to sneak off—it showed you were ready to take your medicine. But I guess you knew you couldn’t get out of it anyway.”

“What medicine do you mean?”

“You know as well as I do. What do you think I’ve got this buggy whip for? I intended to give you twenty lashes, but on account of what I said before I’ll give you just twelve. That will teach you to come to gentlemen’s houses where you’re not invited and to bring a woman of ill-repute. Take off your coat.”

“I’ll leave it on, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t know what shape it will be in when I’m through.”

“I’ll take a chance on that.”

“Well, let’s get it over with. Turn your back.”

“I can’t do that either. Whatever’s coming to me, I take in the front.”

“Well, if you prefer it that way—”

He advanced toward me, the whip held upright. I did not move. As he drew in reach of me an expression of extreme cruelty came into his face and he raised the whip above and behind his shoulder to deal a hard blow. I still did not move, but I felt a preternatural quickness in my hands and the perfect vision of my eyes.

As the whip came down my hand shot out fast and true as a snake’s strike and caught its end. With all the strength of my arm I jerked it back, and so strong was Butler’s grasp of it that he could not release it in time and stumbled forward. I was there to meet him. Before he could begin to recover, I caught him with my left fist on the side of the jaw.

Such power was in the blow that he seemed to raise off the ground. But he tumbled soon enough, with me on top of him. Now I intended to give him such a beating as I had seen, but never shared in, on the river front in Augusta; and for a second or two I could not understand what had tied my hands. Then I knew, and almost laughed. He was an inert mass. But even before then he had been a fool, to think I would stand and take a whipping from any man. That thought had been born of stupid, inordinate conceit. Such a man could not be my great adversary. If such a one existed, I had not met him yet; meanwhile I had greatly overestimated Butler Mims. He was not worth hating. Hatred is like love; its giving must be deserved, or it sickens the giver.

So I struck him, full force, only twice more. One blow fell under the eye, to give him something to look at in the mirror for the next week, and to waken the ribald mirth of his associates. The other was to the opposite side of his jaw, to double the shock to his brain and thus make sure he would sleep a good while. No surer soporific could be found; I had seen enough of human mauling to know that. Then I brushed my clothes—they were disarranged and dusty but unharmed—and, taking the buggy whip, broke it in about four pieces. After grinning at the sprawled, snoring, cut-down giant, I went back through the little gate I had entered hardly ten minutes before.

Mr. Bailey looked at me with bulging eyes.

“Good God Almighty, what happened?” he asked.

“Nothing to me. Quite a lot happened to Mr. Mims, and I’d like to ask one question about him. Is he politically powerful?”

“I reckon I’d say he was.”

“Did he give you any instructions about disturbing us?”

“He told me not to disturb him, no matter what sounds I heard.”

“Will you please obey those instructions for just about an hour? It might prove of great convenience to me.”

“I’ll be only too glad to, and the same with my boys.”

“Could I reward you in any way?”

“No, sir. If what happened, what I think happened—what I can’t hardly believe—you’ve rewarded me enough.”

Again I gave thought to my fellow men, as in that strange moment after Mamma’s death, and thought how many were bullied and browbeaten by the

Butler Mimses; and I rejoiced that I had cut one of them down to size. Still I felt no great triumph, only sober satisfaction.

I would not let it dull my play. I remembered that I had so far to go.

## CHAPTER VI

### The Slaver

Clara had been very quiet throughout the homeward journey, pensive but not petulant; and on the whole an agreeable companion. The last hour, as the train came in by Kathwood Springs and Beach Island, she told me a little more of her childhood in the piney woods of Alabama; and, looking at her soft eyes and tender mouth, the tale was hair-raising. As we neared Hamburg, she started to make her farewells.

“When we get on the ferry, we’ll pretend we don’t know each other,” she said.

“If you think best.”

“I don’t want any of Memphis’ bunco-steerers to see me with you. I’ve got to make my living, and while he never raised any brabble about our act that night—he’s a gambler and he thought it was your winning—he’ll never forgive you for showing him a three of diamonds that turned out a five. As for what you did that night to me—in plain words kicked me out—I’m going to consider that square. The reason is, your treating me like a lady in Charleston and buying me that dress.”

“I’m mighty glad it’s square.”

“Did I pull off the Charleston job to suit you?”

“You did wonderfully well.”

“If you need me again, call me, will you?”

“Thank you, ma’am. I certainly will.”

My thought told me I never would, yet a little gambler’s hunch said that I might.

We parted, and that night I sat late with Faro Jack in observance of soon farewell. I revealed to him as much as I knew of my own situation and aims. One of the latter was the winning of a fortune—something more than a “big stake” in gambler’s parlance, as soon as possible.

“Have you thought how to go about it?” he asked.

“Not much, but there are new gold fields found every year or so where a good player might clean up. There are pearls in the South Seas and in the

Gulf of Honduras, diamonds in Brazil, ivory in Africa. There is also what's called black ivory. Fortunes can still be made in the trade, although it's more dangerous than ever."

"That's dirty business, Edward."

"I agree with you, although I believe in slavery." And that was like saying no more than I breathed the air of the South, instead of Northern air.

"I couldn't deal in slaves—and I've never even aspired to be a gentleman."

"My aspirations have taken a fall. Maybe they're all dead. Anyway they're put away for an indefinite period. Still, I don't believe I could do it either."

"I think you'll find some better means to make your stake. To try for it, I mean. They may be on the wrong side of the law, but they won't stink up your hands too bad. You may not win, but you'll have a good run for your money. That's a gambler's hunch."

"What's behind it, Jack?"

"Well, I'll tell you. You're not afraid to take risks, certainly to your skin—I don't know about your soul. I believe in the human soul. More than that, you understand gambling. You can figure a percentage and about how the cat's going to jump and what you can do with your head and your hands. I doubt if you'll mess with cards, much more. That's tin-horn gambling, at the best. I think you'll want more scope."

"There's a lot of scope when the deck's hot."

"It may be a good tool for you, in times of stress—and there'll be plenty of those. But you've got a different look in your face since you made that trip to Charleston—a different air—and I'm good at noticing such things. The catch in it is—you may not live very long. The good don't die young, and many of the great players do."

"I won't have much to lose, Faro, except you. Mamma's gone—I have no real friends, although, oddly enough, Mate likes me fairly well—I have no family—no sweetheart—no fortune—no name. My birth was an accident—there was no legal provision for it—it was not within the care and the jurisdiction of either the church or the law—as Butler Mims crudely put it, I have no more relationship to a legitimate son than a mistress has to a wife. It leaves me without protection—without the strongholds that most men have—but also without the responsibilities. What you see in my face may be this. I feel strangely free."

“Edward, I believe that you do.”

“I’m going to act on that freedom, as long as it lasts.”

“It will be mighty lonesome, I’ll tell you that.”

“My mother remarked once that neither she nor I had ever been anything but lonesome.”

“You had each other then. You had me. You had hopes—although you didn’t believe them—of getting that beautiful girl, Salley—and I saw her in Charleston when she wore pigtails. I knew her rake of a pa. Now you’ve got nothing but a dream. Even that dream has changed—it never did make much sense—now it makes even less. You know what made Cain a wanderer on the face of the earth? He only had one brother—and he killed him.”

“I don’t understand that, very well.”

“I don’t either. I’m saying just what comes to my mind. Well, do you want me to put some money in your venture?”

“I wasn’t going to ask you to.”

“Didn’t I know it! But I might as well. Easy come, easy go, as the saying is. I’ve got quite a little more piled up than I ever told you. I can lose several thousand, and still have enough to buy that yellow wench, a small whiskey still, and a little place on some lake where I can gamble with bass and bream. Moreover, you’ve kept faith with me for more than six years. That’s a hell of a long time for a man to keep faith, although it’s a common enough thing among women. How much have you got of your own?”

“About five hundred dollars.”

“Suppose I’d put two thousand with it?”

“I could very well lose it, in one play.”

“That’s what I’d be giving it for, for you to lose in one play—or maybe to win. If you do win, you can pay me back. If you lose, I doubt if you’ll be around here any more. That’s my hunch, and you know I believe in hunches.”

“Two thousand is quite a roll. You’ll want some papers—”

“No, only your word, keepable if you live. And I want to say this, which has nothing to do with the money. Edward, I’ve been lonely too. I guess there’s no class of men more lonely than gamblers, but you’ve eased it for six years. Do you want the notes in dollars, pounds, francs, or Spanish pesos?”

“In pesos, if you please. I’m going to start in Panama.”

“How are you going to carry ’em?”

“In a money belt.”

“Quite an interesting outcome to that little bit of spooning that a Charleston aristocrat and a West Indian girl started twenty-three years ago. Well, this isn’t the outcome yet. God knows what it will be. Edward, I know a lot about cards—I know a lot about human nature—but what I don’t know anything about—and I’ll tell you straight—is Fate.”

2

For nine months I roved and roamed with no gain save experience.

The first of my ventures as a rolling stone was the pursuit of pearls in the Bay of Panama. Catching the fever from an earnest, honest, but wildly visionary red-haired Scotchman, I put my capital in a bevy of oyster boats, hired Indian crews, and repaired to what my partner believed were virgin beds immoderately rich. There we put divers overside in forty feet of water, each with his basket and a signal cord weighted with a stone. The periods that they remained submerged astonished and frightened me—these were always shorter than they seemed, yet they often passed two minutes—and the amount of oysters brought to the deck was imposing; but instead of one oyster in a hundred containing a pearl, the proportion was more like one in two thousand. Worse luck, the season had not been favorable to pearl growing. A few were round and luminous, with the perfect “skin” and the glimmering “orient” of which the Scotchman ranted; but the most were scrawny, ill-shaped, and dingy.

Of my two thousand balboas invested—each was equivalent of a dollar—I retrieved five hundred. This sum I swelled to a thousand in card play against some sharpers gathered here to skin the gangs of gandydancers building a railroad between Panama and Colon; and I might have done better if my nerves were stronger. As it was, almost all of them were Forty-niners—at least they had gained the Golden Gate in the halcyon days of the Rush—and, regarding themselves as pioneers and me as a tenderfoot, they did not take kindly to my gains, and were quite equal to wiping out their losses in an abrupt, Western style.

A promising tobacco-smuggling operation from Havana to New York fetched me up with less than a hundred pesos in my poke. Then I made a quick thousand at the cockpits of Santiago de Cuba, not because I knew one bird from another, but because the faces of their breeders—“feeders” they were curiously called—reflected their ill-hidden hope, fear, discouragement, or boundless confidence in exactly the same way as the faces around a poker

table. And while visiting this ancient, populous, and beautiful city, living richly at Casa Majested, I might have heard, had I listened well, some thunder rolling far off.

The great adventure awaiting me, still in the womb of time, had an oddly commonplace beginning. I had fallen to wondering whether the running of a shipload of Santiago rum, the best I had ever tasted, into the New England coasts where flowed the much more costly Medford rum, would be a profitable venture; and if so, whether I could induce some wealthy *destilador* to back me. With that thought in mind, I had scraped an acquaintance with the mate of an English vessel, presently in port. I had encountered him at one of the better mug-houses on the waterfront.

It turned out that he had very little to tell me about rum-running. But in his youth he had sailed before the mast on a Bristol slaver, and the rum in his belly invoked sentimental memories of the Middle Passage. When I brought him another glass, he came forth with a piece of odd information.

“You’re rolling in money, ain’t you?” he asked.

“I could use a little more,” I told him, grinning.

“You’re from one of them rich Southern families, but you want more excitement than you’d find growing cotton. Well, I could tell you where to find it, and a big haul, too.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“It’s no good any more, fetching black cargo from Africa,” he went on. “The British gunboats are too fast, and too many good stinkin’ vessels are caught or have to put their goods overside. But there’s big and quick fortunes to be made in a trade yet, and not too many miles from where we sit.”

“I’d like to hear about it.”

“Well, I’ll tell you. Then if you need a real blue-water sailor, who’s weather wise, to command one of the ships you’ve chartered, you’ll know where to find him. As you know, there’s no legal slavery in Haiti, but there are more slaves there for sale than anywhere on the Guinea Coast. This is the way it happens. A third of the people—maybe a half—are just as uncivilized—heathen, I call ’em—as when they were first brought over. Of course they can’t read or write. A few can speak a little French—most of them still speak an African lingo. They’re not Christians—you don’t have to worry about that—they worship a conjure god they call Agoon. Well, the country’s overrun by bandit gangs. You can call ’em bandits, but what they really are, are slave catchers. The judges are hand in glove with them, and so are the officials. If a

man gets in debt—if he violates a law—if he just ain't lucky, in no time at all those catchers have got him and shut him up in a barracoon on the seacoast. Then a ship comes in at night. Some are English, some Spanish and French, but plenty are Yankee. They load with as many as five hundred black cattle and make the little trip across the windward passage to a port on these shores. There are two or three ports where they're welcome, no questions asked, everything fine as silk, only the Don to take care of, but there's one in particular that's the favorite with the shipping. The captain of the port, the medical inspector, and the customs officer are all the same toff. I call him that, 'cause he is a toff, as you can see with half an eye. He came from one of them old English families of Jamaica. He wants five dollars a head, handed to him neat and proper, no more no less. He's going to get it, or no business done. Then the runner—sometimes a charterer, often the captain of the ship—can keep all the rest he can make.”

“How much is that?”

“That depends on how much he pays in Haiti. Often it's no more than ten dollars a head, but say twenty on the average. The sugar growers here will take the whole lot at a hundred dollars a head. Four trips, and the bully boy can wash his hands, wash his ship, and settle down to a pew in a Boston church. It may not last much longer though; I'll tell you that. 'Cept for the toff I spoke of, 'twould be pretty well stoved by now. Lately the Governor of Jamaica has sent gunboats to try to catch the runners. That raises the risk and cuts down the profits.”

The abduction and the return to slavery of free Negroes in Haiti seemed to me the ugliest phase of the slave trade ever of my hearing. My flesh crawled a little at this ship's officer's eager description, I had not the slightest temptation to seek its rich rewards, and I was mildly curious about the “toff” from Jamaica, the big gun of the trade, who would dirty—stink up, in Faro Jack's language—his gentleman's hands.

“Now there's a rum thing,” the mate broke forth, his mouth slightly rounded.

“What is?”

“You didn't come from Jamaica, did you?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, that toff—Captain Walker, he calls himself, but I've heard that ain't his real name—he talks a lot like you.”

“In what way?”

“His accent, I mean. He says ‘hoose’ for house. And you know what?”

“No.”

“He looks a lot like you, too. He’s handsomer, I admit, but with the same coloring, and cast of feature, and something else I can’t exactly name. I’ll be damned if he don’t look enough like you to be your brother.”

I remembered then that I had a half-brother somewhere removed from Charleston. His name was Clay Hudson.

3

My seafaring friend gave the name of the slavers’ port as Puerto Miramar—meaning to look at the sea. Actually it was not much more than a well-sheltered cove about fifty miles eastward of the city. The sponge boat I had boarded at Smith Key put out on the beautiful, landlocked bay and sailed up the narrow rockbound passage into the Caribbean; and the wide blue water, the white of the distant surf, the golden yellow of the sands, and the tempestuous green of the foliage, all blessed and beamed upon by the ardent sun, seemed to me like auspices of happy fortune. I did not ask much in the way of it, today. My request was a small one, easy, it seemed, for any Luck to grant. It was only that El Capitán, his English name assumed to be Sidney Walker, might bear that or any other name as long as it was not Clay Hudson. But my soul or my stomach, I could not tell which, could not rest until I knew for certain.

Surely the odds were immensely in my favor. Hereditary dwellers along the eastern seaboard from Brunswick to Baltimore said “hoose,” for “house”—perhaps because of the salt air in our throats—and the same might be very marked in Jamaica. The only danger seemed to lie—and surely it was slight—in a half-tipsy English mate having deep, sure, penetrative vision. Such vision was extremely rare, as well I know. I would readily bet ten to one against my goblins.

We spanked into Puerto Miramar, and the cove with its swift-rising shores proved almost unbelievably picturesque, indeed one of the loveliest spots I had ever seen. But all was not well with the little port—I felt it, then I saw it, and at last could almost smell it. The small custom house, once ornate in the Spanish style, was falling into ruins. Probably it had not done ten thousand pesos’ worth of legitimate business in the last ten years. About a half-mile back from the beach, at the edge of the verdant forest, stood an abandoned warehouse with nailed-up windows and oddly heavy doors, and, seeing it through the captain’s glass, I had not much doubt of its use. Once in a while I

thought the sweet fresh winds blowing along the shore were strangely tainted, as though they had brushed against something rotten.

Dressed in my best, I went at once to pay a call on El Capitán. As I waited in the entry, I was breathing slowly and deeply, a familiar sign of trying to steady myself before a crisis. In a few minutes a Cuban lackey showed me into his office. As he rose from his desk to greet me, I thought—I believed—I could almost, not quite, be sure I had made a wild-goose chase to a happy ending. As far as I could tell at first sight, Captain Sidney Walker, so-called, did not resemble closely any Hudson I had ever seen, including a disqualified one I saw in the mirror. What resemblance there was, it seemed to me, lay in his having the marks of ancient lineage.

It was no wonder that the ship's officer had called him a toff. He was delicately made, soft-voiced, courteous in the extreme, even with the air of diffidence. True, there was something in the bony structure of his face that haunted me. Long ago I had seen one of similar composition, which an artist would find beautiful to paint, but I could not think who it was, and forced it from my mind. His nose was rather large in the Huguenot style, but more Roman, more aristocratic-looking, than any Hudson's. His eyes were dark and I confessed them to be set somewhat like Mate's, but instead of a deep glow they had a brilliant sheen. His lips were perfectly molded and rather sensuous. His hair was as elegantly black and fine as that which grew on the small proud head of Salley Sass.

This last gave me a little jar. I remembered—I knew it by heart—that Mason Hudson's first wife had been the sister of Salley's father. If, against my judgment, and hope so deep I did not try to rationalize it, this renegade was indeed Clay Hudson, he was Salley's first cousin.

We spoke of the weather, the brilliance of the vegetation, the wonderful blue of the sea. It could be Charleston that I heard in his accents, but also it could be the old English aristocracy of Jamaica. Accepting me as a gentleman, he served me a tot of well-aged Santiago rum. He raised his glass with a little toss that worried me. Englishmen whom I knew did not do so. It was a drinking mannerism of the Low Country.

"How may I serve you, Señor Stono?" he asked presently. For I presented myself under my own name—all I had in the way of a name—quite certain that it would mean nothing to Captain Sidney Walker, whoever he might be.

"I have available some capital which I wish to invest for a quick turnover at a good profit," I answered.

He lighted a cheroot with a hand as fine and delicate and almost as small as a lady's.

"I won't say you've come to the wrong place," he replied.

"Is there anyone in hearing?"

"Shut that door, and there won't be." And when I had done so, "Please speak frankly, sir, and to the point, as I'm somewhat pressed for time."

"I realize that a much greater return could be made if I began my operations in Haiti," I went on, "but also the risk would be much greater and, frankly, I wouldn't feel competent to back an entire venture from its beginning to its end. I thought, though, that since the next captain who moves in here may be eager to dispose of his cargo and set sail, I still might do quite well."

"You are an American," he suggested.

"Yes, sir."

"From somewhere about Charleston, to judge from your accent."

"I was raised in Charleston."

"There is a creek near Charleston in which I have run a few times, when I was in—shall I say?—the more active side of the business. It is called Stono Creek."

"My name derives from that part of the world."

"You are quite right that the big hauls are to be made by backing a venture from its beginning in Haiti to its end in a deal with sugar planters on this island. However, as you suggest, often the captains have no backers, use their own capital which is usually limited, and are glad to sell their cargoes at less than fifty per cent of their worth and beat a swift retreat. Even at that, they do quite well."

"Their cargoes are delivered safe and sound on shore?"

"The usual practice is for the buyer to pay earnest money, say about ten per cent, to the owners, the balance is to be paid when the livestock is locked in the barracoon. Also, at the time of settlement, he pays an import tax of five dollars a head directly to me."

"Isn't the cargo subject to confiscation by the Cuban government as long as it's on shipboard?"

“Nominally, yes, but it never happens. The cane that furnishes Cuba’s sugar and rum, her only exports of importance, can’t be grown without steady importation of black cargo. The dons know this—and look the other way. Because there is a good deal of fever in and about the fields and the mortality rate is quite high, the demand is always greater than the supply.”

The trouble with slaving was—so I thought in some gray corner of my mind—that while you could use such terms as livestock, black cattle, and black cargo, every once in a while you had to use words that plainly referred to human beings, such as mortality.

“I don’t question that; nevertheless I couldn’t make any payments until the goods are safe on shore.”

“If there are several buyers present, you might lose out. If not, the owners would no doubt bow to your wishes.”

“What I took for the barracoon is at the edge of the tropical forest. If some would break away, they would be hard to catch.”

“Not merely hard. Almost impossible. Away in the forest dwell what are called the maroons—runaway slaves who live like their forebears in Africa—and they are always ready to help other fugitives. But the windows and doors are solid and strongly bolted. Also there are six guardsmen employed by each buyer in turn to keep watch with loaded rifles. Not one has ever escaped from the barracoon itself. The five that we lost some years ago broke away while being marched in from the ship; they had chewed their neck ropes in two. The guard who was supposed to be watching that part of the line had dropped back to make advances to a beautiful quadroon. I could only have him whipped, not hanged, but I assure you the job was well done.”

He spoke more softly, toward the end, and there would have been charm in his voice if I could ignore the words.

“I’d consider that a very good record,” I remarked.

“Our perfect record was smirched,” he answered coldly.

For some reason I could not quite trace I was frightened, and becoming more frightened as the conversation continued.

“The present danger to the traffic lies at the other end,” Captain Sidney Walker went on. “Ultimately it may prove quite serious. Already the Governor of Jamaica has had two gunboats put at his disposal to intercept the ships in the windward passage.”

A remarkable expression came into the beautifully molded face.

“I judge you don’t take kindly to that, Captain Walker,” I remarked boldly.

“If you had been present—as I was—at the slave insurrection in Jamaica in 1831, you would not take kindly to it either. That was twenty-three years ago. I beg your pardon—it was not, strictly speaking, an insurrection—the events were caused by a false report that the slaves had been emancipated by royal decree. Bands of them started immediately to kill, rape, and burn. Among the people murdered were my father, my mother, my elder brother, and my elder sister—I, being sixteen, and in charge of my little sister of eight, watched the butchery through a crack in a cabinet door. Perhaps I have not been quite a normal person since. Certainly I have not gathered near as much pelf as I might have—as the opportunities offered—as the risks justified—simply because I have taken such joy in the work itself. I am not interested in the importation of African savages. Those I wish to see wearing chains are the blacks who have been emancipated—a beautiful word—who have tasted the joys of freedom—and now go back where they belong. I am glad to report that more than one shipload has come from Jamaica itself, right from under the noses of their emancipators from Great Britain; and of course I haven’t forgotten the tales of the slaughter of the whites occurring in Haiti in 1804. In other words, Mr. Stono, my activities here—I can proudly say I have been the central figure in the importation and return to slavery of something over ten thousand emancipated Negroes—are only a small part motivated by my financial requirements. Almost altogether the labor is one of love.”

He meant that it was one of hate. It seemed I had come face to face at last with human hate, without mitigation or forgiveness. Such hate was well accounted for by the story; I could understand how, under these circumstances, a scion of one of the aristocratic Jamaica families could become a slave dealer of the most repulsive sort.

But there was one thing wrong with the story, a serious thing. It was a lie from the first to the last.

I remembered whose face it was that I had seen, long ago, with this same beauty of bone structure. It was Mate Hudson’s face, the first time I had met him in the Battery.

A cold wind blew upon my soul, for at last I knew.

What I did not know or could hardly guess was the next play. One choice I did not have was to pass. I could think of no reason. I longed to say polite farewell, go out the door, leave the port, and get out of Cuba. This game was

going to get worse. I could feel it in my bones. The bad cards were on top of the deck, ready to fall.

Instead I kept my countenance with an aroused will, kept secret-telling tensions out of my body and especially out of my hands, and continued the conversation on an oblique course.

“It would give me great pleasure if you would dine with me tonight,” he told me, when I rose to leave.

“I accept with many thanks,” I answered.

He did not bother to tell me how to find his house. Evidently any dweller of the port could direct me there. It proved to be a *casa* of considerable sumptuousness, perched on a windy hill. Happily I had dressed formally, for I found him so. We dined at a table of San Domingo mahogany that must have been seeded close to Columbus’ time; on a patio before a cool fern bed watered by a copious spring. The Spanish wines and the fricassee of wild guinea hen were beyond praise. The servants were all Cubans, some showing a dash of Indian blood but none a trace of African. The cloths were of ancient lace the color of ivory.

Meanwhile there was no sign that he knew or suspected our strange brotherhood. Clay Hudson was about seventeen years older than me, and had left Charleston only two or three years after I was born. Nor did it cross his mind—unless I was badly fooled—that I had connected Captain Sidney Walker with the renegade son of a great Charleston house, named Clay Hudson, whom I had never seen.

After dinner he took me through the drawing room on the way to a cool veranda. On one wall hung the reproduction of a coat-of-arms, beautifully worked in silk, framed in gold, and under glass. Without appearing to glance at it, I perceived it in every detail. The name appearing there was not Mason nor was it Sass, his mother’s maiden name, but Ashley, the maiden name of his maternal grandmother.

“Mr. Stono, are you of a mind to pursue the business you mentioned at my office this morning?” he asked, over our liqueurs and cheroots served on the breezy veranda.

“I would like to look into it, sir,” I answered.

“The reason I ask, tomorrow a schooner is due to arrive from the Bay des Gonaïves, in East Haiti. I intend to go out and meet her in my gig—my usual custom when a ship hoves in—to see she has no plague aboard, and no contraband. If you would like to take the jaunt with me, you’ll be welcome—

and comfortable. If you care to talk to the captain on that matter, it would be a good time.”

“I will accompany you with pleasure.”

I left shortly, to spend the night in an old-fashioned Spanish tavern. All night I was prey to wild or troubled dreams, and always it seemed that a clock was about to strike, ushering in the most critical hour of my life. But there was no sign of it when, at an agreed and common hour, I met Captain Walker at his private dock. Every visible prospect was of a pleasant brief excursion out on the rippling sea.

He appeared in gay spirits. He wore the antique official raiment of the Captain of the Fort—cocked hat, white scarf, long blue coat with gold buttons and epaulets. His gig had bright paint with a striped awning and comfortable seats; the water was of matchless blue; balmy weather lay upon the land without excessive heat; the wind blew mild and cooling. Our crew was of brawny, sun-browned Cubans, most with fine mustachios. Seabirds flocked to see us off, delicate terns to rowdy pelicans; and the wings of gulls flashed like mirrors in far-off sunlight, and great white fishes leaped. On the journey out, Captain Walker discoursed pleasantly and intelligently on the flora and fauna of the islands. He was expert on these matters.

About three miles offshore we came in plain sight of a schooner, spanking in with all her canvas spread. It was the detail that made perfect to the sight this sparkling seascape. When she saw us, she heaved to, and while she waited for us to come up, her crew began to perform a duty which, at first, distance prevented me from distinguishing. I could make out squads of four men each coming up from below, carrying something on what might be a wide plank or a strip of canvas. The object was in each case dropped overside amid a pretty blue-and-white splash of water.

Suddenly it occurred to me that the objects were curiously rigid, black in color, and about the size of human beings.

I controlled my voice with great care.

“What in the Devil are those men doing?” I asked. “I can’t make out.”

“They are jettisoning a few pieces of cargo that didn’t stand the trip.”

“Well, there seem a good many. You don’t think there’s any plague aboard, do you?”

“She’d have run up her yellow flag, if there was. I’ve counted only about ten. Almost always the ships lose from fifteen to twenty-five. I can’t tell you why, except they were weaklings to start with, and the crowding—and the

bad air—and the realization that they’re going back where they belong takes them off. Yet sometimes burly fellows that you couldn’t kill in ten years in the fever swamps go out like a lamp in one night. The cap’n hasn’t had a chance to dispose of them before now—I suspect he caught a glimpse of an English frigate.”

Captain Walker spoke of other matters. The dumping went on a while longer—my count of the pieces of cargo spoiled and thrown overboard was sixteen—then the procedure changed. Instead of jettisoning the black forms brought up from below, they were laid along the rail amidships. There were about six of these in a row when we came close enough to hale.

“I’m coming aboard and bringing a friend,” Captain Walker called.

“I’ll have glasses set out for both of ye,” roared back a voice with a strong New England twang.

I did not pay much attention. A turmoil in the water on the weather side of the vessel had caught my eye—swirls and splashings not caused by wind or tide, and once or twice the glimpse of a black fin. The sight was in curious contrast—conflict, I would say—with the old and honorable sea ritual observed during our reception. As we mounted the Jacob’s ladder, sailors in white jackets and clean kersey breeches stood in the rigging, an honor paid to visitors which was formerly widely practiced but which I thought was extinct. The captain, a bearded New England Yankee with the manner and mien of a deacon, greeted us with a cordial handshake and a hearty, salty voice.

“Welcome to the good ship *Sally Tucker*,” he told us.

Strangely, I thought of Salley Sass.

Names were pronounced; hands shaken. The captain was Otis Haverill, of Medford, Massachusetts; and not only the look of the rigging but the clean, trim appearance of his crew showed that he kept a well-ordered, tidy ship. My stomach churned.

“Well, Cap’n, before we sit down in your cabin to a tot of rum, I think Mr. Stono would like to know what you’ve got in the way of freight.”

“Four hundred and five, all in good fettle,” Captain Haverill answered. “As for those six by the rail—I told the boys to let you look at ’em, and see if you think they’re worth putting on shore.”

The six were four men and two women. Captain Walker stepped nearer. The eyes of two of them followed his movements and watched his face; the other four paid no attention. He looked at them with what was no doubt a keen, calculating glance; when he turned back to us he shook his head.

“Not worth their room in a lighter,” he said quietly.

Captain Haverill called to his mate.

“Clear the deck, Mr. Thomas,” he commanded.

“Aye, aye, sir.”

I heard my own voice, trembling a little and strange.

“But, Captain, some of those six have life in ’em yet. Surely they’re worth something—”

“Not the expense of digging graves on shore, especially when the undertakers are here, and ready, and free.”

He had hardly finished speaking when the first of the six went overboard. The man made no sound as he hurtled down—and a strange and awful silence was on me, too. The sun beat on the deck. The sails flapped in the breeze. Men not busy with the duty whistled and chatted as they went about their tasks. Captain Haverill began to speak of some very old Jamaica rum he had bought at Kingston. As he did so, he began to lead us toward his cabin. And then suddenly, I knew, partly, at least, why I had not moved more strongly to save those six sick slaves from a sudden, terrible death. I would not have succeeded and would have shown my hand. That I must not do until I was ready to play. I must lose greatly before I could win. . . .

A great winning if I won—but only in my heart—or, if the play failed, an unestimably great loss. There was no logic in it. That was the Devil of it. It must be I was not a sharp, but the common sort of gambler who let passion master his mind. This much I knew; I was a true-born son of Charleston, the bastard son of Mason Hudson, the half-brother of Clay Hudson. Faro Jack had told me that he did not know the nature of Fate, nor did I, not the least glimpse, but because of these bonds it had suddenly closed around me in a strange and terrifying way.

Yet it would be a great play. That I need not doubt. And I need not be haunted by Faro Jack’s observation of great players dying young.

## CHAPTER VII

### High Play

After our second tot of rum, Captain Haverill named what he thought was a fair price for his cargo, delivered safe and sound in the barracoon at Puerto Miramar. It was approximately forty dollars a head—an even sixteen thousand dollars for the lot—with the provision that he be relieved at once of the black cattle's keep, and the payment made in full within three days. Within a month I could dispose of them for two and a half times that figure. Discounting the import tax paid directly to Captain Walker and the expenses of their care, my profit would be at least a hundred per cent.

"I would have to go to Santiago to raise the money, Captain Haverill," I answered, "so I must ask for four days."

He looked at me keenly with his bright, blue New England eyes.

"Well, I think you can do it. I'll give you four days. Of course you understand that if another buyer comes along with cash in hand—"

"Yes, sir, I do, but in that case I expect the money I pay to the guards and for other care to be refunded to me."

"That's only fair, and I see you mean business."

"Captain Walker, can you signal in a boat so I may leave for Santiago early tomorrow morning?"

"I can and I will."

"I will pay to you five dollars a head at the same time—a little beforehand, in fact, since it's an import tax—that I pay Captain Haverill."

"That is quite proper," my half-brother answered with a faint smile.

Now we asked to be excused to attend to various duties, and had a pleasant breezy sail into port. Captain Walker—I thought of him constantly by that name, to guard my play—discoursed learnedly on the greatest of Spanish satires, *Don Quixote*. While the character was no doubt overdrawn, he himself had known apparently sensible men who charged windmills. On the dock he took courteous leave of me, and shortly after I saw the captives lightered in. They were transported in batches of six, a continuous hempen line used for each batch, fastened from the ankle of one to the neck of the other, an ingenious arrangement that permitted them to walk at a reasonably

fast pace, yet eliminating almost all danger of sudden violence or attempt to escape. When the big doors had been bolted on the outside and the clapboard windows nailed shut and the band of riflemen took their posts, Captain Haverill's sailors returned to their boats laden down with lines. I had expected him to be thus saving of his good hemp, but my heart was lighter to have my expectation proven true.

Still I could not feel the slightest thrill of heroism. My inmost strongest feeling—unless I counted a kind of cold excitement that always took me before high play—was a vindictiveness such as an Indian might feel on a long warpath. Could I still throw in my hand? Yes, because I was a bastard brother; some laws I could not name, but whose verity I could vaguely sense, did not apply to me. But, by the same token, I was free to play. I was risking no one's chips but my own and those Faro Jack had lent to me to risk. So when time moved, I chose to move with it. Walking to the barracoon, I spoke to the captain of the guard. He did not know English, but a ratty-looking little fellow with an old cap-and-ball rifle as long as he was acted as interpreter.

"I've bargained with Captain Haverill for his cargo, and have agreed to pay for its keep, including your salaries, until I can return from Santiago with the main sum," I said.

"Señor, I feel certain you are making a very profitable deal," the captain answered.

"Would you and your men like a small advance on your pay? Ten pesos apiece, perhaps."

When this was translated, the sun-browned faces beamed.

"We would consider it a great favor, señor, and give you our hearty thanks."

I handed each of the men a ten-peso note.

"What do you think of this lot, Captain?" I asked, gesturing toward the barracoon.

"One of the best ever landed here, señor."

"I can speak a little French. Would it be possible for me to get a message to them? I'd like to tell them that they'll have as good treatment as they can hope for. I don't want any of them doing themselves in, during the night."

"Señor, there is an inner door within the outer door, both front and rear. Each has an iron window for passing in and out buckets of water and the like.

You may look at them and, if you like, speak to them provided any of them know French. But that last is rather doubtful.”

“My French is very scanty. Perhaps one of you can speak for me.”

All the guards shook their heads. I had no reason to suspect a trick. The opening in the front inner door to which I was presently led was about two feet square, and the cracks in the boarded windows gave enough light—when my eyes had become accustomed to the gloom—to make out several hundred Negroes, some of them standing in forlorn clusters, some sitting against the wall, many lying down.

“Can any of you speak French?” I called.

Immediately an old man, black as ebony, whom I could imagine as a major-domo in some planter’s home of long ago, and a pale-brown young woman came to the opening. Unless I was deceived by the dusk, the latter was quite a beauty. She was tall and lithe, with a dark Semitic splendor in her face; I thought she might be of Arab origin.

“I speak French, monsieur,” the old man told me in good accents. “So does the girl called Theba, although that is not her name.”

“Has any of you a timepiece?”

As I asked the question, I was watching with the side of my eyes the face of the English-speaking guard beside me. It evinced not the slightest interest or understanding.

The old man was too startled to answer, but the girl spoke, and I could detect the merest stifled wonder in her obsequious tone.

“There might be one, in our band—an old silver watch given by a master in better days—but what would we want of it?”

“It is now a quarter to six,” I said, without looking at my own watch.

“The day is nearly done.”

“The guards will presently eat supper, and they will have a jug of cheer to make them merry.”

“Would that we had a jug, not of cheer but of barest hope, to make us merry.”

“Watch your faces and your voices. It may be that during supper, the caps will fall from beneath the hammers of their guns.”

“The good God would bless that falling.”

“I know nothing about the good God. I do not dare invoke Him. If at eight o’clock the bolts on the rear doors should be slipped back, what then? The night is dark. There are no roads through the forest. Could you find your way to your friends?”

“Some of our friends are waiting at the forest edge even now. They come to meet every new shipment, hoping that a rope will slip—a gun will misfire—and one—or a handful—may go free. It has only once happened at Puerto Miramar. But if you say there is a chance—a hope—we will believe you.”

I turned to the guard who was getting a little bored.

“I don’t believe I’ll sell this girl. She talks with a good deal of spirit.”

“She is also good to look upon, señor,” the man answered.

“Then be ready,” I told her. “I’ll do it if I can.”

“Will you answer one question, señor?”

“It may be so.”

“It is a long time before the hour of eight. Our hearts can shatter from the strain before then. Will you say one word to help me believe? Will you give one reason why you tell us this, so I can hope it isn’t the cruelest jest that a slave trader ever played upon his chattels?”

“It is partly a family matter. The main part is to satisfy a grudge.”

I turned and walked away, the guard at my heels.

## 2

When we rejoined the other guards, I had no trouble keeping signs of terror out of my face, voice, and actions. Actually I felt very little, for no reason that I knew of other than my absorption in the game. It was a great game. Perhaps that was why it did not seem so bleak as the games I had played in Faro Jack’s rooms. It was no trouble, and rather pleasant, to effect a large vulgar bonhomie that soon put my companions in festive spirit. The jug I sent for was jollily passed. Within half an hour, conversation changed to shouts, and a little after that no one listened to what anyone else was saying. Still, to my disappointment, they did not drink themselves to the ground. These Latins had unexplainable barriers against drunkenness unknown to the poor whites of my own country.

A few natives of the region came up; mostly they were fishermen and small farmers. I served them drinks and they grew mightily jolly in recompense; one of them sang an ancient ribald ballad which the English-

speaking guard translated for my benefit, verse by verse. Perhaps one or more of these visitors would be briefly suspected of committing the great offense even now in the cards, giving me a few crucial minutes in which to take to the woods. I had no better plan; I had conceived of no cunning retreat. But I need not regret it; it is not possible to hedge against disaster in really great play. The gambler must use the resources of the moment. He must trust himself as far as he can—that is why gambling is so lonely—and at the bitter last trust to luck.

A solemn, almost poetic mood came over me as the day began to fail. Standing there among my boisterous fellows—or so it seemed although truly I stood alone as on a desert island—I wondered if it would prove my last day on earth. The bet would be a good one for some bystander. I could almost figure the percentage—almost—but not quite. It may be I had made some sort of deal with Death. If so, it had been a fair deal to which I agreed in the secret regions of my soul.

The shadows began to lengthen, to grow, to deepen in tone. They looked like no shadows I had ever seen; and I knew the black cards in this deck were close to my draw. The sun dropped low, then swiftly sunk. Birds passed in headlong flight. They were making their roosts before too late, but it might be I had not made for my roost in time. The jug continued to go round. The guards grew tipsy but without any great slackening of their alertness. The hour was just after seven.

As the shadows deepened, one of the men kicked some dry wood together and lighted a watch fire. At first I thought it would be another obstacle in my path, but I was wrong; in the parlance of the gambler, Lady Luck had given me a smile. The fire did not increase the watchman's vision and instead reduced and narrowed it. No longer were we all in sight of one another. If two men stood a little ways back from the firelight ring in order to tell a joke or share a drink, they became unrecognizable or invisible. And now the rifles, leaned here and there, were no longer conspicuous. Sometimes the firelight burnished them, sometimes they almost disappeared.

Unknown gods! Gods of the lonely, the desperate, and the damned! Gods of children and of humble folk, not the great gods in whose presence you too tremble! I did not mean to invoke you. In all my gambling, I have never asked help from the Unseen; and Luck could smile or frown at me according to her whim. Yet tonight I have somehow bound myself in your name to do this reckless deed, and that binding has lent me new and unknown strength. I do not regret the commitment—I could almost say assignment. It was in some way inevitable—beyond my vision it fits into the pattern of my life and

Fate. I will presently stand in great danger, but I am strangely confident, not of success, but of great play. My spirit is exalted but my heart beats slow and cold.

I began to disable the guns. In the barrel of one I poured half the contents of my cup. From beneath the hammer of another I released and let fall the cap. Of the third, an old flintlock, I drenched the priming. The fourth was in an awkward position for me to manipulate; watching my chance, I jammed the barrel end into the mud beside the spring. At the first attempt to fire it, it would probably explode. A guardsman no more guilty than I was innocent could easily be killed, or have his hand blown off. But I could not reckon with such things now. There was no longer any limit in the game.

Time passed. The fifth of the six guns I spiked with a little stick. It too would likely blow up when the trigger was pulled. The powder of the last I drowned with the liquor remaining in my cup.

I glanced again at my watch and the hands stood five minutes to eight.

“We’ll have one more round,” I told the English-speaking Cuban. “But first I’ve got to pump ship.”

When he translated the vulgarity, it raised a laugh. No one noticed as I slipped off into the dark. They thought I had gone only a few feet. Instead I stole around the side of the barracoon to the rear door. It was immensely strong and heavy but the iron bolt slid with ease. In the darkness within was another door, and high powers of vision came upon my eyes, and when I opened its iron window I saw an old man and a beautiful young girl, waiting with an immobility that suggested sublime patience.

“Is everyone ready?” I whispered.

“Yes.”

“When I slide the bolt, give me one minute if you can, then try to get into the woods without making any noise.”

“We will try, monsieur.”

I had to use great force to slide the bolt, but it gave at last. Then I stole back the way I had come. The distant fire leaped and its black ring of shadows sprang in and out. The guardsmen laughed and talked; I was among them before they noticed my approach.

One of them joked coarsely in Spanish.

“Pedro says you took a long time,” the translator told me. “It must be your boiler room was flooded.”

“No, but I couldn’t turn off the tap.”

I picked up the jug and began to make the rounds. It was a curiously noiseless proceeding—none of the men who held out their cups had anything to say—and my own remarks were soft and few, unfit to drown out a silence. And out of that silence, behind the barracoon, there rose sound.

It was not loud but it carried well in the silent night. It was such sound as light-stepping cattle might make, moving through brushy cover. The men pricked up their ears; then one of them made a quick motion and seized his rifle.

“*Diablo!*” he burst out. The rest he said I did not understand.

“What is it?” I demanded of the English-speaking guard.

“We don’t know. It’s damn queer—”

At that instant the captain of the guard dropped his cup and darted toward the barracoon. Instantly four of his men fell in behind him. I thought the fifth would go too, and then the coast would be clear, and I would vanish in the dark forest, and perhaps my life would be spared. He was a man I had hardly noticed. He seemed the kind always to follow the leader, not one to act on his own account. He was a middle-sized man, rather jauntily dressed.

He took three steps, then glanced at his rifle and stopped. His hand moved quickly and he picked from the barrel a piece of stick I had thrust into it and inadequately concealed. At once the gun leaped and leveled on my breast.

“*Renegado!*” he burst out, with such hate and fury as I had hardly ever heard in a human voice. And then in strange-sounding English, “If they have got away, I kill you!”

3

The fatal card had not yet fallen. The issue of my immediate ruin or repair was not fully decided. The reason was, the guard’s watch of me had become impaired through his intense interest in what was happening elsewhere; his attention wavered just a little as he gave ear to the events occurring about the barracoon; and sometimes he cast his eye in that direction. There could come an instant wherein it failed; and then I would strike back. I was not conscious of hope but perceived the possibility of opportunity. . . .

Someone came running. I thought the guard might lose his aim in seeing who it was. Instead it intensified, with the curious effect of him showing dutifulness to a superior. The newcomer was another guard, called Pedro.

At once my watcher, whose name was Ernesto, began speaking rapidly in Spanish. The newcomer Pedro stared incredulously at first, then scowled, and advanced toward me with his rifle raised over his shoulder as a club. He did not strike, though; at the same time he kept well out of his fellow's aim.

“Mon capitán!” he shouted, in the now heavy silence. “Attention!”

“*Momentito!*” someone shouted in reply. A moment later the capitán and two other guards appeared in the firelight, one of the later being Diego, who knew English. There was a rapid exchange of information, but no break of luck, or shadow of one for me. The men grouped around me but did not get in one another's way; the two or three who seemed overcome by passion remained as vigilant as the rest. Two had dropped their useless guns and instead held ready for use a cudgel and a machete. Their excited talk ran on for a few seconds more, Ernesto making the main charge. Only ratty little Diego still seemed inclined to doubt it, and in a few swift seconds this changed completely and he became more belligerent than the others. I knew that if I made a single suspicious or violent move I would be instantly killed.

The captain ordered Diego to ask me a question. He did so, his face pale with fury.

“Why did you let them go?”

“Why should I? Why should you blame me? I had arranged to buy them \_\_\_”

“You did it. No one else. It was you who spiked the guns. Ernesto saw you meddling with his gun and thought nothing of it. What have you done, Yanki son of a bitch. You have cost the Captain of the Port many thousand pesos. The fame of our barracoon is lost and the ships won't come here any more. I spit on you!”

He did so literally. Ernesto's gun and the club and the knife awaited my reply, poised and ready for instant use, so I made none. There fell a slight pause. I was conscious of the bright and dancing flame and the pretty lights it cast in the brushwood beyond. I saw the men's faces, flushed or pale with fury, and their angry but curiously graceful actions, like those of fighting house cats. This was where my path had led. I had been playing all this while to find myself here. My terror was still not sharp but aching and forlorn. I was more afraid of torture than of death. Torture of a terrible sort was well within the cards. . . .

Diego repeated an order given by the captain.

“Son of a swine, put your hands behind your back.”

My mind revolted, for that way lay helplessness. But something more than the glitter of steel and the murderous glow in the eyes of my captors made me submit. I did not know all that went on in my heart and brain. Maybe I thought to lay a chip on time. Time had saved many a man when by all the computations his jig was up. Anyway, I obeyed.

I felt thongs go round and round my wrists. I felt a noose dropped over my neck, and drawn so tight I could barely breathe. After that, the tense figures about me relaxed a little.

“We will now take you into the barracoon, where we will wait the coming of the two captains,” Diego told me.

While four of the five guards marched me there, the fifth went to the guardhouse after lanterns. On the way we met the sixth guard, who had tried to follow the runaway slaves into the forest. In the great empty room I was seated on a stool, with my ankles bound. Pietro left to summon my judges; the others sat morosely, talking in low tones. Sitting alone, unquestioned, my mind free to roam, I thought of almost everyone I had ever known. None knew of my swift fall, none would imagine it in their distant scenes, and if they did know, how few would care? Faro Jack. . . . Perhaps Mate Hudson. . . . Clara? If she knew, her interest would be diverted for a few hours from Memphis’ games; her mouth would round and her eyes shine with excitement. Mason Hudson and Salley Sass? The threat that had seemed to hang over them had proved a bugbear, and the great oaks still stood, and the lights burned, and the walls were unshaken. For three leagues stretched the fertile rice fields. What was one little avenger compared to these?

After a long time there was a noise at the door. The guards stood up respectfully and all of them looked frightened. Yet when Captain Sidney Walker and Captain Haverill came into the room, they did not storm; they walked gravely and spoke quietly. Not until Captain Walker stood close to the lantern did I perceive that he was under great strain. His color had turned dull white and his soft eyes had a feverish shine and his lips were drawn. I thought very likely he would collapse. If he did, I would not be worse off, and perhaps a chance would come. . . .

With hardly a glance at me, he questioned the captain of the guard. The questioning was long and careful, with an enforced calmness. At the end he turned and spoke to Captain Haverill.

“The men were at the supper fire, the emancipator among them,” he said. “They were making rather merry, but they knew no reason not to, with the

blacks locked in. They mistook him for a gentleman. I came close to making the same mistake.”

“You came close!” Captain Haverill cried, his voice rising. “If you had any doubts—”

“I am speaking now of his station in life. He tried to pass as a gentleman, but I suspected he was an impostor. In the first place, not many gentlemen engage in the slave trade, as you well know. Besides, his manners were a little too meticulous. But I had no doubt whatever of his good faith as a buyer.”

“You should have, when he protested putting those sick ones overside. A real dealer would be used to sights like that. I saw something in his face, damn my eyes, but I thought you wouldn’t have brought him out there, you who love the trade, unless you were sure of him. Now my charterers have lost a fortune. Who’s going to trust me again? My only comfort is, you’re in the same boat. You’ll look a long time from that conning tower of yours before you see another slaver hove into port!”

“Sir, that goes without saying.”

“Maybe it won’t hurt you, because you’re rich. You’ve salted away enough that you can go back to Jamaica and live like a lord.”

“Captain Haverill, no member of my family was ever known to save a peso.”

Captain Haverill turned to me. “Are you a paid abolitionist, or a volunteer?”

“I’m no kind of an abolitionist,” I answered.

“Then what did you do it for?”

“I acted on impulse.”

“It’s going to be a costly one, or I miss my guess. While we’re about it”—Captain Haverill turned again to Captain Walker—“has anyone searched him? For money, I mean.”

Captain Walker spoke in Spanish to the captain of the guard. Two of the men came up to me and in a matter of seconds found my money belt. Their expression changed oddly when they found it contained an even thousand dollars in pesos.

“It’s small consolation, but what it gives you can have,” Captain Walker said.

“Less than twelve per cent of what we’ve paid out. Yet I can’t say it’s the fault of anyone, except that renegade from Charleston. Impulse, hell! Those slaves promised to meet him in the jungle and bring him a whole lot of stolen money.”

“Well, the meeting won’t occur. That’s my consolation.”

Their eyes met briefly. “You know, I wouldn’t like to be in his shoes.”

“You said his impulse is going to be a costly one, and you’re quite right. I’ll attend to the matter early tomorrow morning. I greatly regret I’m too sick and weary to give it proper attention tonight.”

There fell a brief silence. Captain Haverill stroked his beard.

“I have curiosity to know what you’re going to do.”

“You have every right to know. My men will take him into the forest. They’ll have strong rope and they will find a stout limb. The people hereabouts won’t go near the place. I doubt if his bones will be found until long after they’ve dropped to the ground.”

He turned to me and spoke in his soft, pleasing voice.

“In the role of judge—I’ve appointed myself your judge—I’ve a few remarks to make. I’m inclined to disagree with Captain Haverill as to the motive of your deed. I doubt if you expect the runaways to bring you money; I think very likely you acted on impulse, as you said. What you must understand is—what you may contemplate as you lie awake, tonight, your last night of life—is that mistaken philanthropy—misguided charity—whatever you want to call it—is one of the most dangerous and disastrous things on earth. More harm can be done by it than by a thousand selfish or even dishonest acts. Thereby the cattle of the earth go free—break down fences—often kill people. The old orders are destroyed. Civilization itself is threatened. Also the charity so-called is itself suspect. Almost always it’s a form of vanity. You are one of the vainest young men it was ever my misfortune to meet. It enables you to act the gentleman quite well; sometimes you may even believe your role. Happily your career is going to be cut short. You have reached the end of your rope. Excuse me—one end will be around your neck, the other about the stout limb of a tree. You’ve danced, and now you will pay the fiddler—rather I should have said you’ll dance once more, a very lively last dance which the spectators will enjoy far more than you. With that before you, I expect you will find the night somewhat long. We’ll leave you now to pass it the best you may.”

He turned and spoke in Spanish to the captain of the guard. The latter saluted with punctilio. Then he addressed Captain Haverill.

“I have ordered all six guards to remain on duty. None are to lie down, and at least four stay sharply alert at every moment. You need have no fear of laxity on their part. They know that this fine imitation gentleman has cost them their jobs—there will be no more black cattle to guard. Nor is there the slightest possibility of his slipping his bonds. My men are especially skilled at fastening them.”

As I listened to him speaking, I was thinking of two cards left in my hand. One I could never play. It would be tantamount to asking mercy, which God forbid. The other was a weak card, I could not see how it offered the least hope, it might well shorten my time. Still I decided to play it.

“You spoke of me as a fake, imitation gentleman,” I said. “You’re not even that. You lie, steal, and commit murder. You didn’t come from Jamaica. You never saw a slave insurrection there, with the murder of your parents and brothers and sisters. Your name is not Sidney Walker. And you’re a traitor to your country, your state, your order, and your family.”

He waited long seconds before he replied; and I saw his eyes dart to the startled face of Captain Haverill.

“This is quite revealing,” he said gravely. “If I’m not Captain Walker, who am I, pray?”

“Your name is Clay Hudson, and you are a renegade from Charleston who had to flee the city.”

“What do you think of that, Captain Haverill?” Clay Hudson asked.

“I find it somewhat surprising, but—after all—none of that’s my business.”

“I trust you’ll go with me tomorrow, to see this fellow properly hanged.”

“No, sir, I’ll ask you to excuse me. I’m a slaver but not a hangman.”

“Since he has been so revealing about me, I’ll return the compliment. It took me a good while to remember the name Edward Stono—where I had heard it and in what connection—but finally I did. It was the name given to the bastard son of my father by a lowborn Creole woman.”

“Devils in hell! That makes him your half-brother.”

“Cain and Abel were full brothers.”

“Do you mean that you’re going ahead with the hanging?”

“I look forward to it with the keenest pleasure. Now let us take our leave.”

4

The two captains left the room. Two of the guards stationed themselves at the doors; the others sat against the wall. The lanterns threw a bleak, monotonous light, such as I remembered in the gaming rooms. A wild hope struck me, but I did not let it ingress my heart; I would not give it countenance. I had gambled and lost.

Sitting apart from my captors, my first intercourse was with Death. He did not raise his hand to strike me, yet; it seemed he held no enmity toward me, but I felt that he had claimed me, beyond redemption, and I might as well get used to him. It was a strange task to give the mind. Every way the mind ran, it sought light instead of darkness, it looked for continuity instead of finality. I could hardly force it to accept the situation. The night passing, and then a deeper night at morning, striking suddenly, my own night, my light failed, my own sun gone, but perhaps my stars out, shining, stars I had never seen. That was as far as I dared go in thinking of any future life. I had never thought about it until now and to try to build on it now would seem a weakness. Pride was my great fault. Clay Hudson had called it vanity and he might be right, but I still believed it was pride, however foolish.

The hours passed. Two of the guards dozed, two kept up a desultory conversation, two leaned against the lintels of the doors. It struck me that even the latter were having trouble keeping awake, the rum they had drunk acting as a soporific. I half-wished that I too could sleep. Thus the hours of waiting would seem to be cut short. Yet I remained wide, intensely awake. It was as though my heart kept watching for something that my mind denied. It would not be reconciled to defeat; it dared not hope, yet it would not surrender to despair.

I became slowly aware of a change in my surroundings. At first I did not know what it was; then I perceived, with a stifled heart, that it was only a deeper silence than before. The talk of the two guardsmen had long since died away. They still sat with their heads up, in the same position, their guns in easy reach, but from here I could not tell if their eyes were open; I got the strong, wildly exciting impression that they had closed. The two guards at the door stood just as before, leaning against the lintels. There remained so little to bank on. If this were a game in Faro Jack's rooms, I would be ashamed to lay any kind of bet. Yet my heart said, “Now is the time.” If any friend were waiting—if—if—a hundred nos against one yes—now, now was the moment

of his greatest chance to help me. One moment in the middle of the night. One little shift of the odds against me.

Then the hair rose on my head, for through the guarded door came the dim form of a girl.

Her hair flowed and her feet were bare. She walked past the man standing by the lintel, and he did not put out his hand to stop her, and he made no sound. She came on, nearer and nearer, walking swiftly but more lightly than any wind. In her hand was a small gleaming thing. In a few seconds more I saw it was a dagger. The two guardsmen sitting upright across the room appeared to look straight at her without seeing her. No one else moved, no one made a sound.

She came close and I saw that she was the girl called Theba. Quickly and with skill she cut the ropes on my wrists and ankles. Then she gave me her hand to help me to my feet.

Their numbness passed off. We walked side by side. Past the two upright sitting guards, nearer and nearer the man standing by the door. As we came close to him she dropped my hand so we could go through in single file. I passed near enough to touch him, in front of his half-closed eyes. He made no sound or movement.

We went on through the outer door. I felt the freshness of the night and saw the stars and the dying red coals of the supper fire. Again the girl's hand found mine. Still we walked in utter silence, but the dark line of the forest drew ever nearer. I thought we would never reach it, that my luck couldn't run that long, but suddenly we did. We dipped into a little dark trail.

For at least fifty steps more we stole our way along, then she uttered a low, sobbing gasp. Into a starlit patch ahead of us stepped the dim figure of a man; waving for us to follow, he began to run at a swift, light pace up a wide, cleared path. Clutching my hand, the girl ran with me, beside me, it seemed on soft grass, into the dark, silent, unknown heart of the forest. We ran like deer at whom rifles had just blazed. There seemed no limit to the lightness of our feet, to the fleetness of our gait. We followed our leader as her cubs might follow a tigress. We were like disembodied things.

After a long time our guide stopped and spoke in some unknown tongue to my companion. I saw her nod and turn to me, but she could not speak at once for lack of breath. In dimness I could barely penetrate, she put her hands to her breast and looked up to the constant stars as though seeking strength. At last she spoke.

“You are safe now, monsieur. Lugi of the maroons says so. No one can find you now.”

5

In only a moment or two more we left the wide path worn by wild cattle, crossed a brook, and came into a narrow trail where we must walk in file. It forked and reforked, climbed a hill, and entered a valley thickly grown to palm and flowering vine, impenetrable to all who did not know its secret entrances and exits. In only a few minutes more we came to a cabana made of palm logs and roofed with thatch. Lugi entered ahead of us and lighted an old-fashioned ship’s lantern that was waiting there.

I looked first at his face as the steady glimmer revealed it. It was the strong, aquiline, brown face of an Indian. Naked except for a breechcloth, his body was a marvel of lithe, compact strength. Catching my eye and smiling, he motioned toward some fruit that had been left on a rustic table—yellow and red and green, beautiful and fragrant to my revitalized senses—and coconuts that had been perforated to emit their milk. By opposite walls were pallets, covered with deerskins.

He spoke in some unknown tongue which the girl quickly translated.

“Monsieur, you are to stay here the remainder of the night with every assurance of safety. In the morning the maroons will come to guide you to their village.”

“I have been very lonely, and I wish that you would stay here also, if that is possible,” I answered.

“Yes, I will stay.”

Lugi smiled and nodded in the doorway, then the night swallowed him. With a bone-handled silver knife that she found on the table, the girl cut several mangoes, handing them to me to eat with a wooden spoon. They had been called the fruit of paradise, but I must soon refuse the offering; then I had her sit near the lantern so I could look well into her face. I had never seen its like. She was of a people and a land of which I had no knowledge. The land was faraway and warm, and the people were of a Semitic race; beyond that I could not even guess.

Her features were of bold free carving, as was her tall, lithe form, and her eyes held a dark splendor I had never seen before, and her skin was a pale, reddish brown.

“It’s hard for me to believe that this is true,” I told her.

“We were very lucky, monsieur.”

“I may call you Theba?”

“Yes, lord. I was called that in Haiti, although my real name is Mariyah, after the beautiful Coptic concubine who was Mohammed’s favorite.”

“Will you call me Edward?”

“Edward,” she echoed.

“You speak French well. How long have you known the language—if you care to tell me?”

“I am glad to make conversation. I too find this very hard to believe. We were both lost—I along with many others—and suddenly we are both saved. I’ve known French about a year.”

“You learned it in Haiti, of course.”

“Yes.”

“Before that, I think your native tongue was Arabic.”

“Yes, such as is spoken in the Libyan Desert.”

“Then it must be that you were sold into slavery before you came to Haiti.”

“Yes, by my father. He was a great slave trader and catcher. He had several children by the Arab and Berber women who fell into his hands. When he had made enough money to go and live like a nobleman in his native Oman, he sold us all.”

For a moment an intense look came into her face, then a dim and childlike smile played around her mouth, and it passed off.

“What are you going to do now?” I asked.

“I’m going to live with the maroons and help other slaves escape.”

“You must understand I’m not a liberator. I believe in slavery as it exists in my native land. If I live, I may become a slave-owner myself.”

“One of the maroons, listening at the window when you talked to the captains, heard you say about the same. It doesn’t matter now. That part is over.”

I looked at her, and pain passed in a zigzag path across my brow, and my being seemed like that I had in dreams.

“Will you eat something, Theba?”

“I ate heartily before the long watch began.”

“Have you a husband?”

“No.”

“A lover?”

“I had a lover once—but he was killed.”

“Children?”

“No.”

“Your father is in Oman. Where is your mother?”

“She was a Tuareg woman and was sold to one of the kings of the Nile.”

“It’s late and you’re tired and want to go to bed.”

“Not until you do, Edward.”

“Will I ever see you again after tonight?”

“We’ll be together tomorrow as we journey to the maroon village. But from there the men may want to start at once for Manzanillo. From there you can cross to Jamaica in a sponge boat.”

“I wish we could stay together. I wish that was my Fate instead of against my Fate. I have no one else.”

“I have no one else either—but it would be against my fate, also. Against what I would have once called *kismet*.”

“Will you kiss me, Theba? Please do not do so unless you wish.”

“I would like to kiss you, Edward.”

She came and bent over me and her lips were soft and warm and lovely upon mine.

“To be kissed—not by death—but by life!”

“Death has gone away—for a little while,” she answered.

“But only to return. He never leaves for very long. To me you are the very symbol of life. You’re tall and beautiful and proud and brave. Tomorrow we part, but I’ll have the memory of you as long as I live. I’ll hold it in my heart. It will be with me in many a lonely hour and strengthen me in defeat. I’ll see you again as you came into that dimly lighted room, your feet bare, your hair flowing. For that I’ll love you always.”

She was still a moment, and then she echoed in a strange tone, “Love?”

“What else? What other word could be the right word? Is love so hard to come by? It is the easiest thing we do, we humans—the happiest—and the most sad.”

“I will respond to your love, Edward.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I mean I will give you mine in return. Is it only for one night? I don’t think so. I don’t think it can pass so quickly. I think it would be the kind to live in our hearts all our lives. I want it there, Edward, if you do. We have been together so long. We have been so close together. We know each other better than many a youth and maiden who go to the altar. We have run together in the dark. We came face to face with him.”

“With whom?”

“I will answer that in Arabic.” And when she had spoken some words in the alien tongue, she gave me their English equivalent. “The despoiler of delight. He who puts out the lamp. He who brings the last cup.”

“He hasn’t come yet,” I said, with a sudden exultant thrill in my voice.

“And he won’t come, tonight. Tonight the lamp will burn bright, if you wish it. The cup will be the cup of joy. I am a desert woman who can’t hide her heart. Tell me if that is what you want.”

“Tonight I want it more than anything in the world.”

“Then we will be together all the night—deep into the morning when the wild pigeons fly back from the spring where they go to drink—and because of that—wherever we are—we can be together always.”

## BOOK THREE

### CHAPTER VIII

#### Partial Payment

Deep in the morning, when the wild pigeons had flown back from the springs where they had gone to drink, a file of thirty or more maroons came singing down the hill. Their song was very like the wailing work chants I had so often heard raised by gangs of slaves in the Carolina Low Country, its key minor, the refrain essentially sorrowful, the words probably extempore. They were free men, it seemed, yet they remained bound, and I did not know the nature of that binding. I was a long way from Charleston, yet I returned there in the twinkling of an eye. Theba and I would presently go our separate ways, yet either could return to the other in one leap of thought. There was a world of substance and a world of shadows, and these two were inextricably bound.

One of the maroons had brought tortillas, wild-pig bacon, and coffee for my breakfast; another a bunch of cheroots cleverly rolled from the native leaf; the third some deerskin garments and boots for me to wear on the journey through the jungle, to save my own clothes from the thorn thickets and the swamps that we must pass. All were naked except for loincloths and on every face was a broad smile.

Without great haste we set forth on our journey, Lugi walking immediately ahead of me, and Theba just behind. After a mile or so, I could no longer see any sign of a path, while the forest became taller, luxuriant, and wildly beautiful. At first glance it would appear impenetrable because of the mesh of vines and creepers, but my companions were jungle dwellers; and Lugi never failed to lift out of my awkward way branches or brambles which the others avoided with slight twists of their lithe bodies.

Royal palms grew everywhere, sometimes a hundred feet tall, and when we gained the hilltops we could see their plumes gracing every vista. Taller than these stood the silk-cotton trees, of unbelievable girth; even so some of them loomed bereft of life, strangled but still upheld by the huge coils of the jaguey liana. Once our line swerved from other living coils. They looked dark except for a soft sheen and were beautifully patterned, and they formed the body of a huge boa that I guessed at eight yards long. But we passed only a few feet from his leafy bed where he lay asleep, digesting an enormous meal,

and my companions nodded and beamed at being able to show me one of the marvels of their jungle. This was the mighty maja, that swallowed whole goats and wild pigs, but was never known to wind with bone-crushing power about a human being.

Gaudy macaws, uttering harsh cries, and emerald-green parakeets flushed from the tree boughs. The exquisite fairy humming-birds darted or hovered among the huge purple flowers of the royal piñons. When we stopped for a noonday meal, the forest gave it to us—wild plantains, mangoes, custard apples, and pawpaws, and milky coconut flesh. But at the end of the day's march, we did not gain the maroon village, which Theba had seemed to expect. Actually my fleet-footed companions could have made it with ease, except for an alien of whose comfort they took thought. However, we arrived at one of their pig-hunting camps, where stood a few bark-built, thatched-roof huts. When Theba had swept and garnished the best of these, then stood in the doorway with downcast eyes, I thanked some godlings of happy fortune for the delay.

We arrived at the village in midafternoon of the following day, and at twilight I feasted at a small rustic table set in a breezy bower. The tableware was ancient Spanish silver and the cloth damask, no doubt looted, perhaps amid scenes of brutal murder, from the great *casas* of the Islands. The bloodstains had been washed away, but not from human hands or out of human remembrance, and the end, the final accounting was not in sight, and God only knew where good would leave off and evil begin. The meal, prepared from an astonishing variety of edible substances, was expertly cooked and flavored. I visioned a head cook in some warm, fragrant, clean plantation kitchen, perhaps a mammy greatly beloved and trusted by her "white folks," perhaps a white-haired elder whom the children called Uncle Jim or Sam or George until, suddenly, the incredible rebellion. My heart grew heavy. I had been given a new lease of life, as the old platitude aptly put it, but I did not know what to do with it. I must play deeply, but for what stakes, in what game, against what adversaries?

After the meal came Lugi the chief, accompanied by Theba and a tall bronze Negro, lean as a leopard, with an eagle's face and copper rings in his ears and a remarkable grace of movement. Asking my permission, they squatted on the floor. Their voices and manner and the sheen of excitement in their eyes told me of the gravity of their mission. To my surprise, it was not Lugi who addressed me, but the savage-looking African. I was not able to identify the language that he used—I thought it might be some lingua franca of the Dark Continent. What he said, Theba translated literally into French.

“. . . My name is N’kulu and I am a Zulu, and I was born on the middle waters of the Tugela River three years before the faraway King of the White Men gave forth his command that all the slaves of his African domains be set free.”

I thought that N’kulu must refer to the emancipation act passed by the British parliament in 1833. Its impact in South Africa had been enormous, and it had been one of the main causes of the Great Trek of the Boers into the wilderness. He looked about thirty, but he could easily be twenty-five.

“When I had seen the grass renewed sixteen times on the High Veld, and with my spear had slain a lion in sport and an enemy in war, and I had passed under the hand of our witch doctor in the Magic House, I became a gunbearer of a gray-bearded Boer, whom I knew as Heer Piet, and we hunted elephants in the thorn, and Heer Piet sold the ivory for much silver at the trading post at Thaba’nchu.”

He paused, and I nodded in token of understanding.

“One day, as we were crossing the Vaal River in time of drouth, Heer Piet found in a sinkhole in the gravel a small, white stone with twelve faces, colder than other pebbles, and greasy feeling. He stared at it a long time, with some passion in his face that I could not read, and then he began to search diligently for other such stones, commanding that I help him. But only in the same sinkhole could we find any, and there only a few. Some were larger than the first, one had eight faces, two or three had more than I could count, but most were rounded, looking like drops of gum from the milk tree. All the next day we searched in vain. Early the following morning, Heer Piet put the little handful of stones in a pouch made of the skin of the hartebeest, and we went our way.”

My heart beat no faster, I thought, but with a distinct thump.

“Now it so chanced that Heer Piet had been robbed of his gun and his stores some years before, and trusted no man,” N’kulu went on. “So when we came in sight of anyone, black or white, or when we drew nigh a town or a trading post, he would pass to me the little bag of pebbles, and bid me conceal it until he desired its return. Thus I knew they had no little value in his sight, but since he was old and an outlander, exiled from his kind, with many queer notions, I knew not if his sight were true or false—if their value was real or like a dream in the night—and I know not to this day.”

In the pause, I asked a question. “Did you and Heer Piet search any more for the white pebbles?”

“I served him only a few months more, but in that time we searched here and there, without finding any.”

“Could you, if you crossed the great waters, find again the sinkhole in the river bed?”

“Lord, it might be so.”

“Go on with the tale.”

“I will, but it is almost done. There came a day that we saw a war party of Basuto advancing across the plain. Heer Piet handed me the little bag, then went forward to parley with the chief. Instead of words, they gave him their assagais, sewing him in and out. Me they took prisoner, and, with no thought of searching anyone so poor, sold me to an Arab slave trader, whose barracoon stood on the banks of the Zambezi. In time I was brought to Mozambique to be resold in Brazil, but the gods and heavy gales caused the ship that was bearing me there to put into Santiago, where I was bought by a planter of sugar cane. In my second year in the fields the foreman guarding our work gang drank too deeply of his jug and fell down drunk, whereupon we fled into the forest. I brought with me the little pouch of pebbles. Thus it came to pass that I have them still.”

He fell silent. His bronze face, lean and superbly molded by the stark hands of event, spoke to me of great things I could not understand, nothing of the present matter. Not so the darkly beautiful face of Theba, a daughter of the desert, whose right name was Mariyah, after the illustrious Coptic concubine of Allah’s Prophet. Her brilliant dark eyes that I had seen alive and luminous with sudden love were dimmed by tears. She seemed to be waiting for some quite great thing to happen, and the wonder of it was upon her, but I did not know what it was. Lugi the Indian crouched on the ground as still as a form in stone.

“*Bukra!*” N’kulu called to me after the long pause. This was an address I had heard used by Negroes in the Low Country. It was a West African word, I thought, and a title of honor.

“Friend,” I answered in English, without thinking.

“It is my wish, and the wish of the people, that I give the little bag of white stones to you.”

“Tell me why?”

“Because, first, of the money taken from you by the guards in the barracoon at Puerto Miramar, which one of us watched through a crack in the boarded window. I do not believe that these pebbles are worth so many pesos,

but since Heer Piet set such store on them, it may be so. Second, the ghost of Heer Piet often visits my dreams, and he asks me whether the white stones are still in my close care, and what I will do with them, of good usage, that he may rest in peace, and it comes to me that there can be no better use of them than the part payment of a debt owed by my people. Third, my comrades and I have no other need of them, for the forest supplies all our needs, shelter, food, good drink, oil from the corajo palm, cloth from the maya, spices, and medicines. In little hidden clearings we have plantations of bread trees, yams, cassava, coffee, and maize, and bark of the majagua tree even gives us rope to yoke our oxen to wooden plows. Fourth and last, it is all we have to give you, in token of our thanks to you for what you gave to us, and thanks to our gods for what you were spared from giving.”

I looked at Theba and spoke only to her. “What I did for you and your people was accidental to a passion. I was serving myself, not you, and deserve no reward. Anyway it was my Fate, and Fate has already rewarded me, through you.”

She started to make me an eloquent answer, perhaps as poetic as a desert song. Instead she paused, smiled a dim, tender smile, and spoke very simply. In that instant she made me think of Salley Sass.

“Take it, Edward,” she told me. “He wants you to have it.”

I turned to N’kulu, once a painted and plumed Zulu warrior from the far-distant Tugela River, tonight my camp-mate and protector in a great forest of the New World.

“Friend, I accept with pride and pleasure.”

“Veree good!” he answered with a sudden immense smile, when Theba had translated. He seemed almost as proud of his English as of making the gift.

It was a small, soft-leather pouch, containing a handful of white pebbles of unknown worth.

Later in the night I examined the stones with great care. There were twenty-two in all, about half of which looked like white, petrified gum; the others were distinct and, in some cases, quite perfect crystals with eight, twelve, or forty-eight faces. A few appeared to be cracked and there was a distinct variation in their degree of brilliance as I brought them to the light.

I did not know how many substances were found in the river gravel in a white, crystalline form. They might be some kind of fool's jewel, in the way that mica is fool's gold. Still I was inclined to share the opinion of Heer Piet, a gray-bearded outlander exiled from his kind ere he died on the Basuto spears, that he had made a great find.

I went into a lean-to of bark that N'kulu had raised, and, standing beside his sleeping form, I quietly spoke his name. He came awake and sprang up in what seemed one swift, graceful movement; and I thought it was part of his schooling as a Zulu warrior, the scourge of South Africa, or perhaps as a gunbearer in the thorn to old Heer Piet. At once I beckoned him into the cabin where Theba waited for us. When we had all three lighted cheroots, I spoke to him through her of a matter haunting my mind.

"N'kulu, have you ever gone down to the city of Manzanillo, where the maroons will take me in order that I may sail for Bermuda?"

"Yes, bukra. I have gone there twice, with Lugi and some others, to sell cinnamon."

"Do you know if any of the people called in Spanish *los Judios*, who will lend money, live there?" For this was not a certainty by any means. Despite their seeming ubiquity, Jews will not make homes in certain cities and towns, often for reasons unknown to other dwellers there.

"There are several, bukra, of ancient and good standing. Lugi says that many of the caballeros could not get along without them."

"When Lugi sends a party of the maroons to guide me there, I would like to have you follow me in the part of a body servant. Is there any way you could get suitable clothes?"

"More than one of our number was a body servant before he escaped into the jungle. The clothes they wore have been carefully put away and preserved. I can—and I will."

"Now I have come to the hard part. I'll put it as plain as I can, and ask you to give me a plain answer. Although you and Heer Piet could find no more white pebbles, such as you gave me, it stands to reason that there are many more, hidden among the rocks of the river beds. If they are what I think they are—what the Spanish call *diamante*—and the Judío of Manzanillo will tell me—I wish to go to Africa, find a great many, and thus obtain much wealth. My hope of succeeding would be far greater if you would go with me. If you did, and the search prospered, I would share that wealth with you. Now tell me, N'kulu, whether you will go."

A very strange expression came into his face—or perhaps there was no expression there at all. I turned away my gaze so he could contemplate the question in privacy; and Theba gave me a smile. Presently N’kulu rose from his seat on the floor and stood in the doorway of the hut, and from the tilt of his head I thought he was gazing through the tree foliage to the big white stars. Those over his head now had once hung low in the western sky—a little northward too, I thought—but he had not forgotten them; perhaps old shaggy-bearded Heer Piet and he had been guided by them more than once across South Africa’s great plains. After a while he returned and resumed his seat.

“Bukra, I have no need of wealth,” he told me.

“I knew that.”

“The Arab slave catchers hunt below the Zambezi. There are many big and little wars across the Vaal River, and great danger. And we two are not old and half-mad as was Heer Piet. We are both young.”

“Sometimes it seems I am very old and wholly mad.”

“The eve before the morning I was born, a leopard broke into the kraal. All the warriors were away on a cattle raid, so there were none to save our goats but the women, and these hid in their round houses, all except my mother. She took an assagai from the wall and went forth into the pen, and there she gazed into the eyes of Danger, green and glowing eyes, and although the beast snarled, her gaze did not flinch, so he bethought himself and went back to the long grass. Then the witch doctor came, and he made magic and saw the auguries, and he declared that I too would gaze into the eyes of Danger as long as I lived, and it would be my love.”

“What does this mean, N’kulu?”

“I will tell you when the wheel turns in my head. I have other loves, men and women, and the sight of the great herds of wildebeests, and of a lion sitting still on a high rock, and of elephants drifting through the thorn. And the fields of kaffircorn ere the harvest, and the dark sky ere the rain. And bukra, I loved Heer Piet, and it is true you are like him in some ways.”

“Bah! He was an old, gray Boer!”

“But he was an outlander, exiled from his kind, and so are you. That is the way of many an old tusker, who lives alone in his thorn, the reason being that the herd has driven him forth, or he cannot stand any more the gossip of the cows and squealing of the calves; but sometimes it is true of a young tusker, and then there is no reason that men can know. Where is your herd, bukra? Has it cast you forth? And although old, with watery eyes, Heer Piet could

yet see like an *asvegal* across the plain, as far and as sharp as I, who am far from blind. And although his hand shook at common tasks, when he raised his gun it came up as grouse rise from the ground when the serval cat comes nigh, and when it gripped the barrel it was steady as in the coil of an elephant's trunk, and the game, whatever it was, whether a bull wearing ivory, or a hartebeest for our cooking pot, or a *Shenzi* drawing back to throw a spear, it fell so hard that it seemed to bounce on the hard ground."

"When his time came to die, the assagais of the Basuto sewed him in and out."

"Not until he had shot their chief, and clubbed to death three of the warriors."

"As for me, I have rarely held a gun in my hands or hardly ever looked along a barrel at wild game."

"Nor does the young lion learn to kill until he is weaned. Bukra, I have watched your hands and met your eyes, and the wheel in my head has turned."

"Then is the answer yes or no?"

"If you go, I will go with you."

### 3

A party of ten young maroons was picked by Lugi to take me to the outer edge of the forest that dipped close to Manzanillo. One other, N'kulu, on whose back was a bundle of clothes, would accompany me in a role of body servant into the town, and perhaps much farther than any witch woman in the tribe could vision. Ahead of us had sped a Cuban of the pure Spanish type, an English-speaking fugitive from prison, called Martinez, to spy out the ground and make arrangements for my reception. He would report to the leader of our band at a prearranged meeting place before I ventured down.

When we set forth at sunrise, all the people in the village except the infants and the very old accompanied N'kulu and me to the end of the plantations. At the parting place, they formed in a long, crescent-shaped line and, led by a young Negro girl with a clear, glimmering soprano voice, sang a wild, wailing song, half Spanish, half African. Only the women and girls carried the refrain and gave voice to the long, strange cries; the men repeated over and over a word that sounded like "tembu"; and the low pitch, resonance, and rhythm of the utterance gave the effect of a drumbeat.

Theba and I had already made our farewells in a hut in the village, but when I looked at her and raised my hand she felt the need, as I did, of a parting word. But when she came up to me and kissed me, the word was not *au revoir*. It was *porte-toi-bien*.

“Can’t you say till I see you again?” I asked.

“No, Edward, because I will never see you again, except in dreams.”

“How can you know?”

“I asked our conjure woman, Hada. She saw you in a vision, and although there was too much smoke and fire to know its meaning, she could not find you in this forest ever again. She said you may walk into the jaws of Death or fall into the pit of Evil. But what we have found in each other, we can never lose. That is the teaching of the lonely desert where I was born.”

Some beauty of spirit I could barely divine glowed in her dark eyes.

“I will think of you often, Theba,” I told her, as I took her in my arms in farewell. “I will dream of you on many a night. I will live over our great joys.”

We parted, and in the afternoon of the third day our party descended the Sierra Maestra into view of the church spires of Manzanillo. At the appointed place we came upon the spy, Martinez, who reported that all was well, and gave me instructions. In three days, two ships would sail. One was a small Cuban sugar boat, the *Santa Clara*. Her captain, known as Escarpelo because of his rough voice, owed a great debt to the maroons and would take me, without charge, to Kingston in Jamaica. The other was a large English steamer, *Maid of Devon*, bound soon for Philadelphia. Once aboard her, with my passage paid, no one would dare molest me or my body servant.

“We have no money to pay your passage,” Martinez told me, “but under the guidance of Fernando—he is the one who will meet you at the cathedral—you might raise enough.”

“I will take that way if I can.”

“Do not be afraid. This is Manzanillo, which bears the honored title of El Fiel, meaning the faithful.”

No other of my companions could speak either English or French, but their strong handclasps and broad smiles were part of a universal language older and more open than either of these. Two or three gave me good-luck charms associated with voodoo. Since my clothes had been brushed and cleaned, I was able to dress respectably and inconspicuously. When N’kulu

put on the white jacket and loose cotton trousers of a body servant, he looked quite domesticated—a far cry from the lean savage of the woods. As the light failed none looked at us twice, and no one spoke to me until, at dusk, what appeared to be an old beggar approached me close by the high-towered cathedral.

We followed him as we had been told to do; he led us to a house of middle quality enclosed by an ancient stone wall. There my old beggar turned into a pleasant-appearing Cuban, apparently of pure Spanish stock, no older than forty-five; with him dwelt a handsome woman whom I took for a quadroon, and a young man and a young woman of mixed blood. The family was apparently prosperous and of good standing in the town, and my curiosity was aroused as to what possible bond they had with the maroons, but they did not tell me, and I could not bring myself to ask. I noticed that the woman had been branded by a triangle within a circle on the back of her hand. It was a deep and indelible burn, and that she had had a tragic history I could not doubt.

4

When I had bathed and shared the family's spicy Spanish supper, I asked my English-speaking host if I could be taken, early in the morning, to the shop of a pawnbroker of good reputation, liberal as possible, and speaking either English or French.

“If the business involves as many as a hundred pesos, such a one will come here to see you, not tomorrow but tonight,” my host answered.

I asked that he bring his best magnifying glass and most delicate set of scales. The young man left the house; and again the tempo of events began to quicken. Within the hour arrived a bearded Spanish Jew, Señor Augustin Marcel, who reminded me of some Italian Jews, of high and ancient standing, whom I had known in Charleston. His bearing was dignified and his manners impeccable.

When I had looked to the window shades, I took from my waistcoat pocket a white pebble selected from my antelope-skin pouch. It was not as large as two or three of the others, having about the diameter of my little fingernail, but its eight sides were smooth and quite perfect, and it was the brightest of the lot. This I put in his hand.

He glanced at it curiously, then with growing amazement. Taking it close under the lamp, he affixed his eyeglass and scrutinized it minutely. At last he raised almost incredulous eyes to mine.

“May I ask, señor, if this stone came out of Brazil?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, I didn’t think so. It hasn’t quite the appearance of a Brazilian stone. I won’t say it has more fire—or less—but its water is somehow different. Would you care to tell me from what mines it did come?”

“From none that I know of. It was found in South Africa.”

“You mean Asia. There are no diamonds in Africa.”

“I am repeating only what was told me.”

“May I weigh the stone?”

“Please do.”

He dropped into one pan of the scales small cubes of brass weighing something less than four grains each. The beam tipped as he put in the eighth.

“Something over seven carats,” Marcel told me. “That is as close as I can come with my present counters. Now I ask that I take the stone home with me, to scrutinize in daylight. I’ll give you my receipt, valuing the jewel at a thousand pesos, although, actually, it will not bring so much. I’ll return with it tomorrow morning to offer you a loan on it, or to purchase it. Whichever you desire.”

“I gladly agree.”

“I failed to state that Fernando, your host, will assure you of the validity of my paper.”

“Sir, I don’t need the assurance.”

He seemed pleased and took courteous leave. In the morning he returned, and offered to lend me five hundred pesos on the stone, or to buy it outright for seven hundred. I accepted the latter.

“Mark you, Mr. Stono, it would bring somewhat more in Amsterdam or New York, possibly in Havana. There are no cutters here.”

“Would you name me a reliable buyer in New York in case I have other stones to sell?”

“With pleasure. He is one of my nation, indeed a distant kinsman. Moreover, if you care to show me the stones, I can make a good guess at what he will pay for them. At least I will tell you what I would pay, if most of my money was in hand and I had his heavy purse.”

So I showed him the twenty-one stones I had left. He examined each one with his glass, quickly but carefully. Then he removed it from his eye and gave me a happy smile.

“Mine is the best of the lot,” he told me. “Only one of the others approaches it in worth. Still they are finer than any run-of-the-mine I have ever seen, and I am mightily curious as to the field that produced them. I estimate their weight at one hundred and ten carats, and I think you can safely count on forty-five hundred dollars for the lot, and a good chance of getting five thousand.”

“No more than that?” For this was only a doubling of the capital I had started with, and I owed nearly half of it to Faro Jack.

“Say forty-five or fifty dollars a carat. That’s a high price for rough diamonds, and, mark you, young man, that comes to seventy-five thousand dollars a pound!”

When I stared at him, and perhaps he saw a fever reddening my face, he could not refrain from baiting me a little more.

“We Jews know about jewels. Ever since we went into exile we have dealt with them—you see, we had to be ready to run at any hour of the night, with what goods we could snatch up—and perhaps the two words are connected. But even we did not suspect there are diamonds in Africa. If I were a young man—footloose and free and knowing the way—I would go and look for them.”

He wrote down the name and address of a kinsman in New York; and after counting out seven hundred pesos he shook my hand and departed. Suddenly I was satisfied with the present prospect of only a small fortune; nor was it a case of sour grapes. To lie to others is excusable and often commendable but no good gambler may lie to himself for that is the part of a sucker, and that way lies ruin. I did not want to stop before I was twenty-five and be a little planter, a petty gentleman, all my days. As it was—but let me dream awhile. There was almost no horizon to those dreams!

My first act was to give Fernando fifty pesos for his good care of me. If he used it to help runaway slaves, which I could hardly question, it was his business, not mine; and consistency had never been my long suit. I remained a Charlestonian of deepest dye, but if necessary—as most men find out about themselves—I could on occasion run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. That way, between the Devil and the Deep Sea, we manage to live on.

## CHAPTER IX

### Young Moon Setting

My journey from Manzanillo to New York, with the business and pleasure involved, and my leisurely return to Savannah, occupied nearly three months. Señor Marcel's guess at the market value of my diamonds turned out fairly close, and on the low instead of the high side, as I had feared. After pocketing for some unknown future use the stone he had told me was the second best in the batch, I received five thousand six hundred dollars for the remaining twenty. During the transaction I was straitly and cunningly questioned as to their source. Since no one believed my story of their being found in South Africa, I thought best to stick to it, in the spirit of Charleston salt-water fishermen who always gave Bull's Island as the scene of their big catches brought into port. The shrewd questioners grinned the same as had the dock loafers. But one of them, a famous expert and cutter fresh from Amsterdam, solved the mystery to the satisfaction of all.

“Dese stones, dey coom from de Kapuas Valley in Borneo,” he pronounced in a thick Dutch dialect. “For fife dollar, I name you de werry mine. I do not blame you, Heer Stono, for telling de little yoke, but I vill eat all de diamonds ever found or ever vill be found in Sout' Africa. You see, mine friend, de geological formation is all wrong.”

When I arrived in Savannah, I had three drafts on the greatest of New York banks, the first for two thousand dollars payable to John Fargo, whom I knew as Faro Jack; the second for the odd sum of two thousand seven hundred and sixty dollars made out to me but endorsable to any other in case of certain eventualities, and the third, the balance of the sum, payable to either N'kulu or myself, according to which lived the longest. I could not forget Jack's utterance regarding the short life of great players. I had played greatly once, and the game had come wondrously nigh to being my last; and the present cards were pregnant with even greater games.

From Savannah we went by river steamer to Augusta; from where inquiry led us to an old millpond on a tributary of the beautiful Ogeechee. The millhouse had been turned into a cottage with genuine flowers growing about its door, and it seemed that the story of John Fargo, alias Faro Jack, had turned out almost unbelievably right. The pond teemed with the bass and bream, catfish and 'gators and terrapins, herons with the shining whiteness and serene flight of angels waded its shallows; red-bellies and even shad

made springtime rushes into the spillway. The flowers were tended and the cottage tidied by as pretty and trim a brown-skin girl as I had ever seen. Although she had emancipation papers taking effect the moment Jack died, she was in no hurry for that event; he had bought her out of a cotton patch, she doted on catching and eating catfish, and her expression as far as I could tell, was one perpetual beam. All this, and the garden and cornfield, Jack showed me in great pride. If I thought he would be chafing at the bit for the smoke-filled garish rooms of heartbreak, I could think again. The nervous glint was gone from his eyes and his manner was so mild that, barring the brown girl and a small whiskey still, you could mistake him for a retired deacon. However, I was too good at reading faces not to notice now and then a fleeting deep anxiety that just now he wished to forget.

Not a single deck of cards could be found in the whole layout. My questioning him about this oddity brought out a strange and chilling fact.

“You haven’t even an old pack for you and Cassie to play seven-up?” I asked, in the way of teasing him, as we sat on his little porch overlooking the water.

“I threw it in the lake a month ago.”

“Did Memphis—or some other old competitor—pay you a call?”

“It wasn’t Memphis—or no old competitor neither—but I had a caller, and he taught me a lesson.”

“For how much?”

“I hate to tell you, but I will. I declared a thousand and so did he. I thought we were both cracking a joke. But he took the thousand.”

“That reminds me.” I brought forth and handed Jack a draft for two thousand.

“Good God A’mighty!” he broke out, when he read the figure.

“I haven’t included any interest.”

“I don’t want no interest. I don’t want the principal, unless you can spare it.” Although he had a gambler’s face, he could not keep out an intense hope.

“I’ve nearly twice that much, clean profit.”

“Are you lying to me, Edward? You never did.”

“No, sir.”

“Well, then, you haven’t any idea what you’ve done for me. I’ve got the rent from some property in Augusta, but I went in debt to pay for this place, and I’d raked up a thousand to pay it and then lost it, sucker that I am. What was I going to do next? Damn my soul, if I didn’t think of selling Cassie—and that would have damned my soul, forever amen. It scared me so that I gave her those freedom papers, signed before a notary, sealed by the court. Remember I believe in the human soul, its blessedness or its damnation.”

“I remember that you do.”

“What was left but hiring a couple of grubby rooms in Atlanta—I was too proud to go back to Augusta—and run two-penny games until I got in the clear? But I hated the thought of it, and now, by all the stars that shine, I don’t have to! What a piece of luck! My God, what a trick of Fate! You see, Edward, I didn’t expect your return for years and years. ’Fact, I wasn’t at all sure that you were alive. And so many of us come back broke. Broke of pocket and sometimes broke of spirit. They were laying for you, Edward—the bad cards, I mean. You were so young and so proud. Instead, you came back a winner and paid a debt I never thought I’d need. But watch out, or they’ll get you yet.”

“What got you that night, Jack? It wasn’t your sixty years. Your eyes are still bright, your hands steady—”

“It was whist, played with the greatest skill—backed by one of the wickedest brains—I’ve ever run across.”

Jack often used “wicked” to mean dangerous or merely very competent. But I detected suppressed excitement in his voice and countenance—a wonder was upon him greater than that of the return of his bread cast on the waters—and I knew I had not yet got to the bottom of this affair.

“He said he was traveling through the state, looking up routes for new railroads,” Jack went on. “But the real reason he came here was to inquire for you.”

“For me,” I echoed after a long pause.

“He said—and his eyes shone like a fox’s in the shine of a pine-knot pan—that he knew your brother, in Charleston. I said that you hadn’t any brothers that I knew of; he answered that I hadn’t been very frank about my history, and since I didn’t like the smell of him—I just put it that way, but the fact is, he wore some kind of perfume—I shut my mouth.”

“This was a month ago?”

“Yes.”

“What name did he give?”

“Mr. Henry. That was some kind of a joke. An ornery one, unless I miss my guess. He was a very handsome man about forty years old, with fine clothes. The odd thing about him was—one of the odd things—he scared the wits out of Cassie.”

“How?”

“I don’t know and Cassie doesn’t either. Every time he looked at her he gave her a little smile that came straight out of hell.”

I was almost at the bottom of it now. I was not excited, though; I had only a sense of the turning of Fortune’s Wheel, of cards shuffling and falling in a game that had started and could not be stopped until its end; of Fate that rode the rawboned horse of Death.

“How did he look?” I asked, when I had the heart.

Jack had card sharp’s eyes and would tell me true.

“It’s a question I hate to answer, but I will. Although a whole lot handsomer, he looked a lot like you.”

“Had you ever seen him before?”

“I wasn’t sure. I’d forgotten his name but remembered he came from one of the great Charleston families. I think he left town about twenty years ago under some kind of cloud.”

“I get the point of the joke of him calling himself Mr. Henry. His father was a great admirer of Henry Clay—in spite of Clay being a political enemy of Calhoun, and favoring the restriction of slavery. In fact, he named his son after him, but the son doesn’t favor its restriction; he favors its universal application. Still it wasn’t a very good joke. I doubt if any of Clay Hudson’s jokes are very good.”

“That was who I meant,” Jack said quietly.

“I think he intends to play an extra good one on me, one of these days. Much better than taking me for a mere thousand dollars at whist. I wish I knew what it is. I’m going to have to be careful.”

Returning to Augusta after my happy visit with Jack, I did not try to find Clara Day. It would have been an easy search, provided she had not taken herself off—following some lover, perhaps, or the strong smell of money—or

had not been taken off by a spell of fever aggravated by late hours, a knife in the breast, a spoonful of poison, or some other sudden accident to which the Clara Days of this world are especially liable.

The month was March—not yet its ides, only its beginning. In Augusta spring had not made up her fickle mind to set in or to wait awhile, warm, bright, heavenly days alternated with days of blustering wind, gray days, days of bitter frost, but as the screeching train came down from the low hills and the trees took more and more to wearing cloaks of Spanish moss, there came a sheen of green upon the landscape, the sky looked more serene, a greater number of dark-skinned fishermen waited for us to pass before they resumed their places on the bridges, and the season was a fortnight and perhaps a whole month advanced. At length we steamed and tooted our way into the beautiful, ugly, noble, infamous, good and evil but always valiant city of my birth. Still I did not know what in the Devil I was doing here, or what he would do to me.

Perhaps I had no choice. The cards fell in a certain way; I must play them or pass; with God looking over my shoulder as I thought He did all men, I dared not stack the deck. Anyway it so happened that I inquired of an elegant, ebony-black doorman, who would be certain to know, whether Miss Salley Sass—or perhaps her name now was Mistress Mate Hudson—dwelt with her kinsmen at the Hudson mansion by the promenade, or whether she was still at Hudson Barony, or somewhere afar. He gave me a full answer in rich Gullah.

“Sah, she’s still Miss Salley, but de ol’ butler, Nicodemus, he tell a frien’ o’ mine ’at it may be any day now she’ll change up. She livin’ at Mr. Benson’s house—he de white fo’man—while de hands fix some new flo’ in de big house. Mas’ Hudson, he at de town house. Dey say he won’t stay much longer, ’cause it done been bought up. Mas’ Mate, he off in Alabam’, seein’ about de land Ol’ Miss got out there.”

“Where Master Arnold and Master Clay?”

“Mas’ Arnold, he at his own house in de town.” Then, confronting a subject that he did not like, “Mas’ Clay Hudson, he stay at de hotel las’ week, but he gone somewheres now, and I don’t know when he be back.”

Luck was with me, I thought, that both Mate and Clay Hudson were presumably out of town. Mate was my friend—I could not think of him otherwise—but he had never mentioned our blood relationship, and it was in keeping with his character not to know it. He possessed and would ever retain an innocence that I had lost before I was ten years old, and which Salley, by what imparting of what serpent I knew not, might never have possessed.

In my room I wrote a careful note:

Dear Salley:

Would you and Mr. Mason Hudson the elder give me a few minutes in the very near future? I will meet you at any hour and place that you appoint; if tomorrow is sunny and warm, I take the liberty of suggesting the Battery at four in the afternoon. I consider the matter of considerable importance and I hope you both will regard it favorably.

I remain, ma'am,

Your well-wisher,  
Edward Stono

A free-born stableboy agreed to deliver it at Hudson Barony for one of my Spanish pesos now changed to a Yankee dollar. At evening he brought me Salley's answer—a single line on lavender scented notepaper that her uncle Mason and herself would keep the rendezvous unless unforeseen circumstances interfered. I went to bed excited, perplexed, half-proud, half-ashamed. The day broke on a clear sky, and the warm sun followed soon.

When I had dressed, I went forth to make pilgrimage to our old house by Upper East Bay. We had never owned it, only rented it; and no doubt some poor whites of the Quarter occupied it now; still I felt compelled to gaze at its shabby exterior and, if possible, enter its bleak rooms. To my great shock, it had been destroyed by fire. Literally nothing was left of it but a dozen stones on which its sills had rested and the remains of a stone chimney. Then, as I gazed upon these remnants, something very like relief swept through me. There was fire and smoke in the vision of me seen by the witchwoman of the island; and fire and smoke had set me free from one chain of the past. I was no longer dubious of the decision I had come to, and no longer ashamed. Instead of dreading the meeting in the Battery, I looked forward to it.

The hour drew near. I sat on the very bench where once I had told secrets to Salley Sass, where she had turned her proud black head and kissed me. Almost on the moment, she and Mason Hudson appeared. My father wore the long form-fitting coat, tall hat, stock, and tight gray trousers associated with my remembrances. Although past sixty, he gave no sign of declining years; his back was straight, his head high, his carriage slightly and deliberately grand, his countenance beautifully molded by the hands of Time and more distinguished than ever—if my eyes told true—and they almost always did. About him hung an air of elegance he would never lose. In shabby clothes

and with a dirty face he would still inform us instantly of his rank—us poor whites of Upper East Bay—and of our own rank.

The money Salley had spent on her attire was little, but it had gone a long way. Her many-gored skirt with its flaring bottom and close-fitting jacket with creamy lace at its collar and cuffs matched and were as seasonable as the dark-green foliage, not flamboyant yet of first-venturing spring; set perkily on her black hair was a sailor hat of straw.

I looked at her, halfway hoping she would be changed, aged a little, looking more like other people, not so set apart. Instead the quiet magic was on her still. I had never seen such a superbly cast female face; its only counterpart in a male face had been that of her cousin, Clay Hudson. A bad strain of the high Ashley blood had beautified them both. Hers was a dark beauty, lent by the thick forest and deeply shaded rivers of her native Edisto, and recalling to lonely-hearted men long-ago dreams of love, that never would and never could come true; and bringing to men like me, who disavowed such dreams, immediate leaping lust. Her eyes were pale brown, her lips dark red. Only when she smiled was the sharp pain of seeing her relieved. Then her face took on a childish lighting. No longer a witch of the woods, too beautiful and too still to be human, she became only a highborn daughter of our Low Country, with some evil in her.

My father, Mason Hudson, waited with his hat in his hand for her to greet me. It was only a wild aberration that I thought of Mate Hudson, pausing politely, while Clara Day mounted a flight of stairs in Memphis' gaming rooms. But this now was more than Low Country chivalry, ever somewhat overdone in this New World anomaly that was Charleston, this transplanted Versailles a century out of date. He was reminding me—perhaps only himself—that he had not acknowledged me as his son.

3

“Edward, I’m glad—and a little surprised—to see you,” Salley said.

“I don’t see why you should be either one.”

“Well, I can’t explain the first. Perhaps it’s just that you don’t appear as frightening as I half-feared—as you, yourself, threatened to be, if ever I saw you again.”

Salley had a natural impulse to break ice at once. It might be her most aristocratic propensity. Certainly she did so not in malice but to establish truth, without which no one could feel free. I could not deny I felt greatly relieved.

“As for my surprise,” she went on, “I certainly didn’t expect to see you this soon—and quite likely never again. You don’t play it very safely, you know. But you want to greet Uncle Mason.”

“Sir, you’re looking very well,” I said, when we had shaken hands.

“Thank you, Edward. I can say the same of you.”

“A great deal nicer, to tell the truth,” Salley added. “The last time—but of course conditions were at their worst, that night. I’d think something very pleasant has happened to you since.” She looked at me more closely, her gaze wide and direct. “And perhaps some things not so pleasant.”

“May we sit down?” I asked. “What I have to say takes only a few minutes—”

“I think we’d better. Things you say have a way of taking my breath.”

She sat on the nearest bench, my father and I on either side of her. All three of us appeared very calm; although none of us came near it. I knew my own feelings and I had sat with too many adversaries at high play to be deceived by others.

“First, I would like to ask a deeply personal question,” I began. “I don’t think the answer to it will affect what I wish to do, or give me more, or less, justification, but I’ll feel better, knowing the answer—that there was more logic in it—and there’s very little at best—or that I went ahead anyway. I guess that’s not very clear. I assure you, though, that you won’t regret telling me. I came to meet you in peace and in contrition.”

“I accept that assurance,” my father said. “What is your question?”

Salley started to say something too—I thought it would be a kind thing—but she closed her warm-looking lovely lips, and I saw them, and thought of our last kiss, the second of only two, and I could hardly speak at all.

This little park, somehow the epitome of Charleston, was where Mason Hudson gave me my first book. Here I had first met Mate Hudson, with a kind of beauty in his face and loneliness in his eyes. What I was about to do, I might be doing for Mate’s sake. I might be doing it for vanity, although that might be only a cheapened name for pride. Anyway I would be doing it for my heart.

The trees were budding, and this was March, and our lovely Southern spring was breaking fast. Fast as the beat of my heart, I thought. But as I sat here with my betters, my voice was calm, and my manner was that of a gentleman.

“Will you kindly tell me whether your investments in Alabama have prospered as you hoped?”

“Not as we hoped,” Salley answered before my father could speak. “The crop we planted last year was a failure because of drouth. The drouth was confined to only a few square miles—nothing like it had ever been seen before—but our land happened to be in the middle of it.”

“Had that anything to do with the selling of your house in Charleston? I heard it had been sold.”

“We didn’t sell it. We should have done so years ago—and now we’ve lost it. My cousin, Clay Hudson, bought up the mortgages and foreclosed. Uncle Mason and Aunt Mildred have until May to get out. Clay was very gentlemanly about it—he is the most polished member of the family—in that respect he reminds me of you. Like you, he deals in facts.”

“I deal cards, which are only numbers of agreed value. Gamblers live in a world of half-fact, half-fancy. Also, I deal in myth, as you well know. And I wish to remind you that I’m not an accredited member of the family.”

Mason Hudson had changed color but I thought he blessed Salley for her frankness. The ice was indeed broken. My heart lifted.

“That last was unavoidable, Edward,” he said quietly.

“I know it was. I can go ahead now. Salley spoke a while ago of what I had told her the last time I saw her. Of course, sir, she told you.”

“No, I didn’t,” Salley said.

“You didn’t!”

“What would be the use? It would worry him, and he had enough worries. Either you could carry out your threat, or else it was a false alarm. I don’t know yet.”

“I’ll tell you now. Sir, when I came to the Barony that night, I was not in my right mind. My mother had just died in squalor. She had received ten dollars a month from you, and with her sewing—”

I was strangely interrupted. My father spoke in a low, shaken voice. His face turned swiftly gray.

“Did you say ten dollars?”

“Yes.”

“Edward, I sent twenty. Even that was a pittance, but it was all I could do. You won’t believe that. I, master of a great plantation, a slave-owner, and all the rest. I was trying to guard the secret. I never knew how to manage. There were so many calls, all of which seemed important. I’m only making matters worse—”

“No, you’re not. Anyway it was more than most men, even most gentlemen, would have done, unless they were forced to. Of course your messenger took half. Sir, you were at fault in trusting a man like that. But you couldn’t come yourself—and you didn’t want anyone else to know.”

“He is a devil!”

“Granted, but he had something to do with my cure. When I came to the ball, I told Salley that the Hudson family and I were going to change places. I would own Hudson Barony and the town house; you and the others would live in shacks and see how you liked it. Even then I didn’t for a moment think of it as justice, even the Mosaic law of eye for eye, tooth for tooth; I intended to bring it about for my personal satisfaction, an act of malice. Very naturally, Salley didn’t think I could succeed. One little bastard, matched against the power and glory of the Hudsons—those were her words.”

“I was more frightened than I let you know,” Salley said, not looking me in the face.

“You should have been. I meant it very seriously—and I am a gambler who will risk high stakes. I lived to see the folly of it, and now I’ve reached a quite opposite state of mind. I’m more proud of my mother than ever—the long brave fight she made—and have accepted the fictitious name she gave me as my real name. I want to start from scratch. I don’t want to be a half Hudson but a whole bastard. I don’t want her to owe any obligations for an act which she did of her own free will, and I don’t want to inherit any obligations, good or bad. I wish to make one settlement, then close the door on the past. I don’t want to feel any more dependence. I wish to be entirely free.”

The reason Salley did not look at me was that her eyes had filled with tears. I did not know their meaning. But my father’s eyes were fixed steadfastly on mine. His soul was in them, and I almost saw its shape.

“I am not sure—that I know what you mean,” he said.

“I do, I think,” Salley said.

“I have here a draft on a New York bank for the sum my mother received from you in twenty-three years. It is true that you paid out twice that sum, but

the other half was lost through no fault of hers—indeed through your own mistake in choosing an agent. I wish to endorse it over to you. For the interest you took in me—the books you lent me—I can give you only thanks.”

“Edward, you cut me to the quick.”

“I don’t mean to, sir. I’m doing only what it seems I have to do, according to my conceptions, to gain the freedom that I need and want.”

“Take it, Uncle Mason,” Salley broke in. “He wants you to have it.”

Time rolled back his scroll. When Theba had spoken thus of my accepting N’kulu’s little bag of jewels, she had reminded me of Salley. Now Salley reminded me of Theba.

“How can I?”

“You owe him his freedom, if he wants it. What claim have you got on him really, except the money? And if you won’t take it for his needs, take it for ours. It means we can plant another crop.”

Her voice broke and she rose quickly and walked a short distance away.

“Edward, I am not a clever man,” my father told me. “I’m not an understanding man. I find in times of great perplexity I have to be guided by others. But I wronged your mother—I wronged you—and to take back the money with which I tried to atone—”

“I don’t know that you wronged either of us,” I said, when he paused. “It is over my head as are all the other mysteries of life and death. But I know that except for you I would never have been born. I would have been non-existent. If that will help you any in doing what I ask—”

“You *ask* it?”

“I entreat it, for my heart’s need.”

“Then I will.”

I took out the little slip of paper with the small inkhorn and pen that I had brought, and wrote on the back of it. My hand shook when I held it out; with a shaking hand he accepted it.

He rose at once. “Edward, I wish you good day,” he said—the only suitable thing to say, I thought.

“Thank you, and will you tell Salley I’d like to speak to her a moment more?”

“Of course I will, and I’ll wait for her on the High Battery.”

He walked off, his back straight and his head high, and spoke briefly to Salley. She returned to where I was standing.

“What is it, Edward? What do you want of me?”

“I’m a free man now, and I ask you to marry me.”

She looked at me steadily and long.

“Come out to Hudson Barony tonight,” she replied. “I believe—I’m almost sure—that tonight I’ll give you my answer.”

4

Chances were, I thought, that Salley would receive me in the little parlor of the foreman’s house. The fact remained that I was going forth to sue for her hand in marriage, a mission of great moment, so I dressed formally in a broadcloth evening suit and ruffled shirt I had bought in New York to replace the garments I had lost. Again I hired the fast team from Bailey’s livery stable. Although N’kulu knew next to nothing about guiding vehicles, he had ridden horses, possessed strong hands and a commanding voice, and was correctly dressed as a body servant, so without great compunction I let him drive. Happily he got through the Charleston evening traffic without accident. Once on the open road, he was in his glory.

When we turned into the avenue of ancient live oaks there gleamed through the foliage a light in the window of the Big House. It winked out and came again, and I followed it, and gave no further thought to the foreman’s house standing half a mile beyond, except to wonder at my own faithlessness in Salley’s *savoir-faire* by ever doubting the dignity of my reception. Every form would be observed, every detail have a correct aspect. If half the floor had been torn up, there would be no sawdust or kegs of nails on the part remaining, only the warm glimmer of the lamps.

My suit might be dismissed—I had no real reason to think otherwise—but this was no fool’s errand. If it were, she would not have bade me come.

The old butler, Nicodemus, answered my knock. He bowed low, we exchanged a remark about the weather; with impeccable mien he led me into the drawing room where three big logs blazed crackling on the hearth. There he bade me wait Miss Salley’s coming. It would not be long, he thought, and I could warm myself after the cold ride. Meanwhile I was marveling at the lovely multicolored flame. This was salt-impregnated driftwood hauled from the beaches, which Low Country hostesses burned only at intimate gatherings, usually of family importance. It caused me to wonder greatly. I knew so little about Salley; all that I really knew of her was her dark and

thrilling beauty. There might be more luck in the cards tonight than I had dared imagine. There might be more good fortune in my Fate than I had ever dreamed.

She appeared in a few minutes, quietly, at once lovely and tranquil, as bringers of happiness come to us in dreams. The signs of good fortune multiplied. With the full skirt of black velvet she wore a lace bertha dropped off her shoulders, with short, puffed sleeves, whereby their exquisite rounding became glossed by the firelight, warm and dark, and her eyes were beautifully matched, and the first swell of her breast was shown by the low bodice, for the pleasure and excitation of my gaze only. Beside the fireside chair from which I rose stood a large, high, old-fashioned footstool. It was here she chose to sit, a little lower than me, and in my easy reach.

In the way of visible amenities there was only Nicodemus who came only a moment after her entrance, and by poking the fire and turning over one of the logs caused a greater play of its rainbow lights. He went out, and I took her beautiful long hand in mine. It felt firm, and its countless small muscles were well developed. I visioned her fishing with a hand line for red bass when she wore pigtails, the surf crashing about her knees. Since then this hand had performed many a useful task.

“Have you decided yet?” I asked boldly, after a few minutes of trivial conversation.

“How could I, when you’ve been away two years? No, that’s not the reason. You’ve prospered, financially—I believe that’s the polite word, though it isn’t very polite—and personally. You are certainly far more eligible than when you left. Did you make the money gambling?”

“No. I’ll tell you after a little while how I came by it. It was a kind of a windfall.”

“Have you got a lot more? You see, I have no father to put the proper and quite rightful questions; and Uncle Mason couldn’t put them. Even when poor people marry, the father has the right to ask if the suitor has a good job. In the aristocracy, money is among the primary considerations. The estates mustn’t peter out; they can only be maintained by advantageous marriages. Otherwise it’s a case of shirt-sleeves to shirt-sleeves. I’m a poor one to talk, because I’m a pauper; still my position ought to be worth a mighty lot. I mean—to balance against the riches of a suitor without position.”

“Do you talk that way—blunt, to say the least—as a kind of performance, or does it come natural to you?”

“You like to have me talk this way. I discovered that long ago. The reason is, perhaps, that your own shortcomings—your gambling and your bastardy, for instance—seem so much less damaging when they are spoken out loud than when they are whispered. Besides that, I’m inclined to be an unusually honest and direct person. I’ve had to compensate for some bad blood, and I got practice in it from talking to Papa like a Dutch uncle. That was the only way I could get anything out of him, even money to buy food. He rather fancied himself, you know. His father was a Sass, he’d married a Salley, and his mother was an Ashley, although of the wrong branch, so I had to keep reminding him that he himself was a rotter. You’re not, Edward. Don’t take it as an implication. And now answer my question. Believe me—if you want to marry me—it’s terribly important.”

“I’ve got something over a thousand dollars.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“But I may have a million dollars at this time next year.”

“Then I’d better wait till then, to make up my mind.”

“Maybe ten million. Possibly a great deal more than that. Instead of three square miles of rice fields, I may have thirty miles. I may be the richest man in Carolina—richer than Cornelius Vanderbilt. Do you think in that case any of your friends would give a damn whether my seamstress mother was married to my father? But you can’t wait till then to make up your mind. You’ve got to take me while I’m on the make, or not at all.”

“That thrills me—a little. I don’t know why.”

“In the meantime I can offer you a great deal of excitement. I’m going to sail for South Africa in a few days, and as my bride you can go with me. When we get there, we’ll look for diamonds. I know that diamonds are to be found and I know where to look—knowledge possessed by no other white man. We’ll live and travel in an ox wagon. I have enough money to grubstake us well. We’ll eat mainly wild game and we’ll run into danger from savage tribes and wild beasts. If we strike it rich—then I’ll be content to return to the Low Country and make the biggest splash in its recorded history. If not, we’ll go and do something else.”

“That has a wonderful ring to it. You are a very effective suitor. If it wasn’t for Mate—”

“Also I’ll give you this, and all that goes with it.”

I leaned down a little and took her beautiful face between my hands, and they felt the beauty of it and the gloss, and my lips knew and conveyed to me

a beauty and ecstasy beyond telling, almost beyond belief, as they pressed and then captured hers. When she became conscious of losing her safe bearings and tried to draw away, I held her in a tightening grasp. Her lips parted and I felt her breath quicken. But as suddenly as I had seized her, I let her go. I was impelled to by the same instincts that made me a successful gambler.

“There’s a lot of evil in you, Edward,” she said slowly, after a long pause. “I didn’t feel it in your kisses, but I see it in your eyes.”

“There’s a lot in you too, Salley. You came by it more naturally than I did.”

“That’s one reason I love Mate.”

“I think you could go on loving him—in the way that you do—and still be happy, married to me.”

“Maybe I could. But he wouldn’t be happy. I think he’d die soon. Let that go for the minute. Where did you hear about the diamonds?”

“From a runaway slave.”

“You didn’t help a slave to run away—did you?”

“Yes, a lot of them.”

“Isn’t that treason to all we stand for?”

“Not under those conditions.”

“Was there a woman involved? I have a feeling that there was. I thought that was what brought the change in you I saw when we met in the park.”

“A very beautiful young woman. She was an Arab girl who had been sold into slavery by her slave-catcher father. She was as tall as you, darker than you, as beautiful as you. But she had to go her way and I had to go mine.”

“But not at once.”

“No.”

“Not for several weeks—or months.”

“No, only a few days.”

“She couldn’t have wrought that change in you unless—”

“Of course not.”

“Do you want to go back to her?”

“What she gave me was so perfect—so satisfying—that I can go back to her instantly. She promised me that, and I find it’s true.”

“Was she more of a woman than I am?”

“How can I tell you at this stage?”

“You know, Edward, that makes me very jealous. I’m not jealous of the Charleston women. They’re beautiful—accomplished—highbred, but they’ve been so carefully sheltered that they’ve become too refined. Mate doesn’t want any of them. I mean, he hasn’t any powerful need of them. He wants—and needs—only me. I want you to want and need only me, not in the way that Mate does, but as your woman. Yet this swarthy Arab girl—”

“She wasn’t much darker than you. Once, at least, she reminded me of you. She had long dark hair and very light feet and there was a splendor in her face and she came of a more passionate race.”

“I don’t think she did.” And as I looked Salley in the face, her gaze fell and the color mounted fast in her pale-brown cheeks.

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I lifted Salley off her stool, and sitting down again held her in my lap. She was warmed and aroused and vulnerable, and partly because of the forces awake and fierce within me, and partly to gain my ends, I made reckless love to her. For a little while we were more in conflict than in union. She took pleasure and perhaps pride—strange and inexplicable is the human heart—in my desire; but also satisfaction in resisting it. But the cards of life were stacked against her. Her eyes changed shape, and darkened as her pupils became immense, and were lighted deep within, and the longing in her face became manifest in beauty which not words or even thought could measure, the linking of poetry with passion that is one aspect of human love. The fire threw many-colored lights. The darkness lay outside the windows and the house was silent and in the great river the tide rose with irresistible power, and a night bird cried, and the mystery of being was deep and full upon us both.

She drew back, and covered her breast that I had bared, and her face was luminous with desire.

“Pull the bell cord, Edward.”

“If you like.”

“I’m only going to tell Nicodemus that we can watch the fire and for him to go to bed.”

“Very well.”

“It will only take a minute. If that minute breaks it up, it isn’t worth keeping anyway. It isn’t the real thing.”

I rose and pulled the cord. When Nicodemus came, she was standing by the fireplace, and she spoke to him in the deeply friendly voice that masters and mistresses employ to their trusted retainers. He stirred the fire again, and withdrew. She remained there, motionless, fully a minute more. Then she came back to me and put her arms around my neck and kissed me.

“Do you love me, Edward?”

“Yes.”

“Will you always love me, even if this night is our lone and only night?”

“I always have, and I always will.”

“Come with me then. Walk quietly.”

She took me by the hand and led me out of the room. We went into the hall and climbed the high, wide, dimly lighted stairway. At its head she led me into the dark passage, then opened a door. A low fire in the fireplace, not long ago tended, flung a dim, uncertain light on a tall chest, chairs delicately wrought in dark-red mahogany, silk curtains, and a canopied bed. There was a faint, agreeable, flower-like smell I could never forget. The window opening westward revealed the young moon, sharp-edged and bright as a sword.

“When will it set, Edward?” Salley asked.

“In about three hours.”

“If you wish, you may stay till then.”

“I wish it to be in earnest of our staying together always. Again I ask for your hand in marriage.”

“I can’t promise you yet, Edward. I’ll try to tell you before you go.”

“Then I’ve got to ask you something else. Maybe it will stamp me as a vulgarian. But I’ve always thought it concerned a right thing. You know I dreamed of being a gentleman. No matter what I do, I can’t quite waken from that dream. My mind is confused by it, but a few old concepts, rules you might call them, still operate. You are a great aristocrat. Somehow that enables you to make your own rules as long as no one is harmed. But I’ve got to stick to the book.”

“That is very touching, Edward. I wish I could promise to marry you. I’d love to go to Africa with you. But I’m not sure.”

“You know what I want to ask?”

“Yes. If this is the first time.”

“You know it’s none of my business?”

“I’m not sure about that. Everyone has the right to do what he thinks he must do, to stay out of hell. If it seems right to you to ask me, do so, and I’ll tell you.”

“Would it be the first time?”

“No. It would be the second time. The first time was with Mate.”

“I didn’t think that Mate would break that old rule. I thought he would be less likely to than I.”

“We were both very young—on the beach—and I tempted him.”

“If Mate loves you as much as I do, he would have won you by now.”

“That’s not fair. It wasn’t his fault. I’m the one who waited—and I think for you. Now do you want to try to prove it, or go back? It would be safer to go back. Not for me, but for you. The danger is very great. You may never be happy again—after tonight. The invitation may again be withdrawn. Do you remember?”

“How could I forget?”

She came close to the fire, then turned and looked at me. “Well?”

“I love you, Salley. To use the talk of the tables, I call you.”

“I hope that you win.”

The moon dropped slowly. Everywhere she looked, there were scenes reflecting the drama of life, the beauty of love; but I thought she kept a special and benign watch through our window. She shone on the broad reaches of the river, and there the fish fed fiercely, ere the fast of darkness. The season was early spring, and the strong passionate resurgence of life moved in every trunk and shrub and blade of grass and heart. This was the South, beloved of the sun, the warm land peopled by a fervent race. I was its son and Salley was its daughter, and in loving each other we loved what had shaped us. I will be true to you, Southland! I will not be seduced by the gnawed-bone morals of the cold North. The daughter of the green and fertile

island lay in my arms. The darkness of its forest and of its deep slow-drawn rivers was echoed in her hair, reflected in her face.

That beautiful face that flung beauty into mine! The ecstasy of being, not half-drowned in piety, entangled by texts, not shivering with cold, but luminous and leaping, young, scornful of Death; you I have tonight. I know the bliss of love, I have plumbed, although I do not understand, the mystery of eternity. Yet the moon falls, cutting off the minutes, measuring time. Moon, stand still a space. Wait, Time, a little while. Death, I will make a bargain with you, one that will profit you well. Good and Evil, I cannot tell one of you from the other, but I will divide between you all that I have. Love, do not turn away. Luck, I have never invoked you before, I was too proud. Tonight stand by me.

But the moon set. There was darkness in the west except where small stars shone, eclipsed until now. I rose and stood at the doorway. Salley came to me and took my hand and talked plain as was her wont.

“I love you, Edward. I’ve loved you from the day I met you on the beach. But I still love Mate.”

“You’ll have to choose between us.”

“I can’t, tonight. You’re my mate, but he’s my Mate—I wish it didn’t sound so clever.”

“Give me my answer, Salley.”

“It’s the wrong time for both of us. The moon’s set. The fire’s almost out. The breeze has brought up the swamp damp and I feel cold and guilty. If I answered you now, it would have to be no.”

“When can you answer me yes?”

“Perhaps tomorrow morning, when the sun comes up. Give me that little while, so I can be sure. I promise I’ll write you.”

“Good night.”

A few coals still glowed in the small fireplace. By their glimmer I found my way out the door; and, by a reflected gleam from the fire in the drawing room, down the broad stairs. The front door opened to my hand, closed behind me.

The stars were over me now, distant, and very cold. But surely there was one of them, somewhere in the great assembly, that boded well for Salley and me. It knew the word she would send tomorrow. It bade me be of good cheer.

I rose and dressed soon after sunrise, glad of the new day, feeling that it would be a different kind of day than I had ever known before. I felt sure I would have till high morning, perhaps until deep in the afternoon, for Salley to keep her promise; but I would not be impatient, I thought; I could sympathize with her dilemma; I could partly grasp what a feat of will was demanded of her to break with her life's ways and promise to marry an outsider. But the die was cast, the cards were dealt; and by some hard-bitten habit of mind I did not succumb to fear.

I walked awhile before breakfast, about the quiet, time-honored streets, and did not go into the dining room until after nine. Just before ten I was sipping coffee and reading the morning newspaper when one of the Negro postboys approached my table with an envelope in his hand.

"Mas' Stono, de letter come for you at haf-pass eight, but we couldn't find you no place."

"That's all right." I handed him a coin.

"You want me to wait for de answer?"

"No, you can go."

I opened the envelope with care. The faintly scented sheet bore the heading, simply and beautifully engraved, "Hudson Barony." The handwriting was familiar, clear, and fine. It read:

Dear Edward:

I watched the dawn break and came to my decision. I hope if your sense of loss is severe you'll stand to it as you've stood to other losses, like the great gambler you are. Mate needs me more than you do, and I can't go back on my own.

In fairness and I hope in kindness to us both I am acting immediately. Mate is going to meet me in the chapel of St. Michael's at half-past nine this morning. We join in inviting you to come, and if you do, we will consider it an honor and a happy augury of the future.

Faithfully,  
Salley

I looked furtively about me, as though I were committing a shameful offense. No one was looking at me; everyone was busy with his breakfast or

his newspaper or his score. I could lay my head on the table, and no one would take immediate notice. Actually my swimming head was my only physical symptom of shock. But when I started to get up, I was afraid my knees would buckle and I would fall.

I walked stiffly from the dining hall. My vague intention was to make for my room, if for no other reason than to get out of people's sight, to hide what I could not change. But by the time I got to the stairs my thoughts were flowing in a confused rush. An obligation to act was upon me, I felt its growing weight, an action sustaining of my dignity, even my manhood. Suddenly I knew what it was. Late as it was, I must try to accept Salley's and Mate's invitation.

No gentleman or one who aspired to that estate could do otherwise.

So I turned and made for the outer door. A Negro servant bowed low; I saw him and waved my hand. I began to think about my clothes. I always dressed carefully, with a touch of elegance avoiding dandyism, and my silken stock was spotless and my boots newly blackened. My coat was buff and I wished I could change it for a black one, but there was no time to spare. I took the nearest of a line of waiting cabs.

"Drive fast to St. Michael's Church," I ordered, my voice shaking.

He gave me one odd, sharp glance, then whipped his nag. I still could not think straight, but I listened to the regular and pleasing rhythm of hoofs on the stone and looked at the signs of spring, the great houses and the small, the people hurrying, the other traffic, the unceasing inquiries of the street dogs, until we came in sight of the ancient edifice. Perhaps a dozen empty carriages were being held by Negro drivers. Messages had flown fast this morning, to assemble even this number. I got out and bade the driver wait. A footman directed me to the chapel door. It was open to the spring sunlight, and a voice intoned within.

"So I pronounce you man and wife. . . now let us pray."

The murmured prayer cured my confusion only to give passageway to my blocked emotions. Even before I saw my lost one, Salley, rise from her knees, I looked at Mate Hudson, his face white, an incredulous wonder in his dark eyes, his actions unconsciously graceful as they always were. One thing I had to be thankful for, I thought; one little mitigation of the crushing force of the blow. It was Mate, no other, who had beaten me to the prize. It was not someone who had spurned me but one who had given me his friendship, as far as his lonely soul would let him—except for Faro Jack, my only friend.

Then, steadied and sustained, able to see clearly and truthfully, I looked at Salley.

The beauty I had seen last night burst over me like a wave of the sea. That was my only claim upon her now.

The witnesses—and that was what they were, representatives of the *ancien régime*, who had just witnessed the linking within church and state of the lives of two of their own—converged on the pair to kiss Salley and shake Mate's hand. More people were weeping than I would expect in this proud lot, especially considering the simplicity of the ceremony, most of its usual accompaniments of color and sound and symbolism omitted in Salley's haste. How had I ever dreamed that she might marry me?

My turn to speak to her came at last—the turn of an outsider. But her eyes filled with tears as they met mine, and her lips pressed mine in such love as she could give me. It had not been enough. Once she had invited me to a beach party—I was sixteen, with every nerve raw to the winds of the world—but the invitation had proved invalid. . . .

"I'll always thank you for coming," she told me, choking. For the *ancien régime* of the Low Country had not hearts of stone.

"Edward, do you remember—at Memphis' joint—I said my luck would never turn?" Mate asked, his voice deep and glowing. "Well, I was wrong!"

Mason Hudson would have spoken to me too, if I had turned to him. He was deeply moved, and my coming here so late, a black sheep of his own begetting, may have undermined him still more, for there was irresolvable conflict in his face. I bowed to him and to his wife, the latter answering with an ambiguous nod of her head. Jeff Legare, who had served as best man to Mate, gave me a big smile, and even Arnold Hudson would not rebuff me, and Clay Hudson had not joined the company. Still I longed for flight. Unseen in the press of friends and kinsmen warmly greeting one another, I slipped out the door. No one saw or called to me, as I hurried around the walk to my cab; no knowing white-pawed sexton questioned my right to be here. I dropped into the cushioned seat. It was in the way that men slipped down into their deathbeds, I thought, when they were old, not young men like me—sorry to leave but glad they need not stay.

"Take me to the hotel." My voice was steady and cool-sounding. Losing gambler that I was, I could still bluff.

When I had gained my room and locked its door and paced its floor for two hours, I had arrived at what seemed one important decision.

I would not go to Africa. The way was too long, the search for diamonds too uncertain. I would become a gold-seeker in the new camps of the West, but not by delving in the gravels or blasting the rock. I would pit my prowess at the poker and blackjack and monte tables. I would play against the deadliest sharps that had ever crossed the river, I would take a woman to stand behind me at the games, satisfy my needs in my hours of leisure, and perhaps give me a ration of beauty and even of tenderness. I would fight for survival but not scheme to live long.

Still I could not decide whether to go by sea except for a short rail passage, as to Panama, or to travel overland through our own tremendous West. By either route I would find sharps to keep me in practice. Actually I did nothing to further either journey.

The day I lost Salley and on the following day I read a good deal, daydreamed futilely and long, and, oddly enough, slept much and very deeply, as though I had been drugged. I hardly left the hotel, partly because there was nowhere I wanted to go, mainly perhaps in a not quite explainable dread of encountering any of the other Hudsons, Mason, Mildred, Clay or Arnold, or Butler Mims, or the rascally lawyer, Matthew Whitlow, or even boyish Jeff Legare. On the morning of the third day, a room servant brought up a telegram. I did not doubt the message was from Mate and Salley, dispatched from a wayside station on their bridal journey.

But the telegram had been filed in Augusta, and my eye, leaping to the signature, found the single name "Jack." It read:

Arriving tonight. Wait for me.

I realized neither relief nor disappointment, only a glow of gratitude for the steadfastness of Jack's friendship.

When I met the night train from Augusta, there was Jack's real and sturdy form on the steps of the car. We got in a cab, and saying very little made for my room. There I set out rum and water, and a cold but nourishing supper. When he had washed off the dust of travel, it did me good to see him eat and drink.

"I read in the Augusta paper the Charleston dispatch about Salley getting married," he began. "You said you were expecting it but I knew you'd take it hard."

"Middling hard, Jack," I answered.

“Well, I didn’t lose any time getting here. As a gambler, your forte had never been to play safe. You’re a very intense man, sometimes you strike me as a desperate man. I doubted if you could think this over coolly, so I did some thinking for you.”

“Great God, I want to hear it.”

“Remember, when I first proposed that you give up hanging around supported by your mother, both of you dreaming of you being a gentleman, I quoted Shakespeare at you. I said to you, ‘Get money, get money, get money.’ He’s the most quotable fellow that ever lived, I reckon. He’s got every human problem and situation ready for your tongue, although I don’t know one example out of a hundred. But I do remember five words from the great soliloquy in *Hamlet*, when he listed the ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ that often make men want to jump forever and forever in the river. The one I mean is, ‘the pangs of dispriz’d love.’ ”

“It’s very well put. To love a woman—to fight against and can’t help it and then yield to it, head over heels—and have that woman not give a damn.”

“I don’t say Salley didn’t give a damn. But she loved Mate in a way that makes a woman decide to get married. It was a great rebuff to you. No one, not even she, knows how great. I come the nearest to knowing, because I know your dream. She was the center of that dream. You lose her, and you lose it all. And, Edward, you’ve lost her.”

Suddenly I perceived that I had not quite accepted this. The reason I had slept so deeply was not to see it in my dreams.

“She and Mate are married, till Death do them part,” Jack went on. “You’re not accepted as a gentleman in Charleston—nowhere are you so accepted, unless it is in the forests of the maroons in Cuba—but you’re too much of one to try to part them, or win her away from him. Edward, when I proposed that you become a gambler, taking advantage of quick hands and mind and lightning-quick eyes, you didn’t decide right away. When did you decide? What made you decide?”

“When I got the note from Mildred Hudson that I wasn’t wanted at her party.”

“You became a very good gambler. Not one of the famous but a highly able one. Now you’ve found out you’re not wanted as Salley’s husband—not wanted enough for her to take you instead of Mate. She doesn’t love you enough, or you’re not good enough for her. Both of ’em hurt, the second hurts the worse, but that might not stop it from being her true opinion.”

“I know it’s her true opinion.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

“What I did before, except I’ll be a bigger gambler than before. I think I’ll go West. There I’ll play against the biggest there are.”

“That’s not very big—if you’re talking about draw poker and stud, twenty-one, whist, three-card monte. I want you to go on gambling—that’s your calling—that’s your nature—but for far greater stakes than the rolls of your opponents at the gambling tables. Listen to me, Edward. Did you know there are prizes greater than being a gentleman? I mean the kind of gentleman you wanted to be—a plantation on the river—Saint Cecilia—all the rest of it. And do you know that with enough determination—luck—and courage those prizes are within your reach?”

“Name one of ’em.”

“Leadership is one. To be a leader of men. To be a great builder is another. To found a house in a new land. Perhaps to help build a new nation.”

I took Jack’s hand and shook it. It was only a little sign that I appreciated his sincerity and would be forever grateful to him for showing me his best.

“I kind of thought you would think of going to the gold camps,” he told me, in lowered tones. “That’s the reason I got a hump on, getting here. Instead of that, I came to urge you to keep to your plan of going to Africa. But enlarge it about ten times.”

“Take a drink and tell me the rest.”

He downed a tot of rum and turned to me with glowing eyes.

“When you talked to me about finding the diamonds, you the same as told me what you wanted of them. To come back to Charleston and have the finest barony of all. Now I want you to go without any thought of coming back. Wash your hands of Charleston, except for your happiest memories. Shake its dust from your heels. Hunt for your diamonds, but don’t think yourself defeated if you don’t find them, and don’t hunt too long. Remember that old man—N’kulu’s master—he couldn’t find them. He recognized one when he saw it—he knew just where to look—but he couldn’t find any more. But there are things in South Africa ten times greater than diamonds. I’ve been reading about the country—pining for it some—ever since I was a boy. In the first place it’s as big as all outdoors—big as all the United States west of the Mississippi. There’s more game than Bridger saw when he first went to the Rockies. In all that vast territory there are only a few thousand white people.

Instead of a plantation of so many thousand acres, you can have a ranch that a good pony couldn't cross in a whole day."

When I kept silent, he said a characteristic thing.

"A ranch with lions on it."

I did not try to stop that ice and fire from running down my back.

"I want you to gamble as you never gambled before," Jack went on. "For life, I hope for love, for happiness, for fortune. Not with little pasteboard squares with marks on 'em but with savage men and beasts, dangers, deserts, mountains; and I want you to use all those powers you need at the gaming tables, but better and stronger and bolder." Strong and bold was his voice as he spoke right at me. "Do you hear me, Edward? Do you call me?"

"I call you, and raise you."

He had turned white, and, to cover up, he groped in his pockets, bringing out an odd assortment of personal belongings, pencil and ticket stubs and crumpled bills. "I've got it somewhere," he said. "A fellow on the train gave it to me. Here it is," he went on triumphantly, displaying a page torn from a notebook. "The name of the vessel is the *Santa Lucia*, and she's a stout little Portugee, and she'll sail on the tide three days from now, bound for Lisbon with a cargo of sea-island cotton. From Lisbon there are docks of ships that put out for Mozambique."

"Speaking of the tide"—I sniffed the air that smelled like a fresh-dug bushel of clams—"it's about low."

Jack and I walked out on a little porch overhanging an alley. The breeze was up over Jim Island, as the colored called it, and it had skimmed away the clouds that had created a red sunset, and the stars shone in great array.

"One of those is for me," I said. I pointed to the east from whence stars rose.

"Yes, but maybe I spoke too big about the ranch. I won't renege on it, but I'll hedge it. You may not win anything you can write a deed to. But you'll play high, wide, and handsome—to use the language of those Frisco sports—and if you ever come back here—and I don't rule it out—it may be your Fate will bring you back—I think you'll have something I greatly admire in a man."

"What would it be, old man?" I asked, after a long pause.

"Size," he answered.

# BOOK FOUR

## CHAPTER X

### The Raider

The usual route from America to South Africa was to Capetown by way of England. The route I took, by way of Lisbon, and then aboard an auxiliary steam trader bound for Mozambique, had several advantages. I rode on no great Indiaman, but the snug, seaworthy Portuguese ships had the shorter way, were almost as fast, and charged a good deal less. There were no royal governors that I need impress, not even haughty army and navy officers, so I spent my spare time learning Afrikaans—the Dutch dialect that N’kulu had picked up from Heer Piet. A harsh and, to my ears, outlandish tongue, with many guttural sounds, still it covered nearly every detail of the African scene, and knowing it ahead of time would stand me in good stead when my search began.

Big Indiamen touching Capetown take off by the shortest route to Calcutta, but little Portugee making for Mozambique would touch Delagoa Bay, actually the back door of the Transvaal, whereby I would save hundreds of miles by ox wagon in gaining my hunting ground.

Capetown lay almost exactly as far south of the equator as Charleston was north. But the weather being just reversed, here the mild winter had set in, bringing gray days and sharp winds; while there the land lay in the lap of voluptuous July. The short, broad-nosed Hottentot men, related to Bushmen, and their heavy-rumped women looked a poor substitute for our shapely West African Gullahs. Many old Dutch settlers lived stodgy, stingy lives, torn between piety and greed; the English were mainly remittance men, stuffy officials, or fortune-seekers, with few of the graces of our gay, suave Charlestonians. However, of all the emigrants, the Americans appeared the worst. A good number of them were sailors who had deserted their ships and taken up with Kaffir women and Cape brandy.

Trying to raise money for his passage home on a French ship, an intelligent-looking Parisian offered for sale a firearm the like of which I had never seen. It was what he called a pin-fire breech-loader. Bullet, percussion powder, and charge were contained in a single copper shell, from which a tiny pin thrust upward through a notch to be hit by the hammer. Some care was required in loading the piece, yet it could be done quickly, and the ball weighed an ounce, heavy enough for the largest African game. Yet the Dutchmen and Englishmen who viewed it shook their heads, whispered

behind their hands, and remarked that percussion-cap muzzle-loaders were good enough for them, always had been, always would be.

“This rifle was made by Houiller, the greatest gunsmith in Europe,” the Frenchman told us. “It cost twenty-five hundred francs—a hundred pounds. Yet I will sell it for fifty pounds to the first comer and throw in a hundred rounds of ammunition.”

“May I shoot it?” I asked.

“Yes, you may.”

Atop a tower moldering into ruin, once some sort of town-crier to the early Dutch settlers, hung an iron bell. I leveled on it, and the sight of the other loafers scampering in all directions helped me to brace my nerves and take a quick, good sight. As I touched the trigger, I was whirled half-around as by a mule kick, but the bullet was out and gone long previously, and the bell that had not given forth one clang in the last century spoke out in a kind of eerie toll.

“That gun is accursed!” a bearded Dutchman cried in Afrikaans.

“I bloody well believe it,” an Englishman said, in his own argot.

“Look you. It is a good cable’s length from here. Whoever heard of a ball holding true that far! Young gentleman, it is a sign. Have naught to do with newfangled things; stick to the old and tried. The bell cried out someone’s death, yours if you buy it, the buyer’s if you sell it. I would not take it for a gift. I would not fire it if you give me fifty pounds.”

“Thank you, Mynheer. I do not say you are wrong. I think quite likely you are right. Still, it is my fortune to buy it.” And I counted out the Frenchman fifty pound notes.

## 2

Time passed, event moved, we met obstructions and delays, and made the usual number of mistakes. The consequence of all this was one day we found ourselves gone from the sleepy town of Lourenço Marques, and following wagon tracks on the bank of the Maputo River, bound for the Blue. “We” were now N’kulu, his old, rank, and remarkably handy tribesfellow named Kininni, myself, twenty-four oxen, with wide, sharp horns, lean, tall, and quick as Texas cattle, and a shaggy, low-bred nag, with spirit showing in her eyes and ears. Except for the absence of household goods and slaves, you could mistake us for *Voortrekkers*. Actually we were quite respectably outfitted, with a stout canvas-covered wagon, tools and spare parts, the

biggest washpans in town, the purchase of which had impressed the perfumed Portuguese dealer, corn to make mealies, salt, onions, tobacco, and coffee, and a jug of the wicked—this was Faro Jack's word—Cape brandy. As we moved up out of the cold south, the weather waxing hot, N'kulu and Kininni wore next to nothing. I had a supply of straw hats, and pants, shirts, and shoes of soft, tanned buckskin. We got our meat with a smooth-bore muzzle-loading musket, firing a two-ounce ball.

N'kulu loved every sun-baked mile of the long trek, because he was getting home. The blacks whom we met recognized him as a Zulu and either made blood bond with him by many a queer rite, or placated him lest his horde of plumed, blood-thirsty tribesmen lay in hiding behind the nearest *kopje*. As for me, I was becoming an expert inspanner and outspanner. Charleston had turned into an impossible dream of the night. Salley came to me but rarely, and even then I could hardly believe in her, she was so lovely and so cool.

I had never but the vaguest notions as to where we were. N'kulu and Kininni found their way by guess, signs left by earlier travelers, and more or less imaginary landmarks. Meanwhile we were not completely exiled from people whom I could loosely call my own kind. These were the hardiest and most venturesome of the Voortrekking Boers, who, frightened of seeing another rooftop, had brought their flocks and herds from one lesser wilderness to a greater until they had reached this Ultima Thule. Even so, we could travel all day and sometimes half a week without seeing a single kraal.

I did not seek out these settlers. Almost always they were hospitable, but they were also God-fearing in a fearful degree, reading nothing but the Bible and mainly those parts dealing with the wrath of the Lord. I preferred the company of my vivacious Zulus. Anyway I had no plausible excuse for my presence in these parts.

We had seen wild animals on the first day we left Delagoa Bay. South of the lands once held by a black king named Swazi, they increased in unbelievable numbers. There were not only springbuck and steinbok, but quaggas, eland, gnus, hartebeests, buffaloes, and magnificent kudus. Once we passed a whole army of baboons, and I feared for our outfit, they seemed so belligerent. It became a common thing to make out a leopard stealing away in the grass; the songs of silver jackals and spotted hyenas bewitched the night; and now and again an incredible aardvark ambled across the road.

I had not fired the fine French rifle since I had left Capetown, partly to save ammunition, partly because I distrusted its unfamiliar mechanism. But it needed a bleeding, N'kulu said—as his spear had been blooded when he

became a warrior—and the strange gods of the veld, like no gods that ever were, mean and mischievous and often deadly, but sometimes marvelous and magnificent, provided the opportunity.

We had had a long and grueling day, trying to reach a water hole, and had kept on beyond sunset, beyond twilight, because of an immense ascendant moon. There are no moons in my experience or in travelers' tales like the moons of Africa. They are larger, grander, and more luminous than any on earth. Then we made camp in the soft and perfect light. It was a scene of great peace, one to warm the heart and reassure the flagging spirit. Nothing but happy things could occur tonight—deep feeding for man and beast, and deep sleeping.

Then from nowhere appeared a lion. He was suddenly in our midst, virilely maned, huge, insolent, walking with a princely stride. He walked up to one of our oxen, a big cow called Maria and, while she stood transfixed with terror, gave her a little blow on the side of the neck. She fell down dead. The lion stood over her, and took several seconds to set his teeth in a way convenient for him. During these few seconds I was clawing in the wagon for the pin-fire rifle. It happened that N'kulu had fired the muzzle-loader only a few minutes before, employing his last ball, and not having gone to our store had left it unloaded.

By the time I had clutched the pin-fire the lion was disappearing at the edge of vision, the ox in his jaws. She weighed at least twelve hundred pounds, he not more than half as much; but he walked away with her as a man carries a rather light but bulky and awkward load. He had his teeth set somewhere in her shoulder. All four of her legs hung on his right side and dragged on the ground and made a little cloud of dust visible in the moon.

I opened the breech to see if the pin-fire rifle was loaded. It was, the little pin in place, but the extra shells were God knew where.

"I'm going after him," I said quickly in Afrikaans. "You two stay here and guard the other oxen."

For male lions do not always travel alone. His lithe wives might be somewhere out in the dark, lusting to make a raid; or perhaps he was a member of what the English called a "mob," hunting with remarkable cooperation, the terror of every living thing on the veld except the elephants and rhinos, who walked wide for no lion ever whelped, and except for little jackals who could hide behind the rocks.

"Do not so, bukra," said old Kininni. "You will be killed."

“If he is to be killed, why, then, he will be killed,” N’kulu reproved him. “Anyway it is his Fate to go. I can see it in his face.”

I did not know where N’kulu got his idea of Fate. Mohammedanism had never touched the Zulu tribes as far as I knew. But they were curiously like Moslems, in warlikeness, honor and personal bravery, and ten times their equal in cruelty. I needed the same philosophy as I left the camp site and pushed out into the moonlit veld in pursuit of the thief. His shape was still vaguely visible to my stimulated vision. But it was not nearly solid enough to see over rifle sights.

Ahead of me he walked, behind him walked I. I dared not run for fear of falling into ambush, and our walking gaits appeared identical. In a few seconds, I was all alone with Africa and her prodigious lamp. I had one load in my gun. When Dutch boys go hunting, their fathers give them only one load. Their purpose is no doubt economy, but it has made the greatest race of marksmen the world has ever known. How many loads did the lion have? Only one—to run at me, knock me over, and kill me.

That was not what steadied me the most. It was thinking of a she-oxen named Maria, who had never harmed a living soul, who all day long tugged in her yoke for the right to food and rest when darkness fell, herself suddenly pitched into utter darkness by that arrogant invader. He had walked up to her and killed her. I was going to walk up to him and kill him if it were possibly in my power. I was badly frightened of the moonlight and the grass and the solitude, and the thought of Simba, the male lion, the great killer, a vague shape in front of me, but it may be I did not treasure life as much as most men, and that might be because I was a bastard. No arrangements had been made for me. I was an interloper—or, it might be, because I was a gambler.

Salley had been mistaken when, after I had promised to save Mate from Memphis, she had told me I might feel like a gentleman for the last time. I felt like one now. It was a wonderful feeling. The cold in my heart could not subdue the glowing in my soul.

Perhaps two hundred yards from the camp the lion became annoyed over my following him. He did not like to have anyone question his sovereignty of the veld. He dropped the oxen and disappeared in the thick grass. But I had not the slightest notion that he had abandoned his prize; he was waiting and watching to see what I would do; at a moment favorable to himself he would do something. I pushed on, and soon came to the carcass. I stood over it, the rifle ready in my hands. I was quite sure that the lion would not keep me waiting very long. He could not abide seeing someone other than himself in

possession of his prize. The trouble was, I did not know from which direction he would make his entrance on the scene.

It was like the end of the betting in draw poker. I had bet very high, all I had in fact, on what I thought was the winning hand. Say it was three aces, but a full house or straight or flush could beat me. There would be no way of knowing until my opponent laid down his hand.

There ensued a second or two of ineffable suspense.

Then out of the moonlight came the lion, his head down, his tail rammed out, his legs driving like pistons on a steam engine. I did not see him until he was within forty yards—in spite of the magnificence of the moon its beams were dim—and then it seemed I barely had time to level, aim, and touch the trigger. As I touched it I felt a lack of confidence. It was a newfangled contraption; unlike our good old muzzle-loader; it was untested.

But the night roared, and the powder smoke blinded me, and when it had drifted away I still could hardly believe that the gods had not taken this beautiful chance to put me where I belonged. Instead, I still stood by the dead oxen, blood in my veins, sense in my brain, light in my eyes, strength in my muscles, Edward Stono, a living man; and ten feet from me, quivering in death, lay the lion.

Maria, you are avenged. So, in some infinitesimal measure, are all those who are faithful and guiltless, who toil all day only that they may have a little rest and food when the soft night comes down.

## CHAPTER XI

### The Rider

For a matter of six months, I gambled against the secrets of the river bed. Twenty miles up and down the Vaal from the rocky reach where Heer Piet had found diamonds, I washed the gravels for the small, cool, greasy-feeling crystalline pebbles with a dogged patience that made restless N'kulu stop, stare, and sigh. I did not win the bet, and, in gambler's parlance, got no run for my money. I looked everywhere that heavy sediment would settle, but found not even a flake. Every day seemed to end precisely where it began.

Moreover, the life of adventure that Faro Jack foretold for me only halfway came to pass. When in need of meat, I shot the first buck that walked into my sights. Abundant driftwood provided for good watch fires, so lions did not haunt our camps; and when we ran into them in the grass, they usually tried to bluff us or made off. By never arguing with the elephants, always giving them right of way, we kept from waking their titanic wrath. There was no known means of appeasing a truculent rhino, but we did not see many, the land was not brushy enough to please them, and thrice we gave attacking beasts the slip, and only twice had to shoot for our lives.

The natives who passed our camps were hunters or traders or pastoralists in league with the Dutch, and never made us any trouble, and often sat through most of a night with N'kulu and Kininni, jabbering and sucking marrow bones as though raised in the same kraal.

The land was always wonderful, the river brought new sights, and I greatly relished being a diurnal creature instead of a nocturnal one. I thrived on the labor, grew lean and nearly tireless, and almost without knowing it became not an expert marksman, like so many of the Dutch, but a good, quick shot. However, the time had come to change grounds. Perhaps a search for some other source of wealth, gold or ivory or perhaps some wide fertile valley not yet claimed by the Voortrekking Dutchmen, might be indicated soon. So on a pink and pearly morning, we inspanned and trekked.

Making for a strip of land ceded to the Dutch, we pitched by a stream called Klipspringer, deeply eroded and subject to high floods. For once we were only a mile from a farmhouse—almost near enough to smell mutton stewing—but no other homestead lay within twenty miles.

The farmer, whose name his cattle drovers gave as Jan Du Piel, had been a Voortrekker under the sturdy Potgieter, but he had broken with his leader, had quit the settlements of Lydenburg and Zoutpansberg, and with his daughter had become an outlier here at the brink of the Blue. A wandering Bastaard dye-seller, part Dutch and part Hottentot, lately and more politely known as a Griqua, warned me to walk wide of him.

“He is greatly incensed at Jehovah—this being the name of his god—for not giving him sons,” the Griqua explained.

Loafing in camp about sundown, I noticed a herd of milk cows being driven toward the kraal by a small but easy rider in a straw hat. I waved in salute, whereupon the rider’s pony headed my way, and the cows lowered their heads to graze. As the rider came near, I made her out, first, as a towheaded child, then as a flaxen-haired young woman certainly sixteen, quite possibly as old as nineteen. She rode up, and most pleasant perceptions trickled through my mind.

This girl had been raised on the veld. Almost certainly she had never opened a book except the Bible. Probably she had never been taught to read; she had never seen a picture or heard a verse of poetry unless it was a forbidden song by a black woman; most of her life had been spent in the saddle, eating a spartan diet, sleeping on a bed made of strips of rawhide, walking on earthen floors, never in this world seeing or touching the slightest luxury or any man-made beauty. She had been born since the great trek from Cape Colony. A few times a year she went to “meeting,” and listened to a minister picture the horrors of hell. Then what in the Devil had put such prettiness in her face and charm in her small, lithe form? It could be nothing but the native grace of that frequently monstrous, sometimes divine, human race.

Her hair was parted smoothly in the middle and dressed in long, glossy braids. When the sunlight hit it fairly—for she removed her straw hat to show it to me—it shone like the most delicate and forever unfindable gold. Her eyes were ineffably blue, the blue of the African sky seen in patches among white scattered clouds. They were probably common eyes, nothing to excite the artist, but for the present at least they glimmered with excitement—no doubt I was the first western European of something like a suitable age she had seen in half a year. Anyway I was not sure of the commonplaceness of her eyes. They were oddly set and had a direct and an intense glance. If they had never looked into a book, they had looked deeply into Africa. She cast them once about my camp, and I had the notion that she could enumerate—and evaluate—everything in it. They were the eyes of someone intensely

alive. I knew about intense life, for I had felt it when Theba had rescued me from the barracoon, and again, when, half a year gone, I had stood beside a dead lion.

Her face was somewhat broad. I was glad of that, when she smiled—there was so much room for the smile, and it was so childlike and beaming. Her father being a fanatical Dutchman, dead against all fleshpots, had set no bleak asceticism in her sun-tanned face, and instead there was wonderful earthiness that stirred my pulse. Her lips were full and rounded. Her brown neck, which had been snow-white to start with, was small and lovely and, I would almost think, highbred. Best of all, she was a woman, and this semi-desert, this arid, hungry wilderness had not deprived her of it. She was about five feet five, I thought, taller than any *vrouws* I had seen in Capetown, taller than any bespangled native girls except a few highborn, long-shanked Zulus. But every inch of her was female, and the man who could not see it and rejoice in it was not a whole man.

She was shy and likely to be tongue-tied so I spoke first.

“Thank you for coming to visit a lonely traveler,” I told her in Afrikaans. “My name is Edward Stono. What is your name?”

“Mine is Trudi Du Piel. Are you of Dutch descent?”

“No, I am a Yankee.”

“But you speak Afrikaans like a native!”

“I had a good teacher.”

“Is your wife here? I don’t see her.”

“I have no wife.”

“You are quite old not to be married. Most of our farm boys marry at sixteen.”

“Then you too are old not to be married.”

I meant to speak lightly but a shadow came into her face, and it was not dispelled until I showed her my lion-skin, spread on my pallet.

“Have you ever killed a lion?” I asked.

“Yes, Mynheer.”

“A rhino?”

“Yes, Mynheer. Will you show me your guns? I heard that the English— but you are Yankee—have very fine guns.”

So I showed her the muzzle-loader and the pin-fire rifle. She gave the first only a casual glance, but the latter fascinated her. "I have never seen such a gun," she burst out, when I showed her how it was loaded.

"Would you like to shoot it?" I asked.

"I would like to, but I won't waste a cartridge. And it must be that you shot the lion with the muzzle-loader, for there is only one hole in the skin."

"No, Trudi. One cartridge did the trick."

"Then it must be much stronger than it looks."

"I think it is."

"If you want me to shoot you a buck—tomorrow, I mean, when I take the cattle to pasture—I will do so gladly."

"How would you bring him into camp?"

"I would put him on Johan's back and walk." Johan was evidently her gelding. "And now I must go home, for the sun has set."

I could not let her go for a while yet. I brought out a tin of sugarplums and a flask of mild, sweet Portuguese wine, brought all the way from the colony. Her face lighted like a child's. I had never seen a more beaming smile. Before we knew it, the shadows had grown quite long.

"Oh, it's getting late!" she cried suddenly, leaping to her feet.

"When the time comes, I'll take you home."

She looked startled—perhaps a little frightened, although this young horsewoman with hair the tint of wheatstraw was hard to frighten, and I must remember that in my dealings with her, for even a little fear manifest in her might indicate the presence of a full-sized danger—then speculations I could not read came into her limpid eyes. They reassured her, I thought; still I could get her to stay only long enough to finish her drink. When she mounted her pony I noticed what seemed to be an ancient flintlock in her saddle scabbard. I remembered a lion that had walked brazenly into camp in light hardly dimmer than this, so I put the pin-fire rifle, loaded and ready to go, in my saddle scabbard. She rode in and out of the scattered band of milk cattle and almost instantly, it seemed, collected them in a tight herd. If I had ever seen a better rider, it was someone born and bred and raised on a horse on a great Low Country plantation; and he would have merely more style, not a whit more ease, grace, stability, and mastery of his mount. She did not ride like a Valkyrie. They were poetic riders of the sky, who sung from horizon to horizon. She rode like a farm girl who must cover rough ground, meet with

constantly changing conditions, look out for her own neck and her horse's, and in the shortest possible time. Not only her hands but her whole body was sinewy. Thinking of its woman's shape, a warmth crept through me, and I was hard put to it to pay attention to her innocent remarks.

Trudi! The African sun had set, just now, but it was stored up inside of her. Her pale skin had invited its entrance; and what a mate she would make for a young Afrikander, unknown to any fare but meat and mealies, who must people his broad lands! What was there to keep me from taking that part? Why was I ineligible to take a daughter of this broad and sunny land? Nothing but a dream as lost and gone as any in the night.

I rode beside her presently, our stirrups almost touching. The intense blue of her eyes had slightly darker rims, not their only mystery. Africa itself was in her, the golden grass and the fierce sun and the long horizons and the danger and the death; she knew about lions, and great elephants raiding the cornfields, and baboons that must be massacred to save the crop, and the dreadful swarms of locusts. Like Africa herself, she was a bottomless well. She seemed so limpid but really she was so deep.

I had laid the ghost of Salley long ago. Now I was tired of traveling alone. It came to me, as both an intuition and an inward force, that I would like to woo this gold-haired girl of the veld and wake the primal passion under her soft, tanned skin. I would like to woo her in the grass, and in the thin shade of the mimosa, and perhaps I could win her, and then—so strong was my vision—keep her always. It might be that my luck had changed. It might be I had made a find richer than diamonds. Who would stop me from spending my days in this new and burning land, if here lay happiness and fulfillment?

I was dreaming, but, for the first time, what real, unfantastical dreams!

## 2

“You can go back now,” she told me.

“No, I'll take you to your door.”

“There's no need of it. I can see our chimney from here. The grass is too short for lions or even leopards. Thank you for coming this far.”

“I want to go all the way.”

She hesitated, then nodded. It was not an easy, careless decision, a letting-slide as when, a few minutes before, I had asked her to stay awhile. Instead it was feat of will. She was facing costs, and, rising above that, defying consequences. I would not have known it except for the training of my eyes

at the gaming tables. And this was a good deal higher play than I had guessed.

Suddenly I was frightened, because I knew that my companion had decided to face and challenge a very real danger.

We drew nearer the homestead. It would have been bleak enough in the genial sunlight; now, in this suddenly chill twilight, grayness everywhere, not one bright living tint to cheer the eyes, it appeared desolate in the extreme. The tall figure by the gate was a man, very lean and erect, wearing a tall hat, an oddly cut coat, and a fringe of gray whiskers around his chin.

Trudi turned to me and looked me in the face.

“You’d better go back, now,” she said.

“No, I’m going with you all the way.”

“I think you may be sorry but I thank you just the same.”

So we rode on, a little closer together than before. We came up to the watcher, and I had never seen such an austere human being. Africa can humanize a person, I thought, by constantly pitting him against ruthless nature; but, with a slight change, it might denaturalize him. This was no doubt Jan Du Piel, whom I had heard hated Jehovah for not letting him beget sons. I thought to speak to him, some kind of a civil greeting, but when I saw his face I knew he would regard it as a weakness, so I kept silent.

“Trudi, tell this young man to go his way,” the Boer commanded in a cold, level voice far more ugly than the snarls of a hyena. “Then drive your cattle into the kraal. Then come yourself to the stable.”

There fell a brief pause.

“To the stable?” she echoed.

“You heard me, Trudi.”

“You’re going to do that—again?”

“You’ve disobeyed my orders by loitering—visiting this man’s camp, if the signs tell true—and you’re to be punished for it.”

“You can’t. I’ll not stand it.”

“You’re my daughter, and you’ll do what I say, and if you dare dispute me you’ll get twice as much.”

She paused, considered, then spoke in a low, clear voice.

“Unless you promise not to do it—never to do it again—I’m going to tell him.”

“By all means tell me, Trudi,” I said quickly.

“You’d better not! By all the saints in heaven and the devils in hell—”

“Better than that I’ll show him.”

In one leap she was off her horse. Her hands flew and she peeled off over her head her buckskin shirt. She had turned her back to me, not in modesty, but so I could see more plainly what she wanted to show me; even so I knew her for a woman with a knowledge deeper than before, and that helped her cause.

Across her back were many narrow stripes, some of them not healed, such as are caused by the kiboko, the cruel rhino-hide whip.

“It won’t happen again,” I told her.

“What do you mean, you son of Beelzebub?”

“It won’t happen again. You’ll never lay a whip on her again.”

“Who’ll stop me? She’s my daughter. If I’d laid the lash on her faithless mother, she might be in heaven today, instead of burning in hell. I’ll whip her as I think she needs it, as many stripes as I choose.”

“Not even one stripe.”

Jan Du Piel reached behind him and drew from a hip holster a horse pistol cocked and primed. I too was on the ground by now—not remembering how I had got there—and I struck the barrel with my quirt, knocking it out of his hand. Trudi picked it up and ran out of her father’s reach. For a few seconds all three of us were immobilized. The fault was mine—I did not know what to do next. But the solution was so simple, and it rushed into my brain like a spring freshet into a dried-up water hole, and I spoke without effort or need of second thought.

“Get on your horse, Trudi, and we’ll go.”

“If you like,” she answered.

“It’s not her horse,” the Dutchman broke in harshly. “It’s my horse. It’s my gun too. She hasn’t a thing of her own, even the clothes on her back. If she’s going to hell with you, and that’s where she belongs—where her mother went before her—you’ll have to pay for them.”

“How much? Trudi, you know their worth. Set the price and I’ll pay it. I’ve got a hundred guilders—forty Cape dollars—in my poke.”

“That’s just right,” Trudi answered.

“A hundred! That’s hardly nine English pounds. Three hundred would be cheap—”

“A hundred is the price set. Will you take that, or nothing?”

“I’ll take it, may devils wrack your souls in hell for evermore. May your crops fail. May the lions kill your oxen and the hyenas pull down your sheep. May the murrain come to your herds and the rats raid your barns. May you wither away with sickness. May the blacks bring you to torture. May the black mamba bite you while you lie asleep. May the tsetse fly destroy your brains. Death and torment to you both, son and daughter of Lucifer. I hate you. I hate all mankind. I hate God.”

But he took the forty Cape dollars I handed him in a little poke, and he was counting them over and over as we rode away.

### 3

My camp was at the edge of some thorn thickets, close to the stream. Below and above, where the ground was more open, ’mpalla came to drink, quaggas and zebras, gazelles with soft eyes and ever lifted feet, hartebeests, and sometimes oxlike eland. These visitors had all gone by the time we reached the wagon, but the jackals had crept down, yapping, hyenas met and howled, and far away a lion gave forth rhythmic grunts. Listening to these sounds, meanwhile preparing for the night ahead, Trudi and I need not as yet confront the future. Without trying we avoided making an issue of our being together, alone, and far away from everyone except our two black men and the beasts of the veld.

I was busy, looking after the oxen, and she saw to the cooking of the evening meal. We ate it on the ground, sitting opposite each other, looking now and then at our small fire, because we could not afford a big blaze in this grassy country so bereft of fuel. We had scarcely finished when she, N’kulu, and Kininni cocked their heads in the same way, at the same angle. Their eyes met one another’s but did not meet my eyes because I was an alien, not an African, and did not know the swift leap of thought between them. Trudi smiled faintly and nodded. The tension in the two black faces immediately eased. Into the firelight walked a young Negress, her breast and thighs covered in the way of a domestic servant, but with wire bracelets on her wrists and ankles.

“M’sabu!” she said to Trudi, looking her in the face.

“Mynheer, this is my household wench, whose name is difficult in Afrikaans, but whom you may call Hagar, after the handmaiden of Sarai in the Good Book.”

“Did your father let her come?”

“Not he! But she belongs to me—my Aunt Wilhelmina gave her to me, and I think—” She paused, and began to speak to the Negress in some African tongue. When the short parley was over, Trudi turned to me again, childishly pleased. “Hagar said that she hid, and my father could not find her, and when the darkness fell she ran away.”

“Wasn’t she afraid to cross the veld at night?”

“She was more afraid to stay.”

“Will your father come seeking her—or you perhaps—during the night?”

“No, he has cursed me, and that is the end of it, and he would never take me back, even if I would go, and I never will.”

“Where do you wish to go? But your heart is troubled tonight, and no doubt you’d rather wait till morning to speak of it.”

“By your leave, Mynheer, I will speak of it as soon as Hagar and I make the beds for the night. By then the fire will burn low, and the veld will grow quiet, and I can speak free.”

“I want you to feel free, Trudi.”

“I’ve never known such a thing between man and woman.”

“You know it now. Make the beds of ’mpalla and hartebeest skins—I have enough, saved for making clothes. N’kulu and Kininni will sleep where they please.”

I did not appear to watch her, but I saw her lay out the best and softest skins for me, then make a pallet for herself some few feet distant from mine, and another for Hagar literally at her feet. Before long, she returned and took a seat beside the fire. Hagar remained in the shadowy background.

“You asked me where I wished to go,” she said. “Before I can decide upon a place, it would help me to know where you are bound.”

“No place in particular. Any place my road takes me.”

Her eyes brightened like a gypsy’s. “Mynheer, are you seeking land, as do the Voortrekkers? To make a great farm, perhaps, with many kraals and

cattle? Or are you, as some of the outlanders, seeking ivory or gold?"

"I am seeking my fortune, by any means within the white man's law."

"Do you expect to pass before many months by Port Elizabeth?"

"That would be a journey of many weeks. It is not in my plans, but—"

"There is no need of taking it now, if—if you have other plans, and my presence in your outfit is no trouble to you," she broke in at once, hurriedly and stammering. "I will tell you what I started to. In Port Elizabeth lives my mother's sister, who, when you pass that way, would take me to live with her. I am eighteen, a virgin, unwedded, unbetrothed; and among the young men, friends of her sons, in due time I would find a husband. But if I am welcome in your camp, going on as we have started, I too would like to go where the road leads. Truly I would like to see much more of Africa before I settle down—for there is no land like it in all the world. And, Mynheer, it is not a boast that I would not delay your journey, and indeed might even help to make it prosper."

"How is that, Trudi?"

"I can inspan, outspan, drive, pitch camp, cook, make clothes, and get meat. I know what tribes are friendly, which are treacherous, and which are hostile. I can tell good country when I see it, and I know what parts have lately been forsaken by the Doppers, where land can be obtained free, or bought very cheap. I can read sign of distant water and good grass; I know the belts of the tsetse fly, having listened to the talk of the Voortrekkers; and I have heard of certain regions where elephants are numerous and good ivory is common. It would not matter to me if we journeyed a whole year—or as long as you wish. And if I can help you, as I believe, it would give me great happiness."

"Do you wish to tell me why?"

"Yes, I wish to tell you. Because when you came close to the farmhouse, and I warned you to go back, and you yourself felt the danger, still you came on."

"That was a little thing. Any gentleman—" I stopped, for I remembered that my doings in this connection were all done.

"Remember, I have never seen a gentleman before."

"Apart from that, I offer you a place in my camp as my companion. We will trek about the country, seeking gold, or ivory, or other precious stuff, or fertile land fit for grazing cattle and sheep. But if we find none of these, it

won't matter to either of us, for I too wish to see the great land of Africa, and if we take a year to do it the time will be well spent. I will give you work to do and make many calls on you, but our main business will be enjoyment. And I won't make any call that you don't wish to answer."

"That would suit me very well, Mynheer."

"If it should so happen that we would become lovers—" I paused.

"In that case, it would so happen."

"In America, before I set sail, an old dear friend foretold me many good adventures. For a long time the augury was but half-true, but now it comes to me out of the night that my adventures in Africa will be more thrilling and more meaningful than he imagined. I am a gambler by calling, and lately the luck has run against me. Now I have a *hunch*—that is a word meaning an intuition—that my luck will be better than I ever dreamed."

4

After Trudi's coming, I forgot what it was to be lonely. She was my companion. On the long trek or the short trek, in the evenings about the fire, or in the wonderful clear fresh mornings ere we began our day's endeavors, washing gravel in the creek beds, hunting, eating our simple meals, outspanning and inspanning, making or breaking camp, I knew the warm and joyful sense of her nearness to me. It was a different kind of nearness than I felt in N'kulu. He looked upon me as his master, a sort of deputy of Heer Piet whose bones were gnawed and scattered by jackals old and gray or dead; besides, he was a Zulu, his identity bound up with much that I could never share. We enjoyed each other's company, especially during any arduous or somewhat dangerous activity, and were fond of each other; but could not enter the mysteries of friendship. When Trudi was with me, I felt that we were not two people but one person with two sides. We need not talk at all to be aware of our close bond. We need not touch each other, but often I took her hand and held it close.

We were companions, and I wished we could be more. It seemed strange for her and me, a young man and a young woman on the limitless veld, to stop with that—at least to rest with that for the time being—yet when I looked at it squarely with my own eyes, not borrowing the eyes of others, it lost its seeming strangeness and became as commonplace and as natural as our diet of meat and mealies. I had not yet fallen in love with her in the way I had loved Salley. This was the present status. Neither of us had come to any clear decision about the future. Often I felt desire for her, but I never saw the least sign of reciprocation on her part. She wanted to be free to travel back

and forth, up and down the veld. She was a bird new-freed from its cage, and with a good wild bird to fly with.

All that she had told me that she could do, to make herself my valuable partner, she did exceedingly well. I found I could rely on her, and I need never give the matter a second thought. Moreover, her timing, regulated by her energies, was unfailingly superb. One incident of the camp ground illustrated it well.

We were moving north—our general direction—intending to search the gravels of a turbulent tributary of the Vaal. Because we had found a good site about noon, close to a village where we could buy fowls, millet, and yams, we had outspanned under the burning sun and were rather lazily going about making camp. Presently N’kulu made a rather odd find—a human skull. Immediately after the midday meal, when I was lolling on an eland skin, and Trudi was sitting beside me making a buckskin shirt, Kininni reported the discovery of an almost complete human skeleton, its bones gnawed not quite bare only a night or two before.

“I’m afraid we’re going to have to move camp,” Trudi told me.

“Because of a few bones?” I asked.

“Because we’ve happened to hit the village cemetery. It’s a Shenzi village. I knew that from the look of it. A good many of the Shenzi don’t bother to bury their dead—they just carry them a mile or so, and leave them. That attracts all the carrion-eaters—not only vultures but maribou storks, hyenas, and jackals—the rabble of the country—and also—I hate to say it—lions. I saw more lion sign about than I liked. I thought it was accidental, but it wasn’t.”

“Let me finish my pipe, and we’ll move.”

N’kulu, Kininni, and Hagar got under the wagon—they preferred that shade to that of the dwarf mimosas—and Trudi hastened to complete her sewing. Hardly a moment later she leaned toward me, very slowly, and whispered in my ear.

“Lie very still a moment, will you?”

“Yes.”

At once she turned and began to creep toward a thorn tree, against which leaned our smooth-bore musket. The grass was not high, yet I could distinguish her movements only by the little waving of its tops. In a moment she came creeping back. Very slowly she rose to a sitting position, the gun

handy in her arms. As it came level, she touched the trigger. After its deep-throated roar, she turned and gave me one of her quaint smiles.

“If you want to go and look at him, you can. He’s only about a hundred feet.”

“What?”

“A lion. A big male that you’d never think could creep through grass this short. I’ve heard that lions that hang around native graveyards—a polite way to put it—get awfully bold, but I certainly didn’t expect one of them to try stalking us at high noon.”

“Why did you tell me to lie still?” I asked, when I could get my breath.

“I didn’t want to trip his trigger. I mean, he was already much too close when I saw him—hardly fifty yards—and a sudden motion by either of us might have made him charge. I thought I’d better crawl to the gun, even though it took a little time. Donner Blitzen, but it seemed a long time!”

## 5

I went to look at the lion. He had been shot through the neck, and, already belly-down in the grass, had made no motion other than drop his head. Then and there I got the pin-fire rifle, as well as its supply of cartridges, out of the wagon.

“I wish to make a trade with you, Trudi,” I told her.

She did not speak aloud but her blue eyes spoke to my great pleasure.

“I wish to trade this gun for your old flintlock. You’re the best person in our outfit to have it—in fact the only one fit to own a gun of such excellence. Will you trade?”

“Yes, Mynheer.”

When she took it, there was so much joy in her face and her great glance at me was so thrilling, I could not refrain from taking her briefly in my arms. Briefly her lips pressed mine. It was our first kiss. Her lips were rounded, full, and wide, and imparted to my lips and hence to my consciousness a knowledge of her I had not had before, and which even now I could not think through, let alone express in words. It had to do with an immense vitality, but of a female order. Perhaps it was a yet-unawakened capacity for love. Why not, when she had always lived in the sun? She was born blond, yet the sun had not spared her his intense beams. Her father, Jan Du Piel, needed hanging, and her mother, Africa, was accursed by the prophets of old—*Woe*

*to the land shadowing with wings beyond the rivers of Ethiopia*—yet together they had endowed her with a passion for life unknown to the tame peoples. She was a Voortrekker beyond a doubt. My luck had turned at last—but I must not ride it too hard.

That evening I spoke again to Kininni of a matter he had causally mentioned some weeks before.

“North of the Limpopo, north of the Sabi, there is a greater river than both put together, flowing generally eastward, from the hinterlands of Angola to the provinces of the Portugee at Mozambique.”

“Bukra, that is true, and the river is called the Zambezi.”

“Before I left my abode, far across the western sea, there came word of an English doctor descending that river and finding a great falls, which he named for the white Rani of his native land, England.”

“They are such falls as few human eyes had ever seen.”

“Suppose we struck the old Arab trade route which skirts the edge of the Kalahari. In how many days could we come upon the falls?”

“Lord, it is a long way. If you stop to search the gravels of the dongas—God alone knows why—it might take us a year. If we journeyed steadily, outspanning every night, inspanning every morning, I judge we could make the journey in two moons.”

“Is there plenty of game along the way?”

“Yes, bukra.”

“Is there enough water?”

“At this time of year, and for the next four moons, there is enough.”

“May we buy corn from the villages?”

“If they do not give us their spears to eat, instead.”

“How great is the danger?”

Kininni scratched his head long and thoughtfully.

“You ask, bukra, and I will answer. May the gods guard my tongue, lest I lie. If we went with a hundred men, each with a firearm, the danger would be small. If we went with ten men, likewise armed, the danger would be great. But when one white man and two blacks, one white woman and one black, journey in one wagon and on their horses, there is danger from lions—from

elephants—from rhinos—maybe from fever, but from men there is almost none.”

“Why is that, when we will come close to the kraals of the fierce Matabele driven from the Transvaal by the Boers?”

“Remember that the fierce Matabele are only Zulus, as are N’kulu and I. And why should they kill us, bukra? They know we have not come to take their lands, five of us against five thousand. We have nothing that they want—they do not know how to use our guns, and they have cattle in plenty. Did not the same doctor who found the great falls cross the Kalahari, even to Lake Ngami, nigh ten years past? The great Moffat *bwana* goes at will to the court of the Matabele king. Still there is no telling. Often men kill because they know no better, as dogs kill sheep. If you want safety, you must go to Capetown. But that too is a long way!”

“Nay, we will go and behold the great falls of the Zambezi, the wonder of God.”

He stood straight, with a little proud squaring of his shoulders that meant more than words, his eyes on mine. When I confided the plan to Trudi, something very like fear came into her face, but it was not fear; it was only awe. Happily she did not believe in a god in whose image her father had been created; in some childish desperation she had sought a deity who smiled sometimes, who liked the bright faces of little children and whose heart warmed to human hope, and she had found him, perhaps in the huts of the blacks, perhaps in the hills bathed in morning mist; and perhaps she had entreated him that she might go adventuring into the unknown North, but I doubted if she had ever asked to lay eyes on the great Zambezi.

So we set forth, Trudi, N’kulu, Kininni, Hagar, and I, and the oxen who knew naught or cared naught where we went, because their toil would never end until they died, and the two horses. In due course we came to the old trade route, running north beside the vast Kalahari, the great plateau of south central Africa. Sometimes the veld made deep inroads into its red sands, and here the wildebeest and springbuck roamed in immense herds, and the giraffe and the white rhinoceros showed their grotesque shapes; and sometimes the red sands ran deep into the grass, and here there was no life except the adder and the secretary bird, and we must dig for water in the beds of the dry dongas.

There was not a single day uncrammed with incident or adventure, hardly ever a long vista that did not make our eyes kindle with anticipation, almost

never a night that we did not bless the watch fire, the cooking pots, and our lowly beds.

During the journey there came upon me a fever, usually low and lingering, sometimes high, that only hard work and deep sleep could slake. It was the fever of a man for his mate. But it did not yet flush the bright brows of my companion, and anyway she was forbidden to me yet. There was still a contract to be fulfilled. I did not exactly know what it was, or completely believe in it, but I knew the penalty of its breach. That knowledge lay deep within my soul.

When after many weeks we had skirted or crossed the foothills of the Matapo range, we came into the watershed of the Zambezi. Traveling northwesterly at the edge of the grass, and directed by sheep grazers with whom N'kulu established some bond of language, we began to hear a low-pitched, slowly loudening roar as of distant thunder. Then, on an afternoon, we came in sight of the mile-wide river. It flowed serenely, blue as the sky, over level rock; its valley was wide, bordered by low hills; very little forest obscured the view although a cluster of wooded islands set in the river itself and their number seemed more as we gazed downstream. But there was nothing yet to account for a roar as of doomsday and a great cloud of rainbow-colored spray. From our viewpoint it seemed that the easy level flow was endless and immortal as time itself.

But when we ventured farther down the bank we discovered a continuous cataclysm, a scene first described to the civilized world only the year before, unsurpassed in grandeur. Suddenly the great river poured over the brink of a precipice into a vast, gloomy chasm. At every beat of the heart an immeasurable mass of water—probably a million gallons—leaped down and out of sight. The roar extinguished all other sound and continued on forever, giving the effect of some other world where there was no sound, or any living creature with the power of hearing. I felt in the midst of a supernatural silence. I turned to talk to my companions, but it was no use.

## CHAPTER XII

### The Discovery

Many tales were told of Neapolitan peasants herding their goats and tending their vineyards within a stone's throw of the vast maw of Mount Vesuvius. I thought of this in connection with a Bantu village just far enough upriver from the falls that the people could communicate by shouting in one another's ears. Moreover, since some of their pastures and maize fields lay on the opposite side, they thought nothing of crossing back and forth in boats. There was no considerable danger, they said. The river flowed like any other river, tranquilly and majestically, unwarned of its impending fall, not even quickening its pace, until the second of its doom. And because of the blown spray, the crops never failed from drouth.

If it were the wish of the *bwana*—I thought this last must be a Swahili word, brought by the Arab slave traders from their beautiful coastal cities on the Azanian Sea—they would take him and his M'sabu and his boys to an island near the brink of the falls, from which they could gaze down upon the fullness of its wonders, leave them there while they attended to their flocks and herds, and come for them soon after moonrise.

Trudi was eager to accept the invitation—and she had long ago learned to trust the prowess of the people and to rely on their capacity to survive—so I, relying on Trudi, gave ready assent. We pushed out in big, awkward looking bateaux that the blacks handled with assured, long-practiced skill. But when the chief had landed us on the island, with a two-quart bamboo stein of palm toddy, our three dark-skinned followers showed no inclination to come with us.

Kininni fingered the talisman that he wore on a wire at his throat. N'kulu made a sign with his forefinger that I had seen him draw only once before—it seemed to be a circle enclosing a triangle. The most seriously affected was Hagar. She could not bring herself to look at Trudi. She was close to tears and I thought that her conscience hurt her as no man's ever could.

But the boat had hardly pushed off when Trudi and I were glad of our aloneness. It was adventurous without being frightening, moving and mysterious, yet warmly companionable. The treeless island comprised about three acres. The grass was as rich and thick as an unmowed lawn in front of a Low Country mansion, kept eternally green by the intense sunlight and the blown spray. The latter dampened the whole scene but did not wet us; and

there was a rainbow every way we looked. The lower point of the island looked down into the gorge into which the vast flood poured with everlasting thunder, and the poetry of Poe and Coleridge came to my mind; while I fancied Trudi, who had never opened a book except the Bible, thinking of the mysteries of the Apocalypse.

We sat in the grass, our wonder never dying, ever renewed; and the feeling grew upon me of being alone in the world with my pale-haired Voortrekker—a world even now, this minute, in the process of creation, with new-raised mountains and great waters flooding and roaring, a world we had searched for and found far beyond the barriers of all other worlds; and it was like a dream from which I could not quite waken. Then a strange thing happened. She called my attention to what I thought at first was one of the village oxen, swimming the river above the island. Then the beast came to shore, sturdily wading through the shallows until his whole form loomed before our gaze; and he was not an ox but a wild Cape buffalo, one of the most formidable of animals, with heavily bossed, wide-flaring horns. We had no guns and if we waked his berserk fury he could easily kill us both; yet it did not occur to either of us to feel afraid. Instead our hands clasped and we watched him in delight. He in turn lowed impatiently at what he considered our intrusion in his private domain; then, discovering we meant him no harm and expected none from him, he could not resist lowering his great head and snatching a mouthful of the succulent grass.

For nearly half an hour he lingered at the opposite end of the island, not quite reconciled to our presence but reluctant to take his leave. Then again he entered the flood, and we only caught glimpses of his big horns and thrusting muzzle as he swam to shore.

By now the sun was going down amidst flaming clouds, and the rainbow mists lay everywhere over the water and land, drifted, and spread and changed; and we gazed down upon the deep-blue flood above us, majestic and serene, then into the black tumult in the gorge below. The many-colored mists changed to luminous silver as the sun set and a huge and incredible moon rolled up with mighty force over the eastern hills.

I drew at Trudi's hand, and she came closer to me. It might be that on the sixth day in Eden, God had not yet completed all His vast works, perhaps the mountains spouted fire, perhaps the sea and the land had not finished their division, or even the light from the darkness, so the two wonder-struck human beings sitting there could hardly believe in the wonder of their own creation, and when the man drew at the woman's hand, she needs must come to him. Trudi came, and lay across my breast. She was very like Eve, I

thought, in her innocence and wisdom, in beauty that no rainbow mist could equal, in strength, and in wile.

I kissed her wide full lips. In a little while they parted in warmer welcome of my kiss. This moon made me forget a setting moon of long ago. The moonlight flooded the whole scene, white and magical as that which once had shown me a lion invading my camp. Silver-white in my arms lay my captive, although I thought there was still a tint of pale gold in her long hair, and the deepening darkness of the sky was reflected in her eyes. I wished she would strip off her buckskin shirt, not in shame tonight but in pride, and she would become my woman, and the great surge of the river would solemnize our mating, and we would be given a glimpse of eternity in the waters falling without end; and how could any man-made temple be as hallowed as this river-girt island under the moon, or any scene as sublime?

We would inspan and outspan the length and breadth of Africa. She would bear young with the wild of the river in their hearts, the sweep of the veld in their souls; and I would have no more to do with Charleston and its tangled things; and I too would be an Afrikaner, forgetting my mother tongue, while our cattle thronged our kraals and our sheep grazed far. I would search no more for tiny crystals in the river gravels, of good only to tame folk in distant, crowded cities, and for kings and dukes and women of fashion, and instead I would seize upon an empire of my own, ten leagues long, five leagues wide, with grass and forest and springs, hills and valleys, rocky *kopjes* where lions dwelt; and my children and my grandchildren would have it for their domain.

We would hunt together in the high veld and the low veld and the middle veld of the thorn and mimosa forests. We would despoil the elephant of his great ivories, and the white rhino of his precious horn, and the bucks of their soft skins and muscle-building flesh.

The bond would be made now. I would renounce all other bonds. Trudi, will you be my woman? Will you take me for your mate? I love you, Trudi. Alone, neither of us is anything, only casuals of the night, but together we would be unconquerable.

My thoughts moved so strongly that my lips shaped words. She could not hear them, but she felt them against her lips. It seemed to me that she drew back a little, her eyes searching mine in the silvery light.

“What is your trouble, Edward?” she asked, her mouth pressed against my ear.

“I have none, but wanting you,” I answered in the same wise.

After a long pause, she addressed me again. “It is a guilty wanting that I can’t gratify.”

“I love you, Trudi. I swear it by the river.”

“The river falls. You must swear it by the sky, which never falls. You know that, no one better. I think that is where your trouble lies—something from long ago. But wait a little while. Perhaps all will be well.”

“I can’t wait. The moon is up and will soon start to set.” So I spoke, not knowing my own meaning.

“Yes, and it shows the boat putting out from shore.”

She kissed me with great tenderness, and rose.

## 2

The falling waters, with the power of a hundred thousand elephants and uncountable plow beasts, had gouged out of the rock a narrow gorge, through which they burst with unimaginable violence, scooped out a swirling, boiling whirlpool five hundred feet across, and chiseled out a Z-shaped canyon, dark and eerie as Xanadu’s, forty miles long. If there were diamonds in the rock, surely the cosmic cataracts would uncover them, wash them down, and dump them among the sedimentary gravels. So I gave up my notion of giving up my search, and we inspanned for a trek eastward, and began to sample the rock at favorable-looking places from the foot of the trough to the mouth of a northwest-flowing tributary that we could not ford.

Trekking up the waterway in search of a crossing, often a big donga—the child of the child of the old grandsire Zambezi—forced us many miles back into the veld. So our reunion with the river was an ever-recurring pleasure. For the rest, it was the happiest trek we had yet made, promising we knew not what. There were the usual number of delays, but we did not mind; except at good grass and water, we were never in any great hurry to arrive anywhere. Every day the sun rose and shone; in the twilight there was almost always rest and food for all. The land remained unspeakably wonderful; all five of us humans stayed marvelously alive from the sun-bleached tops of our heads to the tips of our toenails. I could not speak for our two horses and score of oxen, since they had their inmost being in a world I could not enter; but they were lean, in good appetite and health, and apparently never reluctant to start the next day’s march.

An event that began as another mishap, only to deepen in complexity and significance, occurred less than four weeks after our visit to Victoria Falls. The moon had rounded, but was not quite full, and it heaved up in a pale-blue

east nearly an hour before the sun pitched down in the golden west. I had ordered our gait quickened as much as the tired beasts and the rough ground would stand. The reason was a dun-colored cloud that was quickly spreading across the sky before a brisk wind, not yet high, out of the Matapo Hills. I intended to pitch at the first donga with a trickle through its sands, or at a “pan” if the water were not too brackish, or even at a water hole with white bones at its bottom and black scum on its top. The reason was, the wind was slowly but steadily rising. The veld here was open, the high veld without trees, whereby it would sweep free. And our oxen could stand up better to a gang of lions shadowing them in the grass than to a howling wind.

Suddenly, with only the briefest warning, it struck full blast. One minute I heard its low, deep-toned whistle in the distance and its singing swish across the grass; the next we were in the midst of it, buffeted by an unseen foe who seemed to attack from all directions at once. As usual, Kininni was driving, N’kulu and Hagar rode in the wagon; Trudi and I were on horseback. All the beasts were simultaneously panic-stricken; but although Trudi and I could exert some mastery over ours, Kininni’s control of the oxen was instantly lost. He could only hang on as, making nothing of the heavy brakes, they galloped across the plain.

They would not go far, I thought. The labor was too great. In the meantime, though, they might leap and stagger across a watercourse that would break our wheels. Instead, another misadventure, never coming our way before, changed instantly the shape of the night’s event. A great gust of wind broke some of the thongs that fastened to its frames the canvas covering of the wagon. It broke loose at the windward side and began to flap; in a few seconds more it tore free like a sail from a mast in a heavy gale and, with the wind in it, began spinning and rolling and tumbling across the plain.

It was the roof and side walls of our house, our protection against weather and wild beasts, the comfort of our followers, and an irreplaceable essential to our trek in this unpeopled land. Without stopping to think or taking note of any landmark, Trudi and I followed its grotesque flight. Across this stretch of level ground, it traveled at devilish speed. We had to gallop our horses to keep in sight of it. At a distance it looked like an enormous dirty-white bird flying close to the ground.

More than once it settled and lay still, only to take off again before we could get hand on it. Its flapping fantastic flight threw into panic a herd of zebras, already frightened by the gale, and it seemed to be chasing a family of sable antelope, a beautiful buck, his doe, and two calves—the first I had seen in this part of Africa—and what sense they made of the persistent pursuer, a

visitant indeed from some unknown world, was beyond human wit to imagine. I think that Trudi and I trailed it about two miles before it stuck fast in the spinny of low thornbushes. We seized it with the determination of a gentleman retrieving his topper on a gusty day on Meeting Street, only to look across into each other's widening eyes.

The windstorm was passing—I could already detect a diminishing of its force. The dun-colored cloud was unraveling into swiftly drifting skeins. The fact remained that we had broken the first rule of the Voortrekker, in becoming separated from our outfit. Any way we looked we could see herds of game—wildebeests, hartebeests, gazelles, zebra, eland, and giraffes—and nothing else but the wild, unpeopled veld. The sun had already set. The night would drop down upon us like vultures on a carcass. Haunted by danger in many forms, it would immobilize veld-wise N'kulu and Kininni as surely as ourselves. The only comfort I could think of, for the moment, was the rising and radiant moon.

Trudi was appraising the situation as correctly and more coolly than I.

“Edward, have you any friction matches?” she asked in an easy tone.

“No.”

I had carried none, in fact, since a portion of our precious store had been wetted and ruined in a sudden shower nearly a fortnight previously.

“Well, I guess it doesn't matter. There isn't any fuel—and we haven't an ax.”

I glanced at her saddle scabbard. It was empty, for the simple reason that she kept the newfangled pin-fire rifle in the wagon, afraid that a tight brush in the thorn thicket would damage its mechanism. However, I had the old smooth-bore in my scabbard. It was loaded, and I had two extra slugs and some powder and caps.

“We'd better forget about that gun,” she said, reading my mind.

“It would be a protection—in the last ditch.”

“We don't want to get in the last ditch. If you should wound a lion with it—or a rhino or a buffalo or a leopard—not to mention an elephant if one comes along this way—we'd be in what the English call a pretty kettle of fish.”

“Well, what are we going to do? I object to being eaten, at least without a struggle—”

“Edward, will you leave this thing to me?”

“With all my heart.”

“Then sit down and we’ll talk.”

“It seems an odd time, but—” Trying to grin, I sat down in the grass. She dropped down beside me.

“Edward, have you anything to eat?”

“Yes, some dried eland beef in my knapsack.”

“Good. My canteen is almost full of water. Edward, I’ve talked to many an old Afrikaner, and I’ll tell you exactly what I think we should do.”

“Please start as soon as possible.”

“About being eaten. You mean of course, by lions. This is the wild veld. There’s no reason to fear man-eaters this far from a village. The lions around here are respectable lions. They live on the game they know and avoid the kinds they don’t know.”

“How about leopards?”

“They’re not as trustworthy, but, on the whole, the same holds for them. Now it may be that horses smell very much like zebras. The first thing to do is take the bridles and saddles off our horses and turn them loose. They may find their way to the wagon in the dark. At least if a lion or a leopard starts to stalk them, they’ll have a fighting chance. In the morning we can make a fire with a wooden drill. I know how, although it takes a full hour, and it is a wearisome job. N’kulu will see the smoke and come for us.”

“I’m not worried about our being found—if we can get through the night.”

“The next thing is to make ourselves as comfortable as possible with this canvas, then go to sleep. I’ll tell you as near as I can hit it—where our danger lies. It won’t be from lions or leopards. They’re not coming near two strange motionless beings rolled in canvas. That is—I don’t think they will—at least closer than fifty feet. Remember they will be able to see us perfectly well but will have no clear recognition of us. Buffaloes will walk wide of our smell. Human beings must smell like the devil to the wild things. Elephants might come up, but I don’t think they’ll go into a rage and trample us. The elephants around here have had very little to do with human beings—I think they’ll go on about their business. That leaves only rhinos. And rhinos—as you know—are unpredictable.”

“What would be your guess of a rhino’s behavior?”

“I think he might snort and stamp, but if we keep quiet he’ll go away.”

She looked at me earnestly, anxious for me to believe her, her eyes clear and candid.

“Under the best of circumstances,” I remarked after a long pause, “it’s going to be quite an adventure.”

“Maybe not. Maybe we won’t have any visitors but jackals.”

3

Trudi was wrong in this last respect. We had hardly spread the canvas, leaving a fold on either side for our cover when the mountain chill crept down, when a small herd of buffaloes came striding into the dying wind with their muzzles thrusting; and, at sight and smell of us, thundered away snorting. The day died so peacefully that we could hardly say when the last of its light expired and the silver gray of the veld was moonlight only. We had a sense of expanding vision. The reason was, of course, there was no firelight to dim our eyes; although actually we could not see nearly as far as we thought; a shadow that looked to be a hundred feet distant was hardly thirty. Still the night was a notable one, the air changed by the wind, the dying of that wind leaving the animals restless, many of them finding themselves after their run on unfamiliar ground, the moon high, bright, and potent, the old magics working strongly, the spell of Africa, which no man can explain any more than he can deride it, laying thick upon the land.

For once, at least, my perceptions were sharply alert to the mood and music of the African night; my soul was wide open to its mystery. I was not in camp or on the way to camp; none of this moonlit savage sweep I had made my own; I was a visitor, a stranger, with nothing possible to do but watch, listen, and surmise. I was not the dominant animal, making my way at whatever cost to the inhabitants; in a certain sense I was at their mercy. Forces out there could move in upon me but I could not move upon them. I was subject to the night and hence to Fate in a way I had never before felt. I wondered what feelings crowded the vital, palpitant heart of my companion.

As we ate dried meat and drank from her flask we spoke very little, and then in hushed tones. Maybe we would be safer if we shouted. The idea came to me that we should do everything we could to emphasize our difference from the dwellers here, our humanity that just now was an idea strangely hard to grasp. But I had agreed to leave everything to Trudi. She had talked to many old Afrikanders; she herself was a young Afrikander who had stored away much lore and had many true feelings about the country. I would follow her lead. I would do what she thought best.

But there was one factor in the situation, one force, that I did not think she comprehended or perceived. It was an outlaw now, I thought, but that did not reduce its power. As she sat near me, in arm's reach, the moonlight on her face, I was more taken by her than ever before. My desire for her grew upon me until it possessed me wholly, leaving room for no other desire. I could not think of the future. Actually it seemed that there was none, that time had stopped, and there was no world other than this gray world of grass, great scattered stars, moonlight, loneliness, and wild beasts, with her somehow its child, and my sought-for prize. The shadows lay thick about me. The lonely miles ran unmeasured. There was no sound.

Above me the great stars shone, and would be shining a million years from now. But this now was mine—ours if Trudi would share it with me. The immensity of dimness and solitude had not sapped at my life. I felt it throbbing in my fingertips. She too was alive as the unseen creatures roaming the veld. Could I make her grasp the *now*? The rapture of one moment, the sense of being, the ocean sweep of desire?

Then out of that deeper darkness, into the misty moonlight, emerged three shapes. They were not attracted to us. They were only passing this way. But when they saw us, seated on the canvas, all of them stopped and gazed. I saw now that they were big male lions, with heavy manes. As they paused, they proposed prodigious latent power. One of them—the youngest, perhaps, growled in low, deep tones.

“Don’t shoot,” Trudi whispered.

I heard her in the silence and I sat still. The three beasts gazed for perhaps half a minute, then one of them—the oldest, perhaps—continued on his way. His companions joined him. On they strode, out of the moonlight, out of our vision, into the farther shadows.

When I looked again at Trudi she had removed the pin that held her hair in a glossy knot at the back of her head and let it stream about her shoulders.

“Now?” I asked. I could hardly speak but she understood.

“Yes, yes.”

Our hands flew. In a moment she lay gleaming. Her pride in her beauty revealed by the moonlight was greater than the pride of the lion in his strength. I saw her lips faintly curled and her wide-open luminous eyes. I saw her shaping more tender and touching than a gazelle's. The moon rose higher; the stars looked down; far away some jackals began to bark and that caused an old gray hyena, divorced from his pack, to wail and sob, then break into

horrid laughter. Other hyenas replied. Now the veld was awake and alive. But no wakefulness was as great as ours, no life as intense.

Did they know beauty, our companions of the night? The sulky rhino, the glowering buffalo, the stealthy leopard, the prideful magnificent lion, the elephant serene as the clouds of heaven until his wrath broke? Did they look up to the illustrious moon and wonder about the stars? It came to me that they did not, but they knew the tragic splendor of existence. They knew its travail, and some of its ecstasy.

We were one tonight. We had established some great, everlasting bond. No lovers were ever more fortunate since that forbidden hour in the Garden. There was nothing tawdry, nothing base; the sky was over us, the moon shone in glory, the stars burned far off; the secret was almost whispered in our ears; everything had meaning if we could only grasp it, the silence and the shadows and the solitude, the beauty and the bliss. The hyenas laughed and sobbed. The little jackals barked. Far away a lion roared, declaring his kingship of the plain. I did not know what life was, or what it meant, but it was no small mystery, no trifling boon.

## CHAPTER XIII

### The Stalk

The night was long, blissful, and epochal in our lives, and we spent it in each other's arms, sharing each other's sleep or wakefulness. Sometimes we were wakened by the drama of the veld that happened to come close to our bivouac. A jackal tried to steal my haversack, containing some dried meat we had saved for breakfast; a loiterer that we both thought was a leopard crept with not quite perfect silence through the thorn; a herd of zebra, stampeded by lions, broke across the donga, and a terror-stricken colt sprang by us almost in arm's reach. Yet I cannot say we were ever greatly afraid. There was a wonder of life upon us that precluded fear, even fear of life's sudden and violent stop in the African night on the open veld.

We saw the moon drop behind the hills, and there set in a brief interval of intense dark, with a great showing of the stars, before it began to roll back and give way to a barely perceptible grayness, preluding another day. Mistlike it paled and spread. Earth-vision came back to our eyes. Then we watched the tranquil, common, miraculous birth of morning. Color returned; landmarks stood forth; distance was recaptured; and the vultures flew forth to see what the night had brought them, and we thought of the wild hunters driven by heaviness of limbs and belly and heart to their dull lairs, although we could not see the slightest movement in the grass. Except for one herd of quaggas a long way off, our companions of the night had deserted us. Thank the blue skies that never fall, we still had each other.

Trudi began to make a wooden drill to spin with a string and make fire. I thought we could find a quicker means, so I cut off a little canvas that could be spared, doubled it and redoubled it with a salting of gunpowder, and, when kindling was cut and ready, fired into it. It began to smolder with a distasteful smell, and by blowing upon it we could have no doubt started a fire. The effort was suddenly needless, because Trudi's quick eye caught sight of N'kulu, approaching on horseback across the plain; and a moment later I made out the wagon, a mile or so at his rear.

I came quickly and took both of Trudi's hands.

"Isn't Zumbo the nearest European town?" It had marked the last westward shadow of Portuguese colonization.

"Yes."

“Is there a Dutch church there?”

“There was—the last that I heard. It may be that the Matshangana have come again. There’s been talk of it.” This blood-thirsty tribe had decimated most of the river towns twenty years before.

“Well, we’re going to try to get there. If we can’t make it, we’ll go elsewhere. We’ll look for diamonds on the way. If we find any, even a few, they’ll come in handy for buying cattle and sheep and Kaffirs and equipping our farm. If we don’t, we’ll take up land in the Transvaal, and begin the best we can. In any case, we’ll be man and wife long before then. Our children will have a name and can hold up their heads anywhere they go. Does that suit you?”

Her smile was broad although her eyes filled with tears.

“We won’t find any diamonds, but we won’t need any now,” she answered.

So we waited, properly, for keen-eyed N’kulu to ride up. He looked from Trudi’s face to mine, and the impassivity of his own face was not as perfect as usual.

“Hagar as well as Kininni are in the wagon,” he reported blandly. “Both horses are safe, and so are all the oxen. It won’t take long to put back the canvas. The evil spirits struck at us, but the good spirits came to our help. And for that I will make offerings to them all my days.”

“I will do the same, the best that I know how.”

We were wonderfully happy, we five people, two whites and three blacks, with our wagon and oxen and horses and guns and adventure, and the vast spaces of Africa in which to have our being. We were making for Zumbo on the Zambezi; and we could have got there in no time by trading our outfit for native boats, but instead we chose to go by land, encircling the great tributaries until we could find a ford, and thereby we spent our days on the high veld, the middle veld, or the low veld, and our nights under the stars; and almost never did we cross another wagon track; and for days on end we did not come in sight of a native village. Our fare was meat and mealies and, very occasionally, roots and berries which one or other of the three Negroes identified as being good to eat. Here and there we looked for diamonds without finding a chip of one, but quite frequently we found ivory, almost imperishable among the moldered bones of a great bull, and the tusks that we added to our growing store would bring something like a Portuguese peso a pound at the river town, enough to replenish all that we had expended for gunpowder and corn and the few other things that the land did not supply.

The wonderful land! It was rugged, sun-baked, and lean, very rarely cool and green with forest, but it suited perfectly us rugged, sun-baked, lean travelers upon its illimitable veld. For one thing, there was no safety. A constant alertness was demanded of us, and that kept our senses sharp and our nerves in tune. There was always the possibility of a war party of Matshangana, starting out on a raid and wanting a good augury of victory, wetting their assagais in our blood for the fun and Devil of it. Manikusa, their king, was an old man, and it was said that he could no longer control his plumed and painted warriors; so we journeyed many a long mile out of the way to avoid their kraals. There were tsetse flies that could kill a hulking eland as easily as us; and there were elephants and rhinos in the thorn, buffaloes in the wallows, lions and leopards and black mambas in the grass.

But there were also herds of high-jumping 'mpallas, little gazelles with whirling tails, hartebeests that stood foolishly and gazed, and wildebeests that ran in frantic half-circles like Western bison. We got on good and almost intimate terms with giraffes, and wished to borrow their long necks to spy out the plains. We slaughtered an eland now and then, and stopped and smoked the meat, for we could never tell when we would come on hungry country. We enjoyed the sight of steinboks, klipspringers, water bucks, roan antelopes, quaggas, and zebras, but we stopped and stared when, now and then, we came in sight of the marvelous sable antelope, handsome beyond belief, or the great kudu with twisted horns. To hyenas and jackals we paid scant heed—they could not help being scavengers of low degree—but when we spied their cousins, the wild dogs, the most pitiless killers in a pitiless land, we stalked them with our guns and laid some of them low.

## 2

One fresh and fragrant morning, about two months after Trudi's and my bivouac on the moonlight veld, she had something important to tell me. I knew it from the look on her face and the way she tagged after me as I went about my chores; and when I walked down to the spring she came with me. Her conduct was dignified in the extreme—she could pass for an Afrikaans *vrouw* of the strictest sect—but there was a pronounced shine in her eyes.

“When do you think we will get to Zumbo?” she asked, in carefree tones.

“At this rate, just about never,” I answered, wondering at her.

“In three months, do you suppose?”

“Perhaps. I didn't know you were in a hurry.”

“Well, we’re to be married in Zumbo—are we not?—and I don’t want those fat Portuguese women to laugh at me.”

“Why should they laugh?”

“Why shouldn’t they? The only thing missing from the joke would be a father with a gun. In three months—well, not one of my skirts will fit me.”

I sat down, partly from weakness, and made a little sign she knew, and she came and lay in my lap. When I had kissed her to my heart’s passing content, she blurted out her triumphant story. Even a month ago she was sure—the mealies had lost their taste, she could not tell eland meat from wildebeest—she dreamed constantly of long strings of fish—she craved pepper sauce—her nipples swelled and itched. She had not told me then lest she be mistaken, and I build in vain. Now she was sure. But there was nothing remarkable about it. Fertility was the order of things, in case of both man and beast, in sunburned Africa. A Boer husband, being told such news, would barely take his pipe out of his mouth to listen. Unless one of us came to an early death—and I remembered, and could not forget Death’s ubiquity in this vast, new, half-peopled, accursed and blessed land, how he was the greatest Voortrekker of us all—why, it would be only the first of many.

“Will it be a son or a daughter?” I asked.

“How would I know?”

“You have already asked Hagar, and she has told you.”

“Hagar is a Kaffir woman. I don’t believe in her signs. Now in a few months, I myself can tell—by the way I carry him, whether high or low—but you would think me a fool to put any faith in an ostrich hen taking off while the cock stayed and strutted, or a male hyena coming into camp in broad daylight, and stealing some meat I had just dressed. Now there was one sign which, although I do not believe in it, is in good repute with the Boer women as well as with the Kaffirs. In the week of my conceiving—and Hagar and I too know what week it was—three times a bull elephant moved up out of his herd to trumpet at us. Not once did an old cow give the warning. It may be so—or—it may not be so. All that I know is—as sure as the grass will die and the rains come again—of us two, there will soon be three.”

“All I know is, we will make a little haste to Zumbo.”

We did so, and came to the ancient Portuguese town in a little over a month. It stood at the very edge of white man’s country, at the mouth of the great south-flowing tributary known as the Loangwa, as long as the Hudson, and which is said to rise beyond the farther reaches of Myasa Land. In some

respects the town was thriving. There was a lively traffic between the Portuguese traders and friendly tribes of natives for ostrich feathers, ivory, and slaves, the latter mainly captives of the Matshangana. Yet I could not escape the feeling of it hanging on the edge of an abyss. Out of the west poured the great Zambezi, becoming even greater with the influx of the Loangwa; and vast countries lay out there, peopled with blacks and wild beasts, and only a few adventurers dared pass the confines of the town.

The merchants with their gold seals took little interest in Trudi and I. We had seen the Great Falls of the Zambezi, we had crossed the red sands of the Kalahari, we had lived and thrived in black kingdoms where, according to legend, every white throat was quickly cut; but we had a small, cheap outfit, and nothing to sell but a few tusks. Meanwhile, though, we looked at them with a certain condescension. They knew nothing about Africa and it was useless to try to tell them. They had never seen the herds of wild elephants drifting silent as smoke clouds through the thorn. When the sun set and the moon rose and the dark was bewitched with silvery light, they went inside their houses and closed the doors.

It turned out that we had arrived at Zumbo at the wrong time. Heer van Lydeck, the pastor of the small Dutch church that had found root in this foreign soil, had taken off for Sofala a few weeks before and would not return for another month; meanwhile, there was not a single ordained minister or lay figure in the town who could perform the Protestant sacrament of marriage. For my part, I would have liked to have the rite performed by one of the old kindly Portuguese priests; but it would be outside his province and authority, even if it were his desire, so Trudi's and my only choice was to await the minister's return. Meanwhile, there were tributaries of the Loangwa whose gravels I wished to scan.

What seemed a far more minor matter, yet which caused me a deeper uneasiness, was the circumstance of our arrival in Zumbo during the stay of a party of men known far and wide as Harvey's Hustlers. There was nothing especially unique about them. Small gangs of adventurers had begun to operate throughout South Africa, mainly renegade Englishmen and Boers, who managed to play both ends against the middle in the various native wars but whose main source of living was an illicit trade in slaves. Harvey's band consisted of only six men, including himself, yet I had heard of them first in Delagoa Bay, and some farmers I had met muttered about them in hate and fear.

I came face to face with them in the main trading post of the town, sitting about a table drinking Cape brandy. They were quiet enough but their

expression and manner breathed arrogance and cruelty. A Portuguese half-caste clerk, called Alfonso, speaking oddly accented but fluent English, took pleasure in identifying and portraying for my benefit its various members.

“Harvey is the one with the red hair,” he told me. “I think he is a Scot, but he came here by way of Australia, and many say he is a fugitive from Botany Bay. He is a wonderful shot. He boasts that he has killed eighteen Kaffirs and four whites, including a woman who was false to him. Notice the gold ring he wears on his right hand. It is shaped like a serpent and identifies him in any company, but he doesn’t care—it is his boast!”

I noticed other signs of natural leadership, including the boldness of its ready assumption, with quick and positive answers, in a low, resonant voice, to his followers’ remarks. A little over medium height, he was powerfully built, quick of movement, with restless energy; and his most outstanding feature was very bright, light-colored eyes with the intense marksman’s glance.

“Why don’t the authorities hang him?” I asked.

“The authorities, say you. Who are they? Who rules South Africa, now that it is divided between the English, the Boers, the Portuguese, the Germans, and half a dozen native kings? No one dares restrain him, much less hang him. And his main lieutenant is the Arab, Mustapha, sitting at his right. Next to Tippoo-Tib, he may be the most successful slaver in South Africa.”

Alfonso went on to tell me of the other four. One was a burly Boer, called Fritz. One was a small, dark, graceful Portuguese, named Bernardino. Still another was of Irish antecedents, gentleman-born according to his appearance and manner, but with a slow, evil smile; he was known only as Sligo. The last was my own countryman, and a Southerner, I thought, to judge by his olive skin, brown eyes, slow speech, and high spirits. His companions called him Culpepper, whether or not for the old Virginia town Alfonso did not know. He was the only one of the company who, obviously, had drunk more Cape brandy than he could control.

“What are they doing here?” I asked.

“Resting—between enterprises,” Alfonso answered sonorously. “Perhaps they will soon take off for Capetown. Harvey has a woman there, I hear—one good to look upon, who works at White’s.”

I did not wish to become involved in their next enterprise, however minor. Then and there I gave over for the present a trivial, although pleasant dream of having my last diamond, almost as good as the one I had sold Marcel,

sellable for about five hundred Cape dollars, set in a ring or a brooch or a pin for Trudi by a clever Dutch goldsmith in the town. Harvey's Hustlers might quite possibly hear about it and they might be so down-at-heels that they would condescend to take an active interest in it. Anyway Trudi would not know what to do with such a ring, pin, or brooch, except to love it very dearly and carry it in a packet at her throat and sleep with it at night. I had already learned she had never owned one single bauble that could be called jewelry; her father associated such with the Whore of Babylon, Actually she had never had a real doll either, only a wooden mannikin carved for her by one of the Kaffirs, and which she had hidden from her father. However, if the skies did not fall too soon, she was going to have a living, breathing doll to make up all her loss.

Indeed, after a close survey of the six bushwhackers—from whom our party had no real protection except our rifles—I thought best to get shed of their company as soon as possible. To that end I spoke freely of Tete, four hundred miles downriver and at present the liveliest of the Portuguese settlements; and since it lay below Kebrassa Rapid, the journey was frequently made by land in ox wagons. Once clear and out of sight of Zumbo, I intended to double back to the Loangwa, whose gravels seemed more promising than any I had sampled.

We completed the maneuver, and after five days' journey found a beautiful camp site at the edge of Basenga country. On a day that a caster of my horoscope, supposing I had ever dealt in such occult matters, would have marked with an esoteric mark which only he could read, all my companions took themselves off in search of an "elephant graveyard" which a wandering Shenzi root-digger had told N'kulu lay only ten miles distant.

Like most Afrikanders, Trudi believed in elephant graveyards. The belief centered in the notion that wild elephants, sensing the approach of death, went off to certain grounds to breathe their last, and their tusks could be found there in wealth-bringing numbers. I did not believe the story, not through lack of wonder at this most amazing and inscrutable of beasts, but because we ourselves had found tusks the length and breadth of the veld; but both N'kulu and Kininni thought it very likely, and their boyish eagerness to go with the M'sabu and Hagar was stronger than I could resist. Anyway I was not willing for them to undertake the little trek alone.

So they went forth happily, Trudi on horseback, the three blacks in the wagon. Apparently they had not the slightest doubt of coming back with the wheels creaking and the oxen groaning from the load of ivory. As for me, I was rather glad of the free day. I meant to go to a small tributary of Loangwa,

deeply scoured and subject to great floods, and to wash its gravels for small crystals, colder than most pebbles, and greasy to the touch. I rode my horse, and brought the old smooth-bore musket in my saddle scabbard. Besides powder and balls, I had one of the washing pans, and plenty of dried meat for my day's fare. After tying my horse in a small spinny of dwarf mimosa trees, I went quite hopefully about my search.

I did not believe in elephant graveyards but I had never denied what could only be called human intuition. The day had seemed a strange one from the moment of its breaking until now. I could not pick out a thing wrong with it; the birds and animals behaved in their usual fashion; yet the heat and the flurries of breeze and the shadows on the rocks and the silent flow of water all seemed to be a little off-center, slightly distorted in some way, as things appear in dreams; or perhaps I was slightly feverish from a touch of malaria, or maybe I had been bitten by a tsetse fly, and this was the beginning of the swift decay of my brain.

My only main concern was for my companions. Although they had struck off alone onto the veld a hundred times before, today was the day I should not have let them go. Africa was an accursed country—Isaiah had said so in some of the most ringing words ever written in Hebrew. Maybe the Devil had created it out of the residue of the rest of the world's creation while God's back was turned. These great rivers, these endless plains, this forever grass, the *kopjes* and the sudden luxurious dongas and the lean thorn. Africa had been too good to us lately. She was up to something, and I wished that I knew what.

Africa, don't strike down Trudi. Take me and N'kulu and Kininni and even Hagar, we are grown up, we have lived devilish long already, we are the run and ruck of black and white people whom the Devil can't hurt very much, we are cannon fodder in the war between good and evil; if we die, to hell with it anyhow, the grass will come up just the same after the rains, the little zebra colts will chase their mothers, the wild pigeons will hurtle by in the twilight, the evil spirits will not meet in great festivity for a victory won. But Trudi is different, she is unique, I found her in evil's very den, yet her eyes were blue and her hair golden and her heart high. I don't know her to this day. I have no idea what goes on in the mind within her mind which is her secret self. I have won her love and her favors, to which I have no more right than to a gift of wings by a visiting angel. Don't do anything to stop her wide, slow smiles. If I can't have her, I'll not protest; she is too much luck for a gambler like me who figures the percentage; but let her live on under your fiery sun; let her ride like some strange yellow-haired centaur until her labor

pains begin, then let her give birth and keep her living, breathing doll without too great a price.

But thinking this, I kept on washing gravel. No, I would not yield to these superstitious apprehensions; I was an American, a Southerner, a Charlestonian, a civilized fellow, with some pretensions to being a gentleman, not a savage living in a beehive house in a nameless village. Perhaps I paid more attention to the business than usual. It was nearly noonday now, there was nothing to fear from lions or leopards; and no cover for elephants, rhinos, and buffaloes. And so it was that a human voice, rising suddenly out of the low thickets on the riverbanks, a voice speaking English, shook me to the marrow of my bones.

“Put up your hands, you Yankee bastard,” the voice commanded.

I turned in that direction. I could see no one.

“Are you addressing me?” I asked, as though I were drunk. “If so, you’ve made a mistake. Bastard or no, I’m no Yankee.”

Farther down the bank, someone laughed rather shrilly.

“He’s got you that time, Sligo,” the laughter said. “He’s no more a Yankee than I am, but if he doesn’t put up his hands by the time you can count ten, give him a two-ounce slug through his gut.”

I waited hardly a second, then put up my hands. It did not seem likely to me that Sligo would shoot—there are few things as valueless as a human corpse—but authority rang in the voice and for a second or two I thought it might be Harvey’s, although it had a Virginia instead of an English or Australian accent; and I did not know the game, its rules, or its stakes. My gun was leaning against a rock about twelve feet distant. Unless I missed my guess, I was one against six.

But only five came out of thorn through which they had stalked me with consummate care and skill. The missing one was none other than Harvey himself—I looked in vain for his red head and compact form in the shiny-eyed quintet. It struck me then that this was only a minor enterprise on the part of his hustlers—he had probably sent them out while he remained in Zumbo with a bottle and a half-caste woman—and that might mean that I might not be murdered, only beaten and robbed—but there was something wrong with that argument. I could find its flaw if I looked carefully enough.

The five came up to me, and I could tell by the way they kept out of one another’s sights that they were used and trained to concerted attack. Instantly I identified every one. I had not forgotten a single face or any fact of the brief

account given me of them by the Portuguese half-caste named Alfonso. The name of the handsome, hirsute Arab was Mustapha. If ordinarily second in command, he would naturally be first in his chief's absence, but evidently he had yielded the office to the American called Culpepper, probably because he could not speak English. Sligo was the renegade Irish gentleman with the slow, evil smile. The burly Boer with gross features was called Fritz. Bernardino was a small swarthy Portuguese with grace in every movement.

It was Sligo who came closest to me—too close for his own safety, except for the gun barrels of his fellow bushwhackers leveled upon me with long-practiced ease. I did not know his intention, but I felt the cold, swift surge of terror. In the middle of one of his smiles—without crossing the aim of the guns—he struck me a short, terrific blow on the side of the jaw. It was as though he had a rock in his hand, and I went down like a polled ox. Although I did not quite lose consciousness, when again I realized time and place, the scene had changed. I lay in short grass, some sixty yards back from the riverbank. My hands and feet were bound by rawhide thongs to deep-driven pegs—in the jargon of the English army I had been “pegged out.” My five captors stood about me, talking jollily in Afrikaans, meanwhile waiting for me to regain my wits.

“He’s all right, now,” Culpepper remarked. “Sligo, find out what we want to know.”

“You heard that?” Sligo asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ve been watching you wash the gravels. In fact, we heard about it before we came to Zumbo. What are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for gold,” I answered promptly. “The rivers here are very like the rivers in California—almost drying up in summer, high in flood.”

“He talks well,” remarked Fritz, laughing.

“Where do you expect to find it?” Sligo went on. “You must have some clue.”

“I look at the foot of rapids and in eddies where heavy minerals would naturally settle.”

“Have you found any yet?”

“No, sir, I haven’t.”

“Search him, Bernardino,” Culpepper commanded.

The little Portuguese did so. When he opened a little gazelle-skin bag I carried in my shirt pocket, at first he stared dumb-foundedly at the pebble-sized stone it contained. Suddenly his dark skin flushed, his eyes widened and shone, and he passed the stone to Culpepper in stunned silence.

“Great God, it’s a diamond!” my countryman broke forth.

“It couldn’t be,” Sligo answered angrily. “Everyone knows there are no diamonds in Africa.”

“Look at it, you Irish fool!”

Sligo took it between his fingers, examining it with what seemed expert care. His eyes bulged strangely, then he turned on me with a malignant expression, frightening as any human look I had ever seen.

“Where did you get it? Speak up.”

“A native found it, somewhere in Cape Colony.”

“You’re lying. It was found close to here. Well, you’d better not lie to us. Fritz, you and Mustapha bring a big rock.”

“How big a rock?” Fritz asked with terrifying calmness.

“I said a big one. As big as you and he can carry. Two or three hundred pounds.”

“What are you going to do?” Culpepper asked. It was his last attempt to resume a command that everyone here perceived he had lost.

“Evidently you don’t know legal procedure.” Now there had come a new note in his voice, one which he thought was humorous and which I recognized as exultant, a voice heard in drunken men but almost never unassociated with cruelty or violence. “Haven’t you bloody Americans ever heard of Old Bailey? The wardens had a way of getting confessions, they did so! They used it with the law’s consent till only a few years ago—I dare say they still use it on the sly. Leave this thing to me. Fritz, you and Mustapha hurry up with that rock. I’ll teach you blatherskites something before we’re through.”

He had not taught me anything yet—I already knew of nothing quite so vicious in the whole tainted human family as a renegade Irish gentleman—but he had told me something. It was, very simply, that my appointment was not only with torture, but with murder. The latter went without saying. It was an outcome as fixed now in the minds of these five bushwhackers as in my own mind. The reason was that, no matter what I told or did not tell, in the end they would not dare let me remain alive. They could catch slaves and by

greasing a few hands sell them to Arab dealers; if they whipped some of them to death, the evidence could be easily concealed, the matter buried with the bones with only hyenas to dig them up and gnaw them. But I was a citizen of a distant but redoubtable nation. An American consul had his offices in Capetown; English governors must answer to foreign offices in London. I might have more money than they guessed. I might have influential friends.

I could not keep my brain from arriving at this obvious conclusion. At the same time I could not keep from remembering that once before I had been sentenced to an ugly death, only to be rescued. But before there was sheltering dark into which to leap. Now I lay in a blaze of sunlight, on an open prairie almost naked except for patches of low scrub and scanty grass. I did not have all night for my luck to change, for wonderful cards to begin to fall; I had no more than an hour or two at most, and perhaps only a few minutes. The time seemed to rush as Fritz and the glowering Arab arrived with the rock. They had got it from rocky ground about fifty yards distant; by their grunting and straining it must weigh three hundred pounds. Oddly enough, I had a good idea what they would do with it. Somewhere—sometime—I had read about Old Bailey.

“Lay it square in the middle of his belly,” Sligo directed.

It was done. Because at first I braced my muscles against it, I was aware of no great pain. But this could not last long.

“Where did you find that diamond?” Sligo demanded.

“It was found by a native in a washhole in the Vaal River.”

“Why aren’t you on the Vaal, looking for more?”

“I looked carefully, but couldn’t find any more.”

“Culpepper, you and Bernardino bring another rock.”

Used to obeying orders, the two went off. The others waited and the Arab told a joke in broken English, but Sligo did not laugh at it; it would be beneath the present dignity of his captaincy. I remembered that I had seen these five men only once before. Their roots and my roots had no mutual ground; they were as much strangers to me as would be a mob of lions. There was no heritage of hatred between us. They were killing me for the sake of a little carbon crystal. It was not a fitting end to my adventure. I deserved better than this of the gods; I had striven hard, and now and again I had acted gentlemanly. Yet there was the blue sky, with its ever-watchful vulture; there was the sun blazing in my eyes; around me grew the mean thorn and the

yellow grass; and the growing pain in my belly did not quite banish its sickening cold.

Help, if you are going to come, come soon! If there is no help for the seamstress's son, for a bastard named Edward Stono who tried to go too far and to climb too high, may the dark come quick! The great players often died young, Faro Jack told me so. Maybe I was not a great player, only a piker, the word used by the Forty-niners in Panama; but many of that ilk likewise died young. They did not like it any better than the great ones. They were as cold and forlorn and lonely in the deeps of their souls. Yet almost all of them stood up to it, when it became unavoidable. It might be vanity, but, again, it might be pride.

Culpepper and Bernardino came grunting with the rock.

“Lay it on his chest,” Sligo directed.

They did so, and its weight was over two hundred pounds. It had a sharp corner that dug into my breastbone; I could hardly lift my chest to breathe.

“Where did you get the diamond?” Sligo asked me.

“I’ve already told you.”

He looked up, with his slow, evil smile. “You bullies bring more rocks. I’m through wasting time on him. My patience”—and this sounded so well that he repeated it—“my patience is exhausted. We’ll put ’em on his legs and arms as they used to do at Old Bailey. We’ll find out where that diamond came from, and why he’s washing this stinking little donga. I think a hundred-pounder on his head might help him remember. If it doesn’t, I know one little trick. I hate to play it on a white man, it’s a trick too good for Kaffirs, but he seems to want it—”

At that instant the top of his head flew off, looking oddly like a chip when one is cutting wood, and he whirled around very strangely and fell down. About the same instant—out of some thorn or grass not far distant—came the loud roar of a rifle.

In the next few seconds only one of this five left alive remained motionless and silent, and I was that one. I could not help myself, being pegged out and weighted down with five hundredweight of stone. The other four became violently active, yet with a curious dreamlike lack of consequence. Both Culpepper and Mustapha snatched up their guns, which were near at hand; then stood pivoting back and forth, looking for a target. I saw both of their faces and there was something irresistibly comic in their popping eyes and ghastly gray faces, despite their undoubted bravery. Oddly

enough, Bernardino fell flat. Probably he had done it in some shooting affair long ago, and it had saved his life, and he could think of nothing else. Fritz broke forth in an Afrikander howl. The words made sense, but the complete absence of expression on his face, as though it had changed to wood, gave them an unforgettable oddness.

“Where did it come from? Tell me, Dummkopf. Where did that shot come from?”

No one could answer. The seconds ticked off, and I think a little hope was born in the hearts of the two riflemen; it might stand to reason that whoever fired the shot was now sneaking away through the grass. But disillusionment came soon. Mustapha the Arab never experienced it, never knew it; but the three others could tell him about it, if they should meet again. A black spot appeared suddenly on his forehead; at the same second the rifle boomed. Mustapha appeared to keep his position, his rifle thrusting, for a long half-second more; then he pitched forward and down.

“Oh, God!” cried the man called Culpepper with what might be easily mistaken for fervent piety, But when he looked for the way to run, he could not find it. When he tried to remember which way Mustapha was facing when the bullet struck, he could not remember.

“Rush him, before he can load again,” cried Fritz. “He has a double-barreled gun but he can’t shoot again—”

No one believed Fritz; at least no one would follow him on the brave venture. Fritz alone ran forth, howling, in the general direction of the fire; now I could understand how such a seemingly stupid man could have a place among Harvey’s Hustlers. He ran about forty yards, a formidable figure, brave as a lion, perhaps, but more suggestive of a rhino charging, before the gun roared for the third time. He toppled sideways, indicating that the bullet had struck him in the side of the head. Then there was a sudden silence. The only movement was that of Bernardino, creeping away on his hands and knees. Culpepper was watching the grass, ready to shoot at its first movement. He too was a brave man.

“You’re next, Culpepper,” I told him.

“Then, by God, you’re going with me.”

He turned and raised his gun barrel, intending to brain me. He was not quick enough, for a rifle roared, the piece dropped from his hands, his face was flooded by a great gush of blood, and he dropped down with his friends.

Only Bernardino was left. He was still creeping through the grass, but he had gained a little distance, and suddenly he trusted to speed. Leaping up, he ran away from the fire. I had never seen a human being cover ground so fast. In a few seconds he was more than a hundred yards from the scene of slaughter. Hope would be rising in his heart by now; he was going to make it; he would live on; of all those so vividly alive a few seconds ago, he was the lone survivor. No one could aim true at this range; no bullet could carry death this far.

Perhaps he was naming over his long-neglected saints as a rifle boomed once more. Far out on the plain the little, scampering figure seemed to stumble. He fell with his legs and arms wide-stretched. That he was head-shot I did not doubt.

Then a wail rose in the grass in front of me, and up out of it sprang Trudi, her rifle in her hands, and she came running toward me, bawling like a child.

## CHAPTER XIV

### I Did It All Alone

Along with our activities, fairly brisk in the next few days, there came to pass a mystery that I have never solved. After her crying spell, Trudi got in the wagon and went to sleep; on awakening it seemed that she had forgotten the desperate drama in which she had played the main part. She never spoke of it again or indicated any conscious knowledge of its occurrence; no doubt she was suffering from shock; and for several nights her sleep was troubled by bad dreams. The only help I knew for the latter trouble—and to my great joy it seemed to work—was to hold her fast in my arms.

None of us mentioned the matter to her, whether a wise course I did not know. After leaving the scene, none of us ever returned to it. We did not give Christian funerals to the victims of the brief and positive gunfire; we gave them African funerals. Before leaving the scene, N’kulu retrieved my diamond from Sligo’s pocket, and I unleathered and set free five horses tied behind a thorn thicket. It pained N’kulu and I think Hagar to leave five good percussion rifles where they fell; Kininni cared for none of such things. Our point was not to conceal evidence of what had happened, but to call no attention to it.

The veld had swallowed up more than one vivacious party without anyone ever to say what had become of them.

Meanwhile I did not forget that when we had first laid eyes on a party of bushwhackers, it had numbered six, not five; and its leader, a red-headed man of parts, remained unaccounted for. His name was Harvey. He had come to Africa from Australia, probably a convict settlement. A successful slave trader, he was no doubt hand in glove with some important Portuguese officials; and the tale of his participation in various native wars could mean that he had influence with some kings and chiefs. Within hours he would be wondering what had happened to his band. Their loss might put a crimp in him; he might be afraid to bluster any more and he would vanish in the Blue. But he might be a zealot of some kind, so we inspanned and we trekked without delay.

In the next month we saw large regions of Africa. My excuse for keeping to our rough, jouncing way, instead of outspanning for a good rest, was always a river, a creek, or a donga not far off, whose gravels I wished to sample. On the whole we kept to the high veld, where there was almost no

timber, but great visibility and maneuverability. We were hundreds of miles from the scene of execution, in the vague frontiers of Matshangana country, before I felt sure all danger of retaliation had passed.

Now we could outspan for a good rest. There lay the wide plain that a jackal could hardly cross unseen; nearby was a “pan” of remarkably sweet water. True, I did not like the country, for no reason better than its looking ugly to me, with its short, half-dead grass, patches of red sand, dwarf thorn, and—which must be temporary—apparent lack of game. There were plenty of hyenas and jackals and fox, more villainous-looking wild dogs and grotesque aardvarks than I had ever seen in one area; and the skies were dotted with vultures and the grass alive with snakes, but I looked in vain for a single herd of wildebeests, quaggas, zebra, ostrich, ’mpallas, hartebeest, springbucks, eland, or kudu. Maybe it was the wrong day. Maybe a hunting party of Basenga had come through here lately. I did see a white rhinoceros, and one she-elephant. But the former was running off as though the Devil were after him, soon lost in clouds of dust, and the latter was so tall and gaunt and wasted that I thought of her as a death-elephant, bringing a message from her infernal master.

We made camp, and ourselves as comfortable as possible. By loading the smooth-bore with small shot, I shot enough guinea hen to give us a meal of fresh meat. In the middle of the night, Trudi wakened me with a long kiss. A weak and waning moon was just rising over the plain, but the stars blazed in splendor; and as the jackals laughed and sobbed, she and I recaptured the wonder of our night on the veld, after the wind had died. It seemed that truly her lithe and lovely flesh had become one with mine. She was my appointed bride. I had found her here in emptiness and silence, on the endless plains. The life of my life was expanding within her womb.

“Where are we going, when we leave here?” she asked.

“We can go back to Zumbo. The minister will be there by now. I want us to be married. As you said—we mustn’t let the Dutch *vrouws* laugh too long.”

“I don’t want to go there.”

“Then we will go to Lydenburg or Pretoria. What does it matter where?”

“Don’t you want to go back to—what is the place?—and leave me here?”

“Charleston? No, I’ll never return.”

“There is a girl there. You’ve spoken of her once or twice. She is very beautiful and highborn.”

“Her name was Salley Sass.”

“Do you still love her? If you do, take me to Port Elizabeth and leave me with my aunt, and go back to her.”

“Trudi, I don’t think anyone ever quite gets over being in love. It changes every cell of the body. But she married another, and now I’m free of her. Sometimes it’s a wonderful thing to be free of those you love. I don’t have to woo her any more. I don’t even have to think of her. Now I’m in love with you. I don’t want to be free from you—I want to be bound to you—the more bonds, the better. Will you love me always? Will you never leave me as long as you live?”

“I’ll love you as long as I live. But tonight the jackals sing of Death. I can hear them.”

“Their song is the same as always. This is Africa, where Death is always just at hand, waiting in the grass. But both of us have the capacity to survive. We are fit to be Afrikaners. Will you join with me, Trudi? I won’t feel satisfied until we’ve knelt before a minister—and gone through the old ceremony—and taken the vows. Then I’ll tell you what I want. It’s not diamonds and it’s not gold, and it’s not to be a gentleman in Charleston, or to own a great plantation. I want an African farm. I want sheep in the fold and cattle in the kraal and babies in the cradle. When can we start, Trudi? I’ve found myself at last. Where in all this vast Africa shall we go to make our home? The diamond I have will bring four hundred, maybe five hundred Cape dollars. I have a little more, besides our outfit. All my life I’ve followed will-o’-the-wisps. Now I want something real.”

She considered a while, noting my wild, half-formed thoughts, not blaming me for them, drunk as I was from the night and the freedom and the exultation of life itself, but not letting them cloud the clarity of her ideas. At last she answered in her own steadfast way.

“Edward, I think we had better go to the Transvaal frontier. Many of the Doppers are leaving their big holdings, and going into Bechuanaland to start new, and a little money will buy a great deal in land and kraals and even cattle. Tomorrow let us inspan and see what we can find.”

Happy, we drifted off to sleep. Later a bleak dream moved upon me like an evil spell, and all my springs of joy were poisoned, and I wandered all alone in an infinite gray landscape. When I called to Trudi again and again she did not answer. Then it must be that I moaned in my sleep for suddenly her arms were about me, her kiss warm and living on my lips, and I knew she was with me still, and that was more joyous than life being with me still. In a

way they were the same. When I was in her arms, I felt the flush of life. I grasped the enormous void between being and non-being. I had little need of other victories; the vanity that Clay Hudson had seen in me required little food; my spirit rose out of me and soared.

Even so, the morning just now breaking, the merest gray cast on the face of the landscape, conveying not yet color or depth, but only the outline of things, seemed unaccountably sinister. Thank God we were breaking camp today. The sooner our wheels began to turn, over rocks or anthills or endless grass or the barren red sand, that much quicker I could know that a curse was lifting off me, or that it was imaginary to start with. Africa! Perhaps this was its dark heart. Maybe we had stumbled on it, a *land shadowing with wings beyond the rivers of Ethiopia*. The vultures were not up yet, but soon their shadows would flick across the ground.

## 2

“Eat your mealies and meat and inspan as soon as possible,” I told N’kulu.

“Bukra, the meat is all gone.”

“We’ll get more before the day is out.”

The day had hardly begun before we saw our chance. Before the sun had burst up, blazing, over the eastern plain, N’kulu made out a herd of eland about a mile away. Eland was the best meat in Africa. Unlike that of most of the smaller bucks, it was not lean and stringy but fat and juicy; and a bull was as big as a steer. This was a chance we must not miss. We could load the wagon with several quarters, and when the blood heat passed off we could stop at a water hole, cut the meat into strips, and string it on thongs to dry. It was a long way to the eastern Transvaal. We must not go empty-handed if we could help ourselves.

“N’kulu, take M’sabu’s old flintlock. I’ll take the smooth-bore. I’ll ride while you drive the wagon. We’ll get at least one or maybe two while Kininni and Hagar pack our gear.”

“That will be good hunting, bukra.”

“Hagar, go with them and help butcher,” Trudi ordered. “That way we will save time.”

I thought that Trudi might choose to come with us, too, but she decided to stay. Her hand crept into mine as I mounted, and a desire to take her again into my arms, to hold her close, to tell her of my love, passed powerfully

through my brain; I resisted doing it because it would use up precious seconds—the herd was walking rather briskly—and because a man must not give way to erratic impulse. I had already seen to my gun; N’kulu patted his, lay it in reach, and, as soon as eight of the oxen had been inspanned, took his proud seat. We left the miserable camp; and, looking back, I was surprised to see how soon it disappeared from view. The plain was deceiving. It gave the impression of almost limitless visibility. Sometimes, indeed, we could see a bustard half a mile away. Actually the grass and the mean thorn and the little hollows and hills tricked the eyes.

But in only a minute or two I spied again the herd of eland; and, considering the lay of the land and the early morning breeze, I planned my campaign. I could not wait for N’kulu to hitch his wagon and make the stalk beside me. This meant that only one shot could be fired, which must not be wasted.

So I rode on at a fast trot, the wagon in my dust. When I had outflanked the herd, I turned in toward them, tied the mare to a thornbush, then crept through high grass to an ambush behind thickets. In hardly a moment the big beasts came into close view. They were walking faster than before, perhaps because they had heard or glimpsed the wagon. They had rather short but massive spiral horns, white stripes on their withers, and heavy dewlaps, yet were wonderfully clean-limbed. You could never mistake them for oxen. They had the dash of the bucks.

The second animal in the file was a barren cow, rather young from the look of her, and perfect for our needs. I let her draw within forty yards, then put the two-ounce ball under her chin. She dropped as though pole-axed while her herd thundered off. When I had bled her, I waited for the wagon to come up.

Its bed contained an inclined plane, and a hoist by which we could lift heavy loads. As N’kulu was getting out the rig, we heard the full-throated boom of a gun. It came from the direction of camp.

“I wonder what M’sabu shot at?” I asked aloud.

N’kulu did not look at me. “Perhaps a rhino came too near, and she wished to frighten him off.”

“It *was* the pin-fire rifle that we heard—wasn’t it?”

“It must have been, bukra. There is no other gun in camp. Yet it did not sound as sharp as the pin-fire. It sounded like a smooth-bore of heavy gauge.”

“Bring the wagon as fast as you can.”

I ran and untied my mare and mounted. Without my laying quirt to her even once as we raced toward camp, she ran as fast as her legs would carry her over the rough ground. The way seemed long, because Time had stopped moving—it was like a herd of elephants utterly motionless in the shade—still the view of the camp slowly emerged into my gaze.

I could see nothing good, as yet, or anything evil. Indeed the little man-made speck on the veld, a kind of carving out of the wilderness to lay our bivouac, seemed utterly deserted. I could not see Trudi anywhere, and then I suddenly came aware—largely to my relief but partly, a small, cold part, to my terror—that I did not see her pony. He had been grazing, dragging his halter rope. It stood to reason that she had seen game on the plain and had hastily saddled and bridled him and ridden out of sight. The report of the gun had sounded alien to N’kulu’s ears because it had come farther than he thought.

Swiftly the brain works when it is aroused! My horse had bounded only three or four times more when a very strange fact leaped to my attention. Stunning and hard to believe, yet it was undeniable. All the remaining oxen appeared to be lying down.

I rode on into the awful quiet of the camp, then dismounted. I no longer hoped for good—that was past and done—and could hardly believe in the half-bad, in being let off with moderated disaster, so deep was the sense of evil haunting my soul. I saw something black lying by the ashes of the fire. In the next instant I recognized the body of Kininni, and in his breast was a yawning hole, and his blood reddened the grass. I stood still and gazed about me. I knew now why the oxen lay so still—the throat of every one had been cut.

And in the dust, drawn by a stick, were large, rough letters. They were English letters to be read in one glance,

I DID IT ALL ALONE  
HARVEY

It took me half a minute or more to find Trudi. She was lying in a little hollow, most of her clothes torn off; and a look close to the look of death was on her bruised and beaten face. But it was not death’s look. Any man could tell the difference. She was breathing; I saw her bosom rise and fall; the bubble of blood at her lips swelled and broke; and as I came and knelt beside her, she knew of my coming.

“I’m here. It’s Edward. You’re safe now. I love you. Don’t try to speak. Smile just once—make any sign—to promise me you’ll live.”

She heard me and her lips curled, but it was a smile of pity.

3

My girl was an Afrikander. She had ridden, and tended cattle, and hunted, all her remembered days. She had survived the hate and cruelty of her father's homestead on the sun-baked veld; she had grown up beautiful and brave instead of ill-favored and afraid. She was not one to yield quickly, or to die without due cause.

From the very first this was my main, and greatest and truest comfort. Kininni was dead, and I could do nothing for him but give him decent burial. His days were over and his sun had set and his story had been told. But life was in Trudi still. I seemed to see it quicken—at least I believed it—with every passing moment. As far as I could tell, she bore no mortal wound. She was in great danger—if I had not known it, Hagar's terror-filled eyes would have told me—and perhaps, just now, she did not care to live; but from this last sickness she would make a swift recovery. Hagar's love and mine would be certain medicine.

So our long fight began.

“Would it be safer to stay here a few days, or to trek?” I asked Hagar. “We can sling a hammock in the wagon for the M'sabu.”

“I do not know, bukra.”

“Tell me what you think. What would the old women say?”

“I cannot speak for the old women, but I'll say what's in my heart. Either one is bad, but to stay here is the worse. She would not lie down and sleep. Every minute she would watch the grass. Besides—have you forgotten?—she is a Voortrekker. She will want to go—to know that the great wheels turn. And that much sooner—while the Red Jackal sniffs the meat ere he sets his fangs—we may bring her to Heer Doctor.”

I thought possibly she might mean the greatest doctor that had ever set foot on the land of Africa, although I believed that he was far across the sea. I had no time to question her now, as she and N'kulu and I made last-minute preparations for the trek. An eland skin, slung on thongs, must serve as a hammock until we could provide a better one. N'kulu made a quick trip after a hindquarter of the carcass, which Hagar would cut up and hang on the cover in the sun and dust while we were en route, saving time thereafter. Something like a tiny piece of luck developed before we left camp. At least it encouraged us a little, and conceivably it would prove important before the end. Trudi's gelding Johan, that I had thought either stolen or dead, returned

to the bivouac unharmed. He wore a piece of a halter and apparently had broken away in a nightmare moment which I knew had come to pass, but which remained a kind of blank spot on my brain.

On his back we lashed the body of old Kininni, wrapped in an eland skin, for we would not leave it to the undertakers of the veld, and could give no time for its decent disposal until far and wide of camp. The gelding would follow the wagon and our eight oxen, all we had left to draw the big wheels through mud and sand. So before they began to turn we jettisoned every ounce of non-essential baggage. Then the whip cracked and brute strength surged once more.

I gave thought to doctors now. Those practicing in Capetown, Elizabeth, and Durban could not help me, from being out of reach; of a few scattered among the Boer settlements on the Orange River or in the Transvaal, I could think of none who was not some sort of renegade. But Hagar had spoken of the greatest of all. . . .

“Hagar, did you mean the Heer Doctor who first laid eyes on the Falling River?”

“It is told that he is coming back from across the sea. N’kulu heard of it, as well as I.”

“Is it true, N’kulu, or only the talk of the kraals?”

“I heard it first at Zumbo from one of my own tribe,” N’kulu answered. “Since then the drums carry the word far. He has already gained Capetown, and will come to the mouth of the Great River by the end of the rains.”

“If we could get boats, we could arrive quickly at Sena on the Zambezi, and from thence find our way to him, at whichever of the Delta towns he might put in. Who would provide us with boats and oarsmen?”

“There is only one who could, and, instead of boats and paddlers, it would be his way and according to his custom to provide the hyenas and the jackals with a feast of our bones. I speak of the old Manikusa, king of the Matshangana. Think you, you could buy our passage from him and his son Umzilla? Both of them hate all white people, and their power is absolute from the Manhissa to the Zambezi.”

“When we come nigh to their kraals, I’ll speak with them.”

“Do so, lord. You are a man, and it is your right to speak even to God. But unless grass grows green on the Kalahari, that night the hyenas, the jackals, and perhaps the lions will speak to us.”

The hated camp drew out of sight, and soon the desolate plain on which it stood; and the changing scenery gave me a sense of change, perhaps for the better. Trudi lay asleep in her hammock. She was a young woman of great strength, not only of body but of will, and perhaps she had taken no real harm. Perhaps the days would pass, the wonderfully bright and sunny days, the starlit nights would intervene with her sleeping in my arms, the landscape of Africa would pass before our eyes, sometimes sunburned and ugly, sometimes beautiful beyond description, and we would see the great herds of game that wander in the middle distance, and she would be well again. There were bad cards in the deck, some of them black beyond my imagination, but perhaps they would not fall. . . .

Time passed. Every hour that spared her and me from the worst, raised my hopes—seemed to increase our chances—for the better. At present, about noon, she lay deeply asleep. Not much light entered the wagon—we had hung a curtain between the bed and the seat—and mainly it came in darts and flashes, very brilliant, dancing wildly on the walls; yet now and again it picked up the pale gold, of her hair; and in the dimness the pallor of her face was marked but not alarming.

Then the brilliant light lingered there a second or two and showed me something puzzling and worrisome. Her face was suddenly drenched with sweat—the cold kind that comes with acute pain or nausea. She uttered a low moan, slept a moment or two more, then came wide-awake. For a little while she stared wildly into my eyes. A sense of awful foreboding came upon me. Then her mind turned a little corner, she accepted something which until now she had rebuffed, and she spoke with perfect clarity.

“Stop the wagon and let me out.”

“What are you going to do?” So I spoke, not knowing what I said.

“I’m going by myself into the grass. Don’t come with me, Edward. If I live, I’ll come back to you. If I don’t, let me stay here, alone. That’s what I want, believe me. I don’t want anybody bothering themselves about me. Don’t look for me. Forget me as soon as you can. Go back. Go home. Leave me alone.”

“You’re asking what I can’t grant.”

“I don’t want you to see it, Edward.”

“Do you think your not wanting me to see it would stop me from coming with you?”

“I might have known it wouldn’t. All right. Then come quickly.”

“I’m going to let Hagar come too. It’s her right, and she might know—”

“As you please. It hurts so awfully. I wish I could die, but I’ll try to live for you.”

“Oh, thank you, my beloved.”

“For Hagar, too,” she corrected herself, with great care. “Only come soon.”

The wheels stopped turning. The oxen lowered their heads to graze. I got out of the wagon, and Hagar lifted Trudi down into my arms. Away into the veld we went, the three of us, N’kulu watching with tears streaming down his face. I came to where the grass was young and soft, and there I lay Trudi down. There I crouched, so that my shadow fell upon her face and kept the fierce sun from her eyes.

A little springbuck went leaping away, delicate and beautiful, and I wanted to believe he was a sending of some sort, a sign of good fortune. But a maribou stork, a bird of death, with a beak like a rapier, perched in a nearby tree. I found I could not believe in one without the other.

There, in the wilderness, in the vast silence and solitude, alone except for us two who loved her, Trudi gave birth to a perfectly formed but lifeless man-child, no bigger than my hand.

## CHAPTER XV

### River's End

In a shady place, pleasing to our human senses because of its appearance of coolness and moisture, N'kulu and I dug a hurried but deep grave, deeper than hyenas were known to burrow, and put there the bodies of old Kininni, who had drawn a quarter of a billion breaths, and of Trudi's babe, who had never drawn one. As we dug, both of us wondered over what we had been told concerning human souls, but we did not pause for any ceremony, because there was life to save. Then we put Trudi back in her hammock and resumed the long, long trek.

The wheels turned early and late, stopping only enough for the oxen to graze. This they learned to do swiftly, while the chance offered, for if they dawdled, they went hungry and the cruel whip cracked the same. To my forever wonder, they stood up to the grueling labor, until we could hardly believe they were flesh and bone like us, and not the Movers of Mountains, sent us in our need. We ourselves took turns eating and sleeping and watching over Trudi. There were moments, or hours, or whole days and nights that we thought she was mending; then not only our faces and voices but the look of the very land seemed to change; the wheels made a different sound; the obstacles in our track fell apart; we laughed at the snorting rhinos and loved the glorious stampedes of the game herds; then all at once the spell would pass, the world turned cold and gray, and the light we could not deny fell upon her face, and we saw it more pale, more wasted than before.

We came nigh the great dry-season kraals of Manikusa, king of the Matshangana, at the head of navigation of the Sanvati, a great north-flowing tributary of the Zambezi. Smoke in the sky showed him already resident there, his boldest outpost. Instead of swinging wide, we made straight for them, and we were only a distant dot on the hillside when a hundred of his warriors, naked, painted, and plumed, with their assagais and great shields, came running to accost us. They gathered about the wagon, yelling and prancing and brandishing their weapons, strangely like red Indians on the Western plains. A score or more surrounded my horse, and the assagai of only one was needed to end my ride. When I paid no attention to them, and N'kulu and Hagar looked at them with calm faces utterly devoid of fear, they thought that some very strong dowra was at work; and, remembering the ghosts and demons and the wizardry and the voodoo upon and around them always, squeezing their lives small, they grew quiet, and walked behind us in the dust.

So we came to the thorn enclosures and to the beehive houses. Instead of a hundred, there were a thousand of the Matshangana, waiting the merest shift of the wind to murder or welcome us.

“Take me to the king,” I said in Afrikaans.

“Take the bukra to Manikusa,” N’kulu translated in a Zulu dialect that some of the old men understood.

Some of Manikusa’s sons led me to a naked ground outside the largest of the houses. Out came the king, he too an old man, naked except for a lion-skin around his shoulders, and unarmed as I was. He was tall, proud, more royal-looking than any human being I had ever seen, capable of unbelievable cruelty but quite possibly of a great generosity, akin to chivalry and to grace. I remembered that he was the most gifted and powerful son of Gaza, king of the Swazi. The lords of Capetown wished to make treaties with him; the pious Dutch feared him only one degree less than the Devil; the Portuguese considered him the Devil Incarnate.

“O Manikusa, my name is Edward, and I come from beyond the seas,” I told him. “With me is my woman, sinking toward death because of a babe born before its time. Furnish me with boats and oarsmen, that I may take her quickly to the great doctor.”

When N’kulu had translated, Manikusa asked but one question.

“What great doctor?”

“He who treated the sick at his house at Mabotsa, on the headwaters of the Limpopo, ten days northeast of Kuruman, where the great spring flows. He who led the Bakwena to Kolobeng, for they knew there was never such a man in Africa, black or white, and to lose sight of him was like losing sight of the sun. He who was the first to lay eyes on Lake Ngami, and the first to see the great falls of the Mother River.”

“How dare you lie to me, son of a jackal? The doctor has gone to his own place, across the seas.”

“I am no liar, Manikusa. At the end of the rains, or very close thereto, he will return. Ask your witch doctors if it is not so.”

The wizard called up by the king was exceedingly tall and gaunt and bore the scars of manacles on his wrists and ankles, and of the Kiboka on his back. I thought that in hating Arab slavers—or perhaps a heartless Dutch or English master—he would hate all white people. But instead of a shrill and impassioned reply, he spoke gravely and calmly.

“Manikusa, the white man speaks true. The ship bearing the great doctor has even now passed Capetown—the drums have spoken over the mountains, over the desert, even unto this village. This moon will wane. When once more she returns and waxes full, he will disembark at the Kongone mouth of our river.”

“Go to the wagon, look at the M’sabu, and say what had best be done.”

He was gone not more than five minutes. When he returned, his eyes glowing in their deep sockets, already conveying to me his answer, I felt a surge of oneness with all human kind that I had experienced only once or twice before in all my days, foreign to my nature, but deeply thrilling.

“Manikusa, you are a great king. You take life, or make life, or spare life at your whim. For you the maize grows green, or the pumpkins ripen, or an old elephant dies and leaves his tusks on the veld. It is in your power to take this life, the life of the young M’sabu—a cloth held tight over her face while you count ten times would leave her dead as a stone—but, Manikusa, can you save her life? The medicine I make is not strong enough. That I know full well. But if you will supply swift boats and swift boatmen, and send her to the great white doctor with all speed, it may be that his medicine might banish Death and let her live. You care not whether she lives, nor do I, but it is a good game. You are an old man now. The Red Jackal will come for you before long. The woman is very beautiful, according to the notions of the white man, and a very great evil had been done her. It would be better sport than killing a lion with spears, to see if by your power she lives or dies. I say to you, send her forth on the great river. Let these, one white man, one Zulu, and a Kaffir woman, go with her. Let them race with the Red Jackal. It may be that, when he comes for you, you will have a joke on him, how he couldn’t take the little M’sabu half-dead already. Would that not be good sport?”

“Very good sport, Wise One!”

“It is worth trying, I think, although the odds are long.”

“When have I, Manikusa, cared for long odds. Am I a beggar or a king? Bid the boatmen load their craft, and put in it these mad wanderers, with meat and mealies, and set forth!”

The king stalked into his house, every inch a king.

It seemed a fitting ending of the event—but the event did not yet end! The gaunt witch doctor, who seemed to have no other name than Wise One, made a little sign, and all the warriors drew farther back. Then he came up to me, smiling strangely, and addressed me in fluent Afrikaans.

“Not for nothing am I called Wise One,” he said.

“So I see.”

“What caused the little M’sabu to drop her babe before its time?”

“She met with an accident.”

“No, she met with the slaver known as Harvey, whose heart is blacker than my skin. Am I a child? I heard, too late, how he had skirted the lands of the Matshangana, following a single wagon. What wagon could it be? Not one of the Voortrekkers, because it made for the Whispering Veld, where no Dutchmen have gone. Then the drums told that Harvey’s followers, five of them, hated and feared only second to their master, had not returned to Zumbo, and their bones had been found not far from the camp of the mad bukra who ever washed the gravels of the rivers. I, even I, made one mistake. I thought that you had lain in ambush and shot them all through the head. But I might have known that only the daughter of Jan Du Piel—or Oom Paul himself—could have killed all so cleanly.”

“How did you know the daughter of Jan Du Piel?”

“I saw her at Lydenburg, where I was in bondage, ere Vrouw Du Piel quit her kraal for love of a music-maker, and Jan took his daughter beyond the farthest settlement and became an outlander.” Wise One’s tone changed slightly. “And at Lydenburg, also I knew Harvey.”

“What business is afoot? The men have started to load the boats.”

“On Harvey’s finger he wears a ring, fashioned in the form of a coiled snake. It is made of yellow gold, and that gold was once worn in the ear of a maiden. When you overtake him—for after you have found the great white doctor, you have another quest—will you take the ring from his finger and bring it to me? Mark that you need not go out of your way. You must return to our kraals to get your wagon and oxen, when your quests are done. The Matshangana will not harm you—I hold them here.” Wise One shut his left hand. “And neither old Manikusa or his son Umzilla will seek to reduce your reward, for I hold them here.” And the witch doctor closed his right hand.

“What will be my reward? Speak plain.”

“All the valley of the watercourse we call M’Kazi, to herd your cattle and build your kraals. If you wish not to dwell near the Matshangana, I will send porters with you, bearing a hundred tusks, each worth fifty Cape dollars at the trading post.”

“Now that is a good price, for a little gold ring shaped like a snake. By what god, or what sign, or what *dowa* do you swear faith in the dealing?”

“By the great *dowa* of a little gold ring shaped like a snake.”

2

Almost before we knew it our world of sunburned, wind-blown grass became a world of water, deep, blue, clear, flowing like life itself with unhurried, quiet power. Our boat was a long war canoe which would hold sixty warriors. Twenty paddlers manned it, and gave no thought to any tribal enemies on the shore, since, in the middle of the Zambezi, we were often more than a mile out of spear cast; and no boatmen in these parts could race with Manikusa's men. There were many little islands, and usually these were our safe retreats at night.

Sometimes we passed great herds of hippos, numberless in the water as locusts in the swarm; then suddenly the reaches would be blue and empty and we would see no more until, again, they became a pleasant surprise. Often huge crocodiles lay on the sandbanks in the shallows; and sometimes herds of elephants waded and swam far out from the shore; and not one of us knew whether they were on business or pleasure, or could guess at the nature of either. Before sunrise and after sunset there are always a great flight of waterfowl. How such great assemblies gathered I could not guess; the air was full of the whistle of wings as, on stormy days, with the wail of wind; some were beautiful fliers, taught, it seemed, by angels; others belted along with ponderous wingbeats; but none ever seemed in doubt of his destination; they flew neither in haste nor with leisure, but with a steady intent as it seemed the waters flowed.

Often as I sat by Trudi, unable to do anything to help or even to think of anything to comfort either of us, I fell into reverie over the majesty and magnitude of the river. I thought of its countless thousands of insignificant sources, springs, ponds, brush-grown dongas known only to wandering wild things; but the trickles joined to become rivulets, and the rivulets met to make brooks, and the brooks interflowed to form small nameless rivers, and these rivers searched for and found one another over a territory great as all my Southland; and then, as though by the sudden wish of God, a river great as the Rio Grande, perhaps as great as the Oregon, flowed divinely and forever, clean from Lake Dilolo to the Indian Ocean, a distance of more than two thousand miles.

If only the minutest fraction of its prodigious life could pass into Trudi and bring her back to the sun!

We went by Zumbo in the dead of night and saw only a lantern or two glimmering on the shore. When the time came we passed down the Kebrasasa Rapids, a perilous experience at this time of year, but Hagar and N’kulu and I could not work up the least consternation to take our minds off our trouble, and Trudi, dwelling in a dream between two worlds, did not even hear the rushing waters, and Manikusa’s men mocked the Red Jackal, Death, that could only run and bark along the bank, since they were obeying Manikusa’s orders, and the power of his voodoo was on them.

Then we came to the lower river, with humid days and hot nights and languid waters. This was a soft land, quit by such steppe-dwellers as the giraffe; but the twelve-foot, white-plumed speargrass thronged with buffalo, and now and again elephant backs showed and disappeared; and short date trees and tall coconut trees became a common sight; and green parrots and roseate flamingos lighted up the reed-grown shores.

We were deep in the mangrove forest, only a day’s journey from the Kongone mouth of the river, when we came on a fleet of boats manned by some sort of Zulu. They were peaceful, having dealt for three and a half centuries with the Portuguese, and one of them knew a lingua franca spoken by N’kulu. Yes, the great white doctor from across the seas had made port. We ourselves could lay eyes upon him on the morrow. He was not as thin and wasted as when they had seen him at Tete two years before, for he had conquered the Demons of the Fever, and although his hair was more gray, his eyes were such that a king could not look into them without bowing down.

We went on, and the moment that I had dreamed of, longed for, and most dreadfully feared came close to hand. We brought out boat alongside the *Pearl* where she lay at anchor in the river mouth, and a young man hardly thirty, who introduced himself as Dr. Kirk, himself a man of parts, spoke to me and asked how he might serve us. At my suggestion, he swung down into our boat. He glanced only once at Trudi before he ordered her to be carried on board the *Pearl*. Here a rather lightly built man, but obviously fashioned of steel, with the most wonderful countenance I had ever seen, came and spoke to her and held her frail hand in his. That he was the great doctor, known by all races and kinds of men from the Zambezi to Fish River, I had no question.

“We have come a long way,” I said. “Help her if you can.” He nodded, pricked her finger, smeared a drop of her blood on a small glass slide, and looked at it through a microscope. Then he wanted to tell me something which he wished Trudi need not hear.

“Speak plainly, will you, Doctor?” she asked, her voice very low and soft, but still clear. “I have the right to hear.”

“No one has a better right, but I have no good news for you.” “Then give me the bad news. I’m not afraid.”

“I can see that. I wish, when my time comes, I can be as unafraid as you. I don’t see how you have lived this long. There is nothing left.”

“I lived this long for the sake of my beloved. Yes, and for the river that I wanted to see join with the sea. It was a hard fight but I won it. Now—unless there is something more to do—I want to go ashore.”

“There is one thing, Trudi,” I said. “I want to ask the doctor—or the captain—to marry us. If you can stay only a little while, I’ll have the satisfaction of it—and the triumph—as long as I live.”

“I can stay only a few hours. The time has come to outspan. But it is my wish also—and my great pride.”

So I sat at the edge of the cot where Trudi lay and took her hand in mine. The doctor went out and returned with the captain of the *Pearl*, a ruddy man by nature, bold, domineering, and with a great self-control, but now he was pale, and his voice shook, and in his eyes was a deep humility in the awareness of powers he could not understand or control. He read from a book. The eyes of Dr. Kirk filled with tears. The gray doctor, the great doctor, passed his hand across his brow, and upon his face were the far-flung shadows of a thousand great scenes; and in his eyes was a power, come to him God knew whence, before which kings must bow down.

We made our contract, Trudi and I, for as long as it might last. A ghost of one of her broad, slow smiles haunted her wide, full lips. Then the captain ordered the lowering of a dingy, in which N’kulu and I rowed Trudi and Hagar to the nearest land. Chance guided us to a bower of coconut palms, only a little way back from the sand. Here the shade was deep, and birds of many hues lighted on the fronds, and sea birds winged back and forth; and a light-footed animal, no bigger than a terrier, that I took for the faun of a blue buck, came out of the thickets and romped and ran in a stone’s toss.

N’kulu cut grass for a couch for Trudi. She lay on it, and we talked of the long miles we had covered together. The time had been short, but the journey long.

“We have seen the Great Falls of the Zambezi,” she told me in a low murmur that did not tax her breath.

“Yes, we did.”

“We saw the veld one night, without fire to blind our eyes.”

“It was wonderful seeing.”

“We have seen the herds of wildebeests, passing in countless numbers, and the great elephants and the white rhinoceros.”

“All that, and more.”

“We traveled far in the bright sunlight, and at night I lay in your arms.”

“I forgot what it was to be lonely.”

“Don’t be lonely any more. I couldn’t bear it. Go back to America and find the girl you left there. If she’s not free, find some other who’ll keep you company, and love you, and—bear you sons and daughters. But don’t bring her to Africa. I don’t want her riding with you in the wagon and sleeping with you under the stars. I don’t want her broiling your meat over a campfire, and making mealies. I don’t want you and her to see what we have seen together. This is my country. I don’t want her to share it with you. What we have had is ours. I don’t want to share it with anyone. I am a Boer woman, an outlander, jealous of the little that I own. I am an Afrikaner.”

“We will always own it together—no one but us.”

“Now I’m going to leave you.”

“Not yet.”

“Yes, in a few minutes. I can feel a hollowness—an emptiness filling my body. There’s no pain. There’s not even sorrow any more—I’ve got rid of that. Do you know where my soul will go?”

“No one in the world can know that.”

“I’ll tell you. It’s going back to the veld. It won’t stay there long, perhaps, but it wants to see the grass again—and the silver colors that come after sundown—and the herds of game. It is going to ride. It’s going to inspan at dawn and outspan at sundown. It will drive the wagon, and it will cross the little dongas that no one knows and sometimes climb the great scarps. It will long for you, Edward, but it will know it can’t have you, for on one side of the River is Life, and on the other side is Death, and it will be on the other side. I loved you at the beginning, and I loved you to the last. Kiss me goodbye.”

I raised her in my arms and kissed her pale lips, and, although the sky was blue and the waves glittered, I went a distance with her, down into the Death. I felt its shadow and its chill, and at the same time its great peace.

“Goodbye, Trudi.”

“Goodbye, Edward, Mynheer.”

She lay back and her breathing began to grow shallow and far apart. I held one of her hands, Hagar the other, and N’kulu stood guard with a rifle in his arms, although there was no conceivable danger. Her fingers tightened once on mine, then she gave a long sighing gasp, and lay still. Her face was strangely childlike, but it was hard to believe that her bright face could be a treasure of Death. Even here in the shade it looked sunlit.

Goodbye, Trudi! Goodbye, my lovely Voortrekker, whose hand so briefly lay in mine. You are across the River from me now; and you are inspanning for your great adventure. Still the Red Jackal barks on the bank in endless and insatiable hunger. Only love can bear tidings from one bank to another. Farewell, Trudi! Roast me some meat and cook me mealies on the great, grassy plain. Think of me sometimes, and remember our great joys.

The Great Falls of the Zambezi. The veld under the moon.

## BOOK FIVE

### CHAPTER XVI

#### The Hunters

One night, as the moon set, Hagar, N’kulu, and I had bivouacked on the middle veld, high on the Maputo River. We had got here after various small events, without following any fixed route. First, I had had sent back to Manikusa the boat and boatmen he had lent to us, and one of the latter bore to Wise One my promise to return, as soon as my ventures permitted. Then we had come by a Portuguese coaster from Zambezi’s mouth to Delagoa Bay.

Since we were going in what I felt was the right direction, much faster than by land, we enjoyed the change in surroundings. Then we had hired riding beasts and a pack mule or two for a trek into the hills, partly to pass the time before the next sailing to Capetown, partly to see the country, and mainly to come to a decision in the free spaces and open air of the veld.

On this clear, pale-blue, and beautiful night, we were sitting about a thornwood fire. Our horses were picketed close by, because this was lion country.

“Not far away is a village of the tame Zwazis,” I said, after we had all been silent a long time. “If either or both of you wished to go there, the first stage of the long journeys to your native villages, you could ride the horses I have rented for you, and I can pay the owner for them when I return to Delagoa Bay. But it may be that you wish to remain in my service while I undertake a much longer journey. If so, I would be glad to have you.”

“To what part of the land, bukra?” N’kulu asked.

“It is in my mind to go first to Capetown, in one of the ships. From thence I do not know where the search may take us, before at last we return to the kraals of the Matshangana.”

“The bukra speaks of a search. What search does the bukra mean? Is it the wish of my heart, more dear to me than my life, or is it to seek again for little white crystals in the gravels of the rivers? How can I know? You are white and I am black. You were born to another land, another tongue. Sometimes your heart seems to beat with mine, but sometimes I know nothing of it, it is

cold and far away, and as hidden from me as the heart of a rock python asleep by the river.”

N’kulu got up, cut a piece of dried meat to chew and quiet him, and resumed his seat.

“His heart may be cold and far away from yours,” Hagar said with a little laugh, “but not from mine.”

“How can you know, Hagar, when N’kulu, my brother of the trail, is in doubt?” I asked.

“Because a woman gave you birth—and I am a woman. Because a woman fed you at her teat. It is good to be brothers of the trail, but what do they know of each other, compared to a mother and son? It has never entered my head that you would trifle at the river beds with the business undone.”

“What is the business, Hagar?”

“N’kulu will tell you. Tell him, N’kulu, in plain words, and speak no more folly, for you are a man, and it is unmeet that you should talk folly, even though the gods have given us women the right to do so, to ease our hearts sometimes.”

“Bukra, your business is to find the white man known as Harvey, and let him join his little company, their names being Mustapha, Sligo, Fritz, Culpepper, and Bernardino, he having been parted with them too long already.”

“N’kulu, do you wish to go with me on that hunt, and have a part in the reuniting of him with his band?” I asked.

“I wish to go with you, lord. What part I shall have in the outcome—I do not know. To fight and kill is one thing, the blood being hot. To stalk and kill is another thing; and there are farther things that pass before the eyes of my mind like dreams. I can say no more.”

“What do you say, Hagar?”

“I? Is it not a common fault with women to say too much? So I will let the night speak for me. Listen, bukra.”

Only to those who listen closely will the African night speak with deep meaning and eloquence. Its plainer sounds are so common that the hearer hardly notices them. These are the barking of jackals, usually sporadic, sometimes chorused in a frenzy of excitement, and the eerie outcries, like human sobbing or devilish laughter, of hyenas. But under and below and beyond all this is intermittent sound, dim and far-off and half-believed, that

causes curious prickling sensations at the base of the human skull. Sometimes it is a deep grunt that begins, lasts a while in a rhythm cadence, and then stops. Sometimes it is a noise like that of a saw ripping through a tough board. Sometimes it is a series of deep-throated roars, which, no matter how far away, still all other voices. Sometimes it is a trumpet-like note, clear, true, and strangely beautiful in the vast hush.

Now and then tonight there rose the ear-piercing squeal of a wart hog, just before the ugly beast died an ugly death. The grassy plain sometimes acted as a sounding board, and the terrible neighing scream of a zebra, with a lion on his back, rushed in like a cry for help, and caused our horses to surge and stamp in their pickets. And there were other sounds that I could not explain away. These were not especially alarming, here by the bright fire, but they had hellish accents. The listener falls to wondering what he would do in certain cases. He wonders if he is going to get off lightly, by merely dying, or if some further and awful accounting must be made. For a moment, perhaps, he knows himself for what he is, God's fair-weather friend, the knower of evil learned long ago, from whom the little demons of cult and story had better run and hide.

## 2

A half-caste Portuguese called Alfonso had told me that Harvey had a woman in Capetown, good to look at, who worked at White's. The latter was a mug and gambling house of considerable pretensions. But if he had known a safer place, there he would have trekked. He was no longer the hunter, but the hunted.

The veld offered him maneuverability and abundant hiding places, and, at times, infinite solitude; but if he passed in view of any human eye, he would be marked down and long remembered. In the crowds of Capetown he could smell his kind again, see without being seen; he might trust his woman to help him; and he would laugh to think of any hunters looking for him here.

We went there, and I got my bearings, and put by for a while the whispering veld. Then I took my diamond to the largest private moneylender in these parts, who accepted without question my tale of having bought it from a Dutch sailor who in turn had brought it back from the East Indies. He had never quite seen its like in fire, paid me a hundred and twenty English pounds, and hurried me out the door lest I regret my bargain.

White's had been named after London's great gambling club. It was large and luxurious, the odd adjective "respectable" being often applied to it. As I came in the door I felt something like nostalgia. Here were the same strained

faces, the same bleak haste, the swirling smoke, the dice clicking, the cards falling as in Memphis' rooms, from whence, with only a few delays, setbacks, and circuities, I had come hence.

But I let that be, as we poor whites and the colored say in the Low Country. My eye roved around, and I saw three young women "playing" for the house. This practice has spread from the dens of San Francisco during the gold rush. The girls soon learned to deal faro and even three-card monte, a sharper's game, and it made for heavy spending and a more generally refined and peaceful atmosphere in the gaming rooms. A "mark" playing monte against the house must make a choice of one of three cards to find a red ace. If I were Harvey, I knew which of the three I would choose for my light o' love, and it would not be one of two washed-out Cockney blondes. It would be a foreign-looking girl with blue-black hair and cheekbones as bold as a squaw's.

I watched the cluster of players about her, to try to tell if any one of them knew her well and whose acquaintance might be worth seeking. But they were a dreary lot, staring dumbly after their departing money, while the monotonous cry went on, "Who sees it, who sees it?"; broken by the greedy question, "For how much," when a mark thought surely he could lay finger on the ace.

Among the spectators was a lean, middle-aged man, with the glinting restless eye of a mark, but not as feverish as a chronic sucker. I saw him get out his wallet and sadly put it back: plainly he had been burned not long ago but still yearned toward the fire. The odds would be long that he knew anything about the young woman's affairs with Harvey, but there was no better prospect in sight.

"Do you think that's an honest game?" I asked, with a gesture toward the table.

"I don't see how it could be crooked. It's a contest between the dealer's hand and the player's eye. There are two black aces—both clubs—and one red ace. She picks 'em up, and lets you see her lay 'em down. All you have to do is play the card you think is the red ace. But though you've seen it just as plain, when you turn up the card it's one of the other two—and you've lost your money."

"Have you seen anybody win at it?"

"Yes, the very night I lost my roll. He didn't win any great sum, but he took her for fifty Cape dollars while I was there."

"Yet you lost steadily."

“I’d been working in the sun and had a headache and I think I couldn’t see straight. That’s why I’m half a mind to try it again.”

“What did this fellow look like? An Afrikaner or a shill?”

“He was about three inches shorter than me—well built—in his thirties—and had red hair. I reckoned him to be Scotch. But if they knew each other they didn’t show it.”

“What kind of eyes did he have?”

“Light gray and sharp as a hawk’s.”

“I may have seen him. Did he wear a ring?”

“Yes, an odd-looking one, gold and shaped like a snake.”

Sometimes a rube draws four aces in the first hand of play. The risk of my informant’s warning my quarry was too slight to trouble me: I meant to work fast. I thought over what he had said about Harvey’s eyes. I too remembered their light color and comprehensive, penetrative gaze. I had been told, and could not doubt, he was an expert marksman.

### 3

Like most gambling dens, White’s was almost deserted from nine in the morning—when the last bitter-enders slunk away to their lairs—until four in the afternoon, when the first *bon vivants* dropped in to slake their thirst and risk a few shillings at play. At five a few stragglers had assembled, ready to watch but not take part in high play; such spectators would stop any desperately beaten dealer from welshing. Five was the hour I picked for a maneuver I considered necessary, not especially difficult, neither anticipated nor disliked. N’kulu and Hagar waited for me in a hut in Kaffirtown.

“What shall I call you, miss?” I said to the white squaw from somewhere east of the Oder.

“Gertrude.”

It came to me, with a long-drawn sensation, as of going through smoke and fire, that my Trudi might have been christened Gertrude. Certainly Jan Du Piel would not have given his baby girl, when he had craved a son, and already wishing in his heart her descent into hell, such a sweet, light name as Trudi. My superstitions were awake and clamoring, and I looked in dread of some other connection, eerie and devilish, between this mug-house woman and my Voortrekker; but there was none, and I got my feet again on solid ground.

“Do you know anybody by the name?” she was asking.

“No.”

“I thought you might have a sweetheart named that—or even your mother or sister.”

This remark was strangely characteristic of harpies and whores throughout the world, and I could not call it hypocrisy. Rather it seemed a need of sentimentality. I felt a brief and passing pity for this Gertrude, who, because of a bad draw in the way of lovers, now was in for trouble.

I did not answer, and she asked if I knew how to play monte.

“I watched you last night. But you’ve met your match tonight.”

She rolled her eyes, but she was not as silly as that. No fool, except a particular kind like me, could deal monte as expertly as she. She had light and rather dainty hands, but which were of course strong, in order to manage her barely visible “hop-over.”

“How does that happen, chum?” This last—out from England—was a popular address in the colony.

“Because I’m pretty good at shooting running game. That takes good eyesight.”

“Well, we’ll see.”

She quit toying with the cards, her expression changed subtly, and at once three or four loungers who had their eyes on her vital face and form drew nearer. “Watch closely now,” she addressed us all, as she passed the red ace and two black aces through the air, then placed them, with quick changing of position, face downward on the table.

“Who sees it?” she called.

Although she had not employed the “hop-over,” only rapid movements, the others shook their heads.

“I do,” I said.

“For how much?”

“Five Cape dollars.”

“I’ll see you. See if you won.”

I did win, and then intentionally lost the next bet, an equal sum. But I bet a tenner on the next hand, and to her considerable surprise—although she was not yet warmed to the game—found the ace exactly where she had laid it.

She thought she had caught her mark, but not an easy one. Her expression changed and I saw her buckle down. She began to play with considerable brilliance; and by easy riding, not yet throwing any great nervous energy into my play, I lost about as many bets as I won. She could not recover from her surprise that I won any. She did not know whether to blame it on my good eyesight, or on some kind of cramp, soon to pass off, in her hands; now and then I saw her shake her fingers. I let her win three tenners in a row, then, suddenly, jumped to fifty.

I was tired of the play already, tired of the tense faces, the swirling smoke, the brittle quiet, and the strain. I craved to end the game quickly, a dangerous craving usually against a dealer as adroit as Gertrude. But my vision had not slowed down in my long stay on the veld, rather had quickened, and as my attention narrowed and intensified I knew I could pick her up on every play.

“Fifty?” she echoed. “Chum, you must be confident.”

“Will you raise me?”

“Not this hand. And I can’t play many more. I’ve got to get my supper. But I’ll call you.”

“You’re mistaken about getting your supper. If you’re hungry, it will be brought you. Remember White’s war cry: ‘Perpetual play and no bets barred.’”

“You talk pretty well. Let’s see if you saw it. Where is it?”

“Here.”

I saw her flinch as I reached. She had hoped to the last I had been led astray. When I turned over the ace, a fine line of sweat, often the sign of an earthen but yet nobler passion in young women, beaded her brow.

I bet fifty on the next two hands, winning both with no conscious effort. Yet I was pouring out nervous energy at a sickening rate. She was frightened now; I saw a little rim of white under the glistening pale blue of her iris. She began to try to dazzle me by rapid play.

Once more she lost; and by now a little crowd had gathered. I began to await the play with which she hoped to recoup—I could almost vision the cunning darting frightened hunger of her thoughts, reflected in her face by a curious sharpening of her features that made her at once more predatory-looking and more desirable to a man. I was eager for the same play, for I meant it to be the kill.

When again she called “Who sees it?” she threw a languishing look to the spectators. Hoping for some kind of a tip-off from the dealer such as a singsong “cop left,” or “cop right,” to break the run of losing hands—or at least to ride on my luck, a somewhat dapper loungeur, a cheap sport, called “I see it.”

“You do, do you, damn you, Frank Webb. Well, place your bet.”

“Can’t I wait for this gentleman to place his?”

“You sure as hell can’t.”

“Then I’ll place five.”

Both looked at me.

“I didn’t see it, and I will pass.”

“Where is it, Frank?”

The man had changed color. He hesitated several seconds trying to recapture his lost confidence. Then with a sudden motion he picked up a black ace.

“Hell’s kite,” he swore, a strange swearing on the part of a barfly, which I had read somewhere long ago.

The interlude gave Gertrude the chance she was waiting for. Her hand manipulated one of the thin decks; as she separated them for the deal I noticed that the red ace had been bent a little, as though by accident. It was not a very obvious mark, but meant to be unmistakable to eyes as sharp as mine.

“Light my cigarette, pal,” Gertrude said.

I did so without glancing at her hands. It was not necessary to know what they were up to. As I stood back, she dealt quickly.

“Who sees it?” she called.

“I do.”

“For how much?”

“I want my supper, so I’ll say a hundred.”

“Chum, you’ve taken all my cash but here’s ten blue chips, to meet you, and I’ll raise you ten more of the same.”

“I’ll raise you another hundred.”

I saw the fever in her eyes to raise still another hundred. She lacked the nerve—from lack of solid assurance that her high-bought knowledge of the human race would surely apply to me—and, anyway, to win her present bet of three hundred Cape dollars would let her break about even on the game. The crowd moved forward one stride as though it had been drilled. Many faces were flushed, one or two had paled from strain, now the men stood still and waited.

“Pick your winning card.”

Her eyes bulged as she watched my hand move slowly forward. I felt a twinge of pity for the heart beating so wildly, while mine was steady and cold. Yet when I took the unbent card on the right of the marked card, she did not cry out. A desperate look came into her face, but her only sound was a long, childlike sigh.

I picked up my bills and the thirty blue chips.

“Keep those a little while, will you?” she asked, in low tones. “Mr. White isn’t in—meanwhile we’ll have a drink—Belle hasn’t a game and can take my table. To tell the truth, I need one. I think I’m out of a job.”

We moved to the nearest refreshment table. I had pocketed the bills, but stacked the chips in front of me for all to see. Thank heaven, I need not delay the upshot. As soon as the Kaffir waiter took our order, before she could begin to decide how to cut her loss, I told her what it was.

“I want either one of two things,” I told her. “The money now, or an I.O.U. that I can show Mr. White if need be.” This last was a form of promissory note valid in San Francisco. “However, if you give me the true answer to some questions, I’ll tear up the paper.”

“I might have known it,” she said, bowing her head.

“Do you agree?”

“There’s no way out of it for me—if I want to keep my job. Are you a police officer?”

“No, a private citizen.”

She took a tab sheet from her pocket, wrote with an India ink, tore off the page, and handed it to me.

“What do you want to know about him?” she asked.

“Where is he living?”

“Somerset Arms. That’s a mu-house on the waterfront.”

“On what days does he come here, and what time?”

“He’s likely to come any day, but he always comes Saturday about sundown. And, chum, I might be speaking of anyone, you know. We haven’t mentioned any names.” Her spirits had revived a little.

“We’re going to mention them now. I mean a red-headed man, known as Harvey, once captain of Harvey’s Hustlers. Is that whom you mean?”

“Yes, God damn your soul. What are you going to do to him? Kill him?”

“That’s a private matter.”

“I knew he was hiding from someone, but I don’t know what he’s done, and that’s Jesus’ truth, may I die and go to hell if I lie. Well, I’m going to do that, anyway. The *Dummkopf* trusted me. He would have told me, if I’d let him. He said he didn’t trust me—he bragged about it to me, showing what a knowing cove he was—but he did trust me in his heart and on the side. He’s the only one of my suitors that does—isn’t that the term you toffs use?—and he’s the one who’s going to get the Judas kiss.”

“You speak English quite fluently for an Eastern European.”

“My mother was English, and I lived three years in the City of Brotherly Love. These Englishmen seem so much more gentlemanly than our Königsbergers. But that doesn’t fool me any more. And the Americans are worse.”

“I don’t know about that. And there’s only one more question.”

“What is it?” she asked, her lips a little parted in repulsion.

“After you answer this, I’ll leave the joint. If the address you gave me proves right, you’ll not see me till tomorrow, otherwise I’ll return. Meanwhile you’re not to tell him or anyone that I’ve inquired about him.”

“Go on,” she said when I paused.

“Think carefully before you answer this one. Has Harvey another hideout in the country? What part does he know best? If he had to slope in a hurry, and wanted to be safe, where would he go?”

“Well, I knew you’d ask that. It was in the cards. If I tell you, will you do something for me?”

“I’ll have to decide that later.”

“You’ll burn in hell longer than he will, no matter what he’s done. He did his deviltry hot, while you do yours cold. All right. If he’s pressed hard, he’ll

hit for the Great Karroo. He'd take the old trade route—that was what he said—I don't know what or where it is—that crosses the Hex River. I remember Hex all right. I'll remember it better from now on. Then if he can find a tribe of Bushmen that he knows—he once saved the chief's son from a bone in his throat—they'll keep him safe till doomsday.”

I said nothing, and she paused and added, “Maybe doomsday has already come.”

“I don't know. Your information seems reliable.”

“Reliable is right. I'm a real reliable girl—until I get stuck for a hundred quid.”

“What was the favor you wanted to ask?”

“Do you know what it means for a girl like me to mistake a sharper for a sucker and lose a hundred quid?”

“I reckon it's pretty rough.”

“Oh, thanks! Well, what I want is, if I've set him up for you proper, and every word is true, will you give me back the paper and half the bills? I can manage the rest.”

“Gladly.”

“How much is a piece of silver?”

“What in hell do you mean?”

“You know. In the Bible. People were always getting paid off in pieces of silver.”

“I suppose it was a shekel. I don't know what it was worth.”

“I do. It's worth two marks and about fifty pfennigs—two shillings, sixpence. Thirty of them come to—let's see—almost four quid. That's a lot of money to get for my easy rider.” She leaned forward and picked up the blue chips. “Now will you get the hell out, and take your gentlemanly airs with you? They stink up the joint.”

She sprang up and ran away.

The following day was Saturday, warm, and fair, sure to bring good business to the dens. Men of Harvey's general stamp are even more habit-bound than the more law-abiding; and I thought that the quiet crowd at

White's would give him confidence. I put N'kulu dressed like a houseboy on watch shortly after noon, feeling quite confident he would spot the quarry.

The black man reported at five. The red-haired, light-footed, gray-eyed man, compactly built as a topi, had come to the usual bait. Dressed carefully, I followed him, and in one glance found him sitting alone at a table. He saw me the same instant. Undoubtedly he had kept one eye on the door. He turned enough to conceal his face from me, and as soon as he saw his chance he intended to drift out. That suited my plans—our business was incompletable in Capetown—but I wished to talk to him first.

I went straight to his table and sat down.

Actually, I was taking quite a severe risk in doing so. I carried no derringer or knife, and he probably had both. If he had shot me down, he would still be safer from the British crowd than he was from me alive; and that was a boast I made to my own soul, and by the stars that ever shone above me, I believed it to be true. Still I did not believe he would commit such a desperate act at this stage. His general prospects were still too good, he thought. He had counted them over scores of times. The fact remained that, while he had not put away his snake ring—no doubt it was his fetish of good fortune—he had turned it around to hide its intertwined head and tail, so that at a casual glance it appeared an ordinary gold band.

“Hello, Harvey,” I said.

He looked at me long.

“Didn't I see you at Zumbo on the Zambezi?” He had a deep, male, dominant voice, apparently unshaken by my sudden appearance. His picked-up Cockney accent did not conceal Scotch overtones, somehow quaint and odd.

“Yes, and I got the message you left for me at our camp by the sweet-water pan in Matshangana country.”

By drawing a deep breath, I too spoke calmly.

The impulse rose in him to deny it. Perhaps it could be called an instinct, for stupid denial is often the first answer people of his beginnings make to accusation. He had risen above those beginnings; his name had been known and feared through a country large as western Europe. Instead he struck a pose. This too was characteristic of his kind, but the pose was mitigated and almost dignified by a good deal of self-reverence.

“Well, you don't blame me, do you?”

The question took me by surprise.

“Why didn’t you take it out on me, a man, instead of on a woman? She pulled the trigger in my behalf.”

To my amazement, Harvey laughed.

“She pulled it five times—every time a bull’s-eye. There are only a few people in Africa who could do that—and one of them was Trudi Du Piel—and she was the only one in a hundred miles of there. You couldn’t have done it, but she did do it, and out went my Hustlers, every bloody one. Still I didn’t kill her. I beat her up a little and took a price from her but I didn’t know she was in family way, and if she hadn’t been, she’d be alive now. The price was what a man can take from a woman, and a beating is what a man can give a woman. You toffs don’t understand that. You treat your women as though they was angels with wings. Well, they ain’t. But she was a woman and I was easy on her. As for killing that old Kaffir, I don’t count that. And I cut the throats of those oxen for the Devil of it—even at that, I still owe you a score instead of you owing me one. You lost your girl—but I didn’t half come out even.”

When he began and when he ended, his eyeballs flicked a little in their sockets, but in the middle of his discourse, when his confidence rose high, they held steady upon mine.

“That may be true, but it won’t affect the outcome.”

He considered this carefully. He sipped his drink, but his hand jerked a little and almost spilled it.

“A man’s got to stand up for his pals—that is, if he is a man,” he went on. “Don’t you agree with me?”

“Heartily, Harvey.”

“You’re being sarcastic. Wasn’t I standing up for mine?”

“Quite so.”

“Yes, she was a woman. But sneaking up on her was more dangerous than sneaking up on a leopard. One glimpse of me in the grass—and I wouldn’t be here.”

“I guess you wouldn’t.”

“I’d made up my mind to lay for you too, and the rest of your oxen, and the ponies thrown in, but when I noticed—afterward—that she was beginning to swell a little, I guessed the truth about her, and decided to call it square.”

“And soon after that the baby died—and then she died.”

“I didn’t intend that. I meant only to take a man’s due. Now what did you mean when you said it wouldn’t change the outcome?”

“I mean it’s your turn next. And that’s the second time I said that. The first time was to Culpepper. He turned on me swinging his rifle, but it was too late.”

“I won’t be too late,” Harvey said quietly. “I accept your challenge, all or nothing. When do you want to start?”

“Right away.”

“Are you armed?”

“Try to find out.” And that sounded like boys, with chips on their shoulders.

“Not here. When I kill you, I’m not going to give you the satisfaction of being hanged for it. I’ll meet you on the veld.”

“That suits me very well.”

“Will you excuse me for a moment. I’ve got to go to the privy.”

I had used the same excuse, in much coarser language, when I had gone forth to save life at Puerto Miramar. In the present case the life to be saved—so Harvey thought—was Harvey’s own.

He left the table, walking slowly at first, then with an irresistible quickening of his gait, and I knew he was on his way to the Great Karroo.

## CHAPTER XVII

### Hunt's End

The Great Karroo, along with the Little Karroo, comprises about a hundred thousand square miles of desolation. All ready to trek, we beat Harvey to the start, and I felt almost certain he would follow the old wagon tracks for the peace of his soul; and if he found the prints of three horsemen, he would mistake them for Griqua travelers', and not be alarmed.

Its name means the Barren Lands. On one side of a range of *kopjes*, there is hope for the land, grass is short, sunburned, but covers its nakedness, many pans hold sweet water, sometimes there are limpid trickles among the shrubbery of the donga beds; and the trees are tall as the elephants that wander through them. On the other side the grass grows in skimpy patches, there lie wide wastes of barren gravel, only dwarf mimosas mark the dry watercourses at this time of year and there is no other bush but wild pomegranate and the bleak Karroo bush itself. Bands of Bushmen, as lean as the thorn, roam the solitudes, eating unclean things, and the secretary birds seek the venomous adder, and vultures keep watch in the sky, but of all the herds of game that swarm the veld, only the quagga, the African wild ass, is seen in any numbers; and the hyenas look like caricatures of Death, and the jackals and little foxes scuttle close to the ground.

Yet the Great Karroo reminded me of some place I had been and deeply hated, and for a time my brain was blocked, and I could not remember where. Then the truth broke upon me with an eerie presentiment of evil. It seemed an unlimitable continuation of Camp Despair. Put that bleak and hateful heath where my dream had ended down in this howling desert, and it would feel at home.

With our water flasks, our pokes of jerky, and our guns, N'kulu, Hagar, and I took lookouts twenty miles apart, whereby we could watch a corridor more than sixty miles broad. The two blacks left their horses with mine, concealed in dwarf mimosa thicket; thus they could patrol their beat and look for Harvey's horses or their footprints without much danger of being seen. Both had little mirrors that I had taught them to flash, under certain circumstances, in the sun. They were ordered not to fire on Harvey, even if he walked into their waiting sights, except as a last resort to save their own lives.

The watch was only two days long, but it seemed shorter than that, to me, those days were so full of visions. Harvey had not loitered along the way, and

on the third day, when my pin-fire rifle, stood upright, cast a shadow of exactly its own length, I watched carefully north and south and caught the flash of a mirror on a *kopje* top fifteen miles away. The signal came from N’kulu. I answered it, and passed it to Hagar, about ten miles in the opposite direction. She arrived in an hour and a half, running all the way. Both of us riding, and leading N’kulu’s horse, in an hour more we spied his form, like a little, slowly moving upright stick on the empty plain.

“How fresh are the tracks, and how many?” I asked.

“They were made since sunrise, by one horse,” the Zulu replied.

We came upon the trail; and then there began what seemed to me a journey into hell. Perhaps I was overtaxed by the long wait, the planning, the yearning, and at the same time undermined by the sense of what was lost, never to be regained; yet I would never be able to believe that the high powers of Africa did not show themselves that day, the nature gods that, whether or not of man’s invention, are yet potent to save or to destroy; the nightmare world that lies under our sunlit world; the half-glimpsed, half-dreamed reality that is behind the black magic of voodoo. I gazed upon the land half-dead with thirst, I heard its muffled voices, I could not smell its life, the tang that rises from the shrubbery as it puts forth leaf and stalk, for here every branch and blade of grass had drawn into itself, covering up against dearth, seeking only to stay alive until the blessed shower; but sometimes I smelled the dreadful smell of Death, and the great vultures hopped off from the stripped bones and flapped away in the hot dead air.

Up from their lairs, out from their coverts, came forth and stood the inmates of the land, and I saw them through a haze, and they seemed not creatures of flesh and blood, but embodiments of forces, most of them evil, or of brutality, and all that lies on the other hand of grace. I was given no close view of the fleet, beautiful quaggas—always they sped past in a cloud of dust—but I saw the merciless wild dogs stand with bared fangs, and the hyenas did not flee but capered strangely, as though in glee of our entrance into their weird domain. We would not come out again. If we did, it would be as different people. We would be forever and terribly changed.

Out of a low thorn that looked as if it would not hide a springbuck—a lovely name for a beautiful lithe and playful creature I had seen once in numberless herds—emerged a huge white rhino. He stamped, and flung up dust, and lowered his monstrous head so that his lance stood forth; but I felt no fear of him, we did not even hold our pieces ready, well we knew he would let us pass, perhaps he had no choice. The wild thought came to me that he would like to warn us if he could, for we too were part brute, and the

same doom that lay on us hung over him. But we knew good and evil, and he did not. The Serpent had instructed us in the mystery, long ago in a fruitful and verdant garden. Since then we had wandered upon the face of the earth, and now we had come into its waste place, hidden away behind the rocky *kopjes*, the place where Cain had fled, bearing that awful mark. We might yet turn back—but we did not turn back.

The heat of the day increased. The last traces of the sweet and saving water, the baptism from the sky that washed away sin, that breaks in the mother's womb that she may give forth life, faded from our sight. There was nothing of any hope or joy between the burning sky and the brown, sun-baked ground. The rhino might have been one I had seen at Camp Despair, running as though the Devil were in pursuit. Now, out of a mimosa forest that looked too low and mean to hide a hermit buffalo, moved forth an old she-elephant, so wasted by age and famine that her bones stood forth. I knew her now, I thought. She was the same I had seen at Camp Despair, and had come hence to prophesy the soon ending of our lives, or the death of our souls. She stood in our path. She scuffled with her feet and wiped out for a few feet the tracks we were following so grimly, so implacably. It may be she was not the death-elephant, but earth-born like ourselves. Perhaps she had come to tell us something. But we marched on, oblivious to her outstretched trunk and outspread ears; she could not stop us, so she withdrew the way she had come.

A secretary bird flew over us, circled and swooped down. Then in our plain sight, not fifty yards ahead of us on the almost naked ground, there came to pass a battle savage and terrible as those between the archangels and the legions of darkness before the world was made. She thought nothing of killing little adders and yard-long asps, the scratch of whose fangs was death, but now she had swooped down upon a black mamba, the serpent that many tribes of black men worship as a god, fast as a whiplash, malignant as a fiend, venomous beyond any being with the breath of life. The bird screamed, and the snake hissed, and they danced the *danse macabre* in the grass until the grass wore out, and dust rose in a cloud.

“Come,” said Hagar, when N’kulu and I would stop and watch, or at least ride wide of this phoenix and this dragon. “We can’t wait for a bird to kill a snake.”

The fury of their battle intensified until it passed credence, passed the mark of what we had learned to accept as earthly; and chills of horror ran down our backs. But when we were ten paces distant, the bird took wing, leaving the mamba in his death throes, the forward six feet of his twelve

sweeping stiffly from side to side in a great arc, close to the ground, while the rear lay paralyzed and dead.

“Look,” breathed N’kulu in a hoarse whisper.

My gaze followed his pointing finger. A hundred yards to one side and thirty feet above the sun-blasted earth the secretary bird was flapping wildly in the air, flying in jerks and circles, and as we stared in dread, its wings clapped together and it pitched down, and the thud as it struck the hard ground came weirdly to our ears and harrowed our souls with thoughts we could not grasp and auguries that we dared not heed. Hagar lashed her horse to a run, and it bounded over the writhing snake. But as N’kulu and I turned a little off the path, its half-length that was still alive rose and swung swiftly two feet off the ground, and its fangs barely missed my foot.

## 2

The heat thickened like smoke. It shimmered on the rocks, and mirages of great wonder rose and hung under the horizon, one of them a brave ship on a cool sea, with every mast and spar, and one was Capetown, spread out for us with all its roofs and towers under Table Mountain. The hills of warrior ants became feverishly animated. Smelling meat and blood, they rushed at us in a black swarm, seeming to move so fast, although we outdistanced them in a few steps, and so the swarms of men must look to the seraphs, fearing our defilement, as they wing through the sky; and the vultures made merry, soaring and climbing and gliding without stirring a feather on the rising currents, but the lizards grew motionless, a delicious trance stealing upon them, and then they lay like dead folk, careless of the insatiable hunger of their desert fellows. The sun looked like a white-hot metal disk in the burning-glass sky. We could not look at it or near it without tears. It scorched all skin exposed to its blast whether black or white.

Suddenly N’kulu laughed aloud.

“Look, bukra!” he cried. “We have got turned around, and come up on the seaward side of the Langkloof, and there are evergreen forests on the slopes. Let us go and rest awhile in the cool, among the dripping ferns, then we will rouse up and follow the bukra’s trail with refreshed hearts.”

I replied, grimacing and gesturing. “Harvey is no bukra. He’s a bushwhacker.”

“And that is no forest, only a cheat on the eyeballs,” Hagar said with a quiet mien. “Let us make haste.”

The sun pitched at last—it was a little lower every time I raised my hand as a shield against its beams and measured its height in the sky. It dropped down, and I thought that the air stirred a little, but there was no cooling of the land or of the baking rocks and the burning sand. The shadows stretched very long. Evening sounds began, such as the yapping of foxes and the sporadic barking of jackals. I knew that night was surely coming when the vultures, hideously hungry, left their vain watch. They went away to some eerie roost guarding an entranceway to hell that lay hot and close by. We ate of our sun-dried unsalted meat that the strong acids of the stomach could dissolve without much help from water, and sipped with a pitiless sparingness at our canteens.

But we could do nothing for our horses, whose wildly rolling eyes and red nostrils already declared their thirst, and who pawed and trembled in their pickets half the night, standing still with their heads dropped through the latter half. We three people fell into short spells of apoplectic sleep. Through our dreams ran the chuckling and sobbing and the long wailings of the hyenas and the strident bark of jackals, rising now and then to a frantic clamor, then dying away, and the whimpering cries of foxes, like infants in the dark. Late rose a moon half-eaten away by the wasting sickness that in due course takes all. The name of that remorseless malady is Time. Her light was weak and wretched, but in this sky bereft of the lightest cooling mist it extinguished the pin-point twinkling stars that somehow promised hope, a distant but final redemption, and which taught the durability of little things, and which made us dream we were not forgot of God; also it dulled the noble shine of the great stars. As she rose up, our visions widened. I could see the mean thorn thirty yards away, and when I looked down could make out plainly my own footprints in the dust.

“Get up and trek,” I told my two companions.

“You took so long about it, I thought you were struck dumb,” Hagar told me.

Was it not Hagar who as Sarai’s handmaid took Sarai’s place? “Hagar, you are well named. There is not much difference in your quest now and your quest then. Then it was to make life, now to take life. One little letter different. She looked like you, Hagar, as Abraham called to her, and Sarai railed at her.”

N’kulu’s black eyes were rimmed with white. I saw it in the moonlight.

We mounted our horses, they not complaining even in their hearts; it was too late now, nothing mattered now; they thought that God Almighty worked

His will through our hands, and never dreamed it might be Satan usurping God's place. Their feet rose and fell, but they did not lift their heads until we crossed a small, dry watercourse, where they snorted and nuzzled at a hole late-dug in the sand. The bottom felt faintly damp. But not a drop oozed through the baking ground, and we struck them with the cruel quirts, and they surged forward a few quick paces, ere again they hung their heads and trudged as in a dream.

The sun rose, and its first ray scorched like a hot iron. The time drew on to midmorning, and I felt sure we were pressing the quarry close. If not, we had lost and would almost surely perish in defeat. Then we came on a rocky plain, dotted with thorn clumps, and presently to a thin line of dwarf mimosa marking a watercourse now bone-dry, grave-silent. But farther on, it entered a kind of ravine, a good place to search for a dwindling water hole.

“Do not go there, bukra, until I crawl and look,” N’kulu said.

“Harvey’s horse’s tracks do not lead down to it.”

“That is why I bid you swing wide of it. The tracks keep a straight course, but I think they will circle back. Would he miss the chance to find water? And he may be there now.”

The trail would pass within a hundred paces of the ravine. I could see it through my Lemiere field glass. Instead of following it, we swung out in the other direction, so we would pass at over three hundred paces; then N’kulu could reconnoiter from the opposite direction, which appeared to give better cover. I admitted the possibility of his proposition, but did not believe it. The scene looked too dead. The silence lay so deep and the heat felt so extreme. I had forgotten how a silence can be shattered by a clap of thunder, and that greater heat than this can be generated in a gun barrel by a trigger touch, and that, without life, death cannot exist.

The thunder roared twice. Our out-swing from the ambush was not wide enough; the great marksman waiting there had been handicapped but not made helpless. My horse dropped under me, dying; N’kulu’s horse bounded forward, about ten frantic leaps, then fell in a heap. Silence set in again, broken only by a faint clatter of rocks inaudible except in such silence.

“Run and take him, before he can reload,” Hagar muttered, her quirt lifted.

Instead we could only stand and watch as a horse burst out of the brushwood at the other end of the ravine. Wildly rode Harvey, his double-barreled rifle in his hand. No doubt he was disappointed that both N’kulu and I had got quickly to our feet. Not daring to aim at our bodies visible above

our mounts, the target being too small, he had hoped to cripple one or both of us, at the same time making sure of immobilizing us. So he might be laughing as he galloped away; at least his heart was singing in his breast. He had escaped, he thought. He would find his tribe of Bushmen and live among them until once more he could return to Gertrude and much else that he had loved. He would begin again, win again.

I thought not. I looked at Hagar, and believed that her thoughts leaped with mine. But I did not speak until we had come down into the ravine, looked at Harvey's carefully laid ambush, and then at a hole he had dug in the bed of the watercourse. A cupful of water had oozed into it, but the wells were only faintly damp; perhaps enough had accumulated after a patient wait for Harvey to wet his lips, but his horse had not drunk.

"We're better off," I told my two companions.

Hagar nodded quietly. N'kulu stared.

"How can that be, master?" he asked. "We three can ride Hagar's horse a little way, then he will fall."

"How soon will Harvey's horse fall from burning thirst? No, we will leave Hagar's horse here, and follow him on foot."

"Did you Zulus never know that a man can overtake a horse in the great Thirst?" Hagar asked scornfully. "So can a woman."

So by taking time to dig away some of the earth on the side of the well, we fastened Hagar's horse so he could put his head in it, his lips touching the bottom. Perhaps before night fell again, he could drink. Perhaps there would be only enough water to tantalize him, and if the wild dogs found him they would kill him; but we dared not set him free, lest we have some awful need of him when we passed this way again. I thought upon his innocence, how he had never harmed a living soul from his foaling in some greener land until this bitter hour in the desert, then I tramped on with my companions, and forgot him.

The land looked different, now that we gazed upon it from our true height instead of high in the saddle. A dream came upon me, a kind of an invisible mirage, in which I saw myself the brother of the yapping jackal, the wailing hyena, and the howling wild dogs, and even the little green and brown lizards asleep on the stones. Then, along with my sense of having time to spare, of being no longer harried and driven by the whips of hate, I felt a strange assurance of victory that at first I could not completely believe. The truth

was, we were winning—or at least our chance of winning had been greatly bettered—by an idea. We traveled unburdened while our quarry was laden down with a thousand pounds of horseflesh. Our flasks of water were ample for such desert-hardened trekkers as Hagar, N’kulu, and me today, tonight, and all day tomorrow, and our course would be changed long before the expiration of that period of grace. Unless he could find his Bushmen in a few hours, Harvey would turn back. Where else could he go?

Before long, Harvey’s footprints led us to a deserted kraal of a small tribe of Bushmen. The dry wells were deep-dug, and the kitchen midden contained the bones of foxes, durboas, sour-tasting aardvarks, and other creatures that even Bushmen will not eat except in the bitter drouth. I examined them without haste. Then I spoke, my voice drunken-sounding from concealed exultation, to my two companions.

“There are three *kopjes* about ten miles apart,” I said.

“I see them, but where is our quarry?” N’kulu answered.

“He will return before dark. Meanwhile we will each climb one of the hills, I with my field glasses, all with our little mirrors, and keep close watch. Then he who spies him will signal to the others, and we will close in for the kill.”

When our brief plans were complete, all three of us made haste. The central hill that I climbed rose about three hundred feet above the plateau, and gave a wide and comprehensive view. At two o’clock in the afternoon, in the extreme heat of the day, I took my post. By four I had seen more clean and handsome creatures than I had ever dreamed roamed these sun-blasted wastes. Several small herds of quaggas had wandered across the distant grass. There were other bucks I could not name, one flock of ostriches, and, close at hand, a family of beautiful sable antelope such as had run with Trudi and me on the day of the windstorm. Perhaps it was a sign that the long hunt was almost over.

*Trudi, wherever you are, do not gaze tonight across the River. Do not watch what occurs tonight. In the silence or the music, in the darkness or the pearly light, do not know of it.*

A flock of vultures took flight behind a long thorn thicket. They had flushed up from what was likely an unguarded carcass, probably last night’s kill of a leopard or even a black-maned lion sometimes ranging such deserts as this. What had frightened them? Rarely does the killer return to his broken meats—well knowing the uselessness of it—and his time is between sundown and sunrise, not in the blast of the day’s heat. Quickly the grisly birds settled

back to their bone-picking; and, watching closely, I made out a moving form on the flank of the thicket. Except for man, only a maribou stork looks so tall and lean.

It was Harvey of Harvey's Hustlers, and his course was run. Unable to follow a straight course, he tacked like a ship in a head wind, and sometimes stopped and staggered. I flashed a signal to N'kulu, received his answer, then did the same with Hagar. In a little less than an hour we met at the foot of the hill. In the meantime our quarry had advanced less than a mile.

We sipped at our flasks, then followed at a fast walking pace. Half an hour later we made a wheeling movement that fetched us up behind a mimosa-lined watercourse not more than three furlongs in advance of our prey. Here we lay an ambush, only to have to move it twice because of Harvey's veering to the right and left. But now he was staggering into easy range. I raised my rifle and saw him plainly in the sights. I had only to press the trigger to be rid of him. He could be left in silence in the dead grass, never knowing what hit him, and when the wild dogs gathered, or the birds of death soared down, he would not hear flapping wings or feel the first wary setting of bared fangs.

He would disappear from the sight of men, his evil deeds nullified by the blotter of Death, and I could go from this place and wash my hands in the first water hole we came on, and it might be my soul would be saved.

Instead the desert closed round me, whispering evilly in my ear, and the burning sky was over me with its seeming hate, and I would not heed the pleadings of a lovely ghost that came across a wide deep river and touched my hand.

"Drop your gun, Harvey, or I'll shoot," I called, loudly enough for a delirious man to hear.

The piece fell out of his hand and he came toward us in a staggering run.

"For the love of Jesus Christ," he wailed out of his thirst-thickened lips, "give me a drink of water."

The horse we had left in the ravine had lived through that night, managing to drink of the slow-seeping water; and the use we made of him was to carry our still weak but reviving captive. With replenished canteens, we made good time toward the Hex Mountains, arriving on their slopes, the Karroo left behind, before the sun pitched down. Again we saw trees, a carpet of grass as far as the gaze could wander, watercourses with olive-green herbage; and

everywhere we looked, gladdening the heart, restoring faith in God and men, roamed herds of game.

The quaggas had come here, out of the waste of the Karroo, for better living. There was no four-legged thing as fleet, unless it was the cheetah, the hunting leopard, who could gain upon him at the start of the race, to lag behind at its end. Where there was deep shade and rank reed, slept and fed and chewed their cud wide-horned Cape buffaloes, the cows vigilant, the bulls lazy but furious in wrath. In the way of freaks of nature—or so we thought, not knowing how natural they felt to themselves—roamed droves of giraffe in ever silence, never giving sound to any joy or pang of the heart, with a sedateness of behavior, a calm trust in God and unfortunately in man, a sweetness that their very grotesqueness caused to catch at the heart. Undignified, squawking and fighting, the ostriches ran in six-foot strides, pell-mell at the slightest danger, and their feet flushed the little larks who were their cousins.

Lonely roamed the white rhinoceroses, their only fellowship being mother and calf, or sometimes two old males, outvying each other in selfishness. But I did not believe they were the origin of the legend of the unicorn. The latter had the body of a thoroughbred horse, was pictured as snow-white, not dirty gray, he was lusty and frolicsome and had strange dealings with women. In among the rocks of the *kopjes* and in the thick of the dongas dwelt creatures of the night.

“Is tonight my night?” Harvey asked, when we had pitched a little camp by a cool spring. Sitting there with his hands tied, his concern over my intentions deeper than any ocean, he still spoke with a trace of bravado.

“Yes,” I answered, going on with my chore.

“Well, don’t be so damned close-mouthed. Haven’t I the right to know? Are you going to shoot me like a man, or hang me like a dog?”

“Neither one.”

“I’ve got a killing coming. I don’t deny it, in spite of what the girl did to my good Hustlers. She did it for you, I know. I hadn’t ought to have taken it out on a woman. But I tell you, Stony, or whatever your damn name is, if you peg me out on an anthill, you’ll burn forever, and I tell you you’ll burn forever and ever, world without end.”

“I’ll not tie you to an anthill. I know something better than that.”

His eyes half-shut and his lips trembled like a child’s and he said nothing more. I finished the chore I was doing, then gave N’kulu orders as to close

care of the captive, then with a picket rope fastened to my saddle strings, the pin-fire rifle in its scabbard, I rode forth in the grass.

In a matter of minutes I came in range of a herd of large roan antelope and had shot a heavy bull. When the horse had dragged the carcass in a long looping course across the grass of the veld, a half-mile in all, I let it lie within four hundred paces of our camp. Then I turned the carcass on its back, the four legs in the air and cut strips of rawhide two feet long and three inches wide on the inner side of the thighs, leaving these attached at one end. The table had not been set for the lions and hyenas, leopards and wild dogs, that would cross and follow that blood trail. Nothing remained but to finish spreading the feast.

As I rode back to camp, I made a fleeting inquiry into my own sanity. I followed it only a little way, then laughed and rubbed my hands that felt hot and dry. As I rode into camp, Harvey's gaze fixed in yearning intensity on my lips when I spoke, on my hands when I moved. His own lips were pale, oddly grimacing at times, and his blunt, brutal hands had become strangely awkward. I noticed the serpent ring which for a while I had forgotten. At my command, N'kulu tied a slip knot in the picket rope and put the loop over Harvey's head.

"Pull it tight if he struggles," I ordered. "It will surely quiet him. We'll loosen it if it quiets him too much."

"I'm not going to struggle, you bastard," Harvey said, and I believed him. "I'm going to take my medicine, and not give you the satisfaction."

"We'll start with you putting out your hands."

"What for?" he asked, holding them forth in their leather bonds.

He turned gray, his eyes glazing, as I removed the ring.

"What do you want of that?" he muttered, when I took the ring.

"I'd better ask what you want of it."

"I took it from the ear of a dead girl who had been false to me. A girl of coffee color, but the comeliest I ever saw. Later a black Bushman came and told me that if I'd give it to him to take to his master, I could leave Africa alive. But if I didn't—"

"Did you beat him for his insolence?"

"Yes."

“You should have believed him. How much money have you in your belt?”

“Five hundred Cape dollars. I’ve made thousands but couldn’t keep ’em.”

“Do you mind my taking it? I can use it, and you can’t.”

“No, I don’t mind.”

“Don’t imagine this will change anything,” I said, when I had the bills in my own belt.

“I’m not that big a fool.”

I wondered what he did imagine. Now he would soon know the truth. At my nod, N’kulu led Harvey like a haltered animal to the roan carcass, Hagar and I bringing up the rear. When Harvey saw the rawhide strips peeled off and hanging from the thighs he turned his head and looked at me in stunned disbelief.

“You can’t,” he burst out, his chin palsied.

I did not answer.

“You can’t do it!” he went on, his voice rising.

N’kulu gave a light, nervous jerk on the rope, but the cords of Harvey’s neck stood out, and he did not feel it.

“You can’t do this to a white man,” he shouted as loud as he could, the cry ringing over the silent plain.

“I can do it a little better to a white man than I could to a black man.”

Suddenly his throat eased, his expression changed, and he spoke to me in a low, desperate, but strong rumble of sound.

“Well, go ahead, God damn you. But He’ll damn you without my asking. Maybe I’m damned too—I’ve done enough to deserve it—but when you’re sent to hell, you’ll be shut up in solitary. You know what that means? A corner that the rest of us, the decent damned, whisper about, but have never seen. Only God could imagine it, as only the Devil could imagine this. The Devil’s got your soul already, just thinking of it. Will you let me off and give me a decent killing?”

“No, I won’t let you off. There’s your bed for the night. You’ll find it soft enough.”

“I thought you were a gentleman, but you’re not.”

It was a grotesque remark to make the Devil hold his sides, but I could not even smile.

“Lay him face-up on the breast and belly of the carrion, and tie his arms and legs with the rawhide,” I ordered N’kulu.

“Spare me the task, bukra,” the black man answered.

“Do as I tell you.”

“No, not if you order me the same death.”

Then up spoke the black woman whose face made me think of Gertrude’s as she dealt for the kill. “I’ll do it, bukra.”

“No, I’ll do it myself. Hold the rope tight.”

“I told you there’s no need. I told you I won’t struggle, and I will not. But you deserve it more than me.”

The conviction ringing in his voice made me look at him and listen.

“How do you count that, Harvey?”

“Because you could do this to a fellow man, and I couldn’t. Neither can that black man, and he’s a savage. A black woman can do it, but they’re not human either, when love for someone turns ’em into fiends. It’s the end of me, but it’s the end of you, too. You can give up hope. You can run up and down the world and cross all the seas and all the deserts and all the mountains, and you’ll never get away from this spot, this hell-hole in the veld. The Devil will be waiting for you here. You’ll know it, and when there’s nowhere else to turn, you’ll come back here and he’ll get you. Do you think I’m lying? Do you think that the vision that’s come to me is false? I was born in Mull off the Scottish coast, across the Firth of Lorn from Argyll. I was a gilly for English lords who came to hunt the red deer in the days before I won a whole kingdom, half a continent, to hunt o’er for myself. Oh, the mists that rolled in from the outer islands across the Pass of Coll! Silver and snow-white and pale gray, with the sun shining through them, ere the winds tore ’em to shreds. Oh, the blue of the lochs, and the green of the young rye! But the grass was never greener than in the kirkyard, and oft we’d see the Devil, black as the coals of Linlithgow, waiting there for his own. He’s close by now. It’s for you his hand is out, not for me. Fine Southern gentleman you make out to be, this is your last chance.”

“Lie down in your bed, Harvey, and I’ll tuck you in for the night.”

He lay down without an instant’s struggle, and I fastened the rawhide strips to his wrists and ankles, and pulled the knots tight. As I finished the

job, I must rub my eyes for better vision, for the light was failing. The bottom had fallen out of the sun, and it had dropped behind the rocky hills, and the shadows no longer crept but leaped and rushed.

“You’ve still time to cut my throat and save your soul,” Harvey told me.

I need not answer for some shadow-folk answered for me. They spoke in my place, as one night they had done for Hagar. The first voice was only the chattering, snarling chorus of a band of jackals. Then a hyena gave voice to wild laughter that ended in a sob. He laughed over the bones left by the lordly lion, with good meat on them still, but his maw would never be filled, there was always hunger, there was always pain, and the end was defeat and death.

“Oh, they’ll come tonight,” Harvey told me in low tones. “You’ve planned it well; the whole cursed lot will come. There will be jackals and hyenas and leopards and lions, and some will hang back, but some will come up, and I may live a long time, maybe for hours, ’specially if they start on my guts instead of my throat. Even at that, I’m glad it’s the nighttime and not the day. I won’t be here at daybreak, I’ll promise you that. I’ll be where no fang can touch me, and no man-made law can cop me, and no hate can harm me.”

“Yes, I think you will.”

“It’s hate that’s got its hand on me tonight. It’s not law, and it’s not justice. You don’t claim it is?”

“No, I don’t dare claim that.”

“Then go away and leave me, so it can start, and once it’s started, it can get over with.”

“I call you, Harvey.”

But he did not know what I meant. He thought I was mocking him.

I beckoned to N’kulu and Hagar, and I led the way toward our camp. It seemed a long way in the thickening dusk, and for a hundred steps or more I kept my gaze fixed on it, as though in fear of losing my way, but the real reason was I did not wish to look back. My soul had darkened with the darkening hillside, and I did not want to see the first little jackal stealing upon the carrion—a little flicking shadow, darker than the rest. Then it came to me that although I could hear N’kulu breathing hard, and the faint swish of grass from his footfall, I had heard not a sound from Hagar. I stopped, turned, and saw her coming toward us on a light run.

“Where have you been?” I demanded.

“A task was appointed me, which I have done.”

“What was it?”

“Something that the M’sabu commanded me to do.”

“What do you mean? M’sabu has been gone many moons.”

“Yes, but only across the River. She came to me just now and gave me the order. It was not meet that I could disobey, even though you kill me.”

I pushed past her and, at a fast pace, retraced my steps. As I came near the scene, there was a rustle of grass as some little creature, a fox or a jackal, scuttled away. But there rose no other sound. I had never come to a more silent place.

“Harvey?” I called.

There was no answer.

I pushed close. Harvey lay almost as though asleep, but his head had rolled back a little, and his breast and his bed too looked black in this dim light from some clean baptism of Death.

I turned to Hagar and spoke in bitter reproach.

“Woman, I did not bid you take my sin upon your soul.”

“M’sabu bade me, bukra. When I said I would, she smiled her wide, slow smile. So there was no evil. That was the sign. She had lingered until now, you held her here by hate, but now she has inspanned and gone her way. It is all right now. Let us, too, go to our own place.”

The jackals barked, the hyenas laughed and sobbed, far away a lion roared out his sovereignty of the veld, but there was no evil in any of these, and the night wind felt cool on my fevered face. And now I must follow blindly Hagar and N’kulu, because I had been given the holy baptism of tears.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### The Park of the Three Lions

There was nothing any longer to hold Hagar, N'kulu, and me in the Hex Hills. When the morning broke, strange and gray, we did not visit the scene of the atonement, and actually the exact spot might have been hard to find, so clean sweeps the broom of life across the veld to efface the tracks of Death. The bones would likely be scattered or hidden away in dens. The strips of skin I had cut would be devoured with the rest. The skull would be rolled and the dark stain on the yellow grass would be licked off by small, rough, avid tongues. All the feasters had gone now, vanishing as invisibly as they had come; and although after sunrise the vultures might find vestiges worth their lighting down, we did not wait for them to begin their implacable watch. Shaking some dust from our heels, although not all—we could never in this world shake all—we rose from our beds and trekked.

It was a long way back to the kraals of King Manikusa on the Sanyati arm of the great Zambezi. When we made it at last, I thought to find both the aged monarch and his chief witch doctor gathered to their fathers, but Manikusa, although very feeble, still walked in the sunlight in his lion-skin of state, and Wise One looked as lean and timeless as a thorn tree.

“The ponies are both in good flesh,” he reported to me. “Of the eight oxen, seven are well and one is dead on the horn of a rhino that broke through our kraal, and we have kept the axles of the wagon in fresh grease made from the fat of the wild hog.”

“You have done well,” I said.

Then, when I paused, the aching expression on his face, more agony of suspense than I had ever seen on any face unless it were Harvey's, more than I had ever let come on my face even when I waited to be hanged, caused me to speak in haste in the Dutch tongue.

“Don't be afraid. All is well in regard to the ring.”

“You have it?” he gasped.

“Yes.”

“I will put my hand in yours, making what these buffalo think is *dowa*. Then give me the little gold snake, and by its *dowa* every promise I made you will be kept.”

My card-sharper stood me in good stead, in fishing the ring from my tobacco pouch unseen by that sharp-eyed throng. While he performed his hocus-pocus, I slipped it into his hand. When he felt its shape he could not keep two tears from running out of his wildly bright eyes.

There followed some sort of palaver between Wise One and Prince Umzilla in one of the beehive houses. I had not yet sought audience or had been greeted by the tall, young, royal black, so I did not gaze in that direction. Presently both men came forth, and although Manikusa's son could not speak to me, he gave me a broad smile and a little curved bone from the neck of a lion, famed as a good-luck token.

"The great Umzilla bade me tell you that his tribesmen, and their women and children, and in truth all his kinsmen of the Sun, whether his friends and foes, and the Hottentot, and the Bushmen, and even the pale-faced Chiquaa take you in brotherhood for the sake of the falling dead of the slave dealer Harvey and his band, at your hand and at the hand of the little M'sabu which is now stilled."

"I take them in brotherhood, also," I answered without thinking.

"Also, the great Umzilla has bade me offer you, as a token of his brotherhood, all the valley of the donga we call M'Kazi, twenty miles long by six miles broad, wherein to build your kraals and herd your kine. Moreover, if you do not wish to become an outlander, so far from people of your skin, he bids me appoint a hundred porters, each to bear upon his shoulder a tusk from our great store, none to weigh less than half a hundredweight, for you to sell at the trading post in Bulawayo." As he named this outpost, the white man's farthest thrust into the South African blue, the lid of his left eye drooped a little in some kind of sign.

Even now I could not afford to lose face with Wise One. Not knowing what the sign meant, I appeared not to notice it. In a few minutes he was leading a band of a hundred porters, deep-chested, broad-shouldered young men pleased at the prospect of change and adventure, to the ivories stacked like cordwood behind the kraals. I would not be cheated in the dealing. Wise One himself chose the big, curved pale-yellow tusks, many of which had been borne by an old bull and weighed a hundred pounds.

When my wagon wheels were ready to turn, Wise One waved away the crowd, then spoke in sly glee.

"No doubt Heer Edward will sell his tusks at Bulawayo," he remarked in Afrikaans.

"Perhaps so, but how do you know my name?"

“Has *Bwana* forgotten that he gave it, when he first came seeking boats to go down our river?” *Bwana* meant master in the East Coast argot employed by the Arabs.

“Yes, Wise One, I had forgotten. But you bade the porters take the ivory to any post I desired, so why not Zumbo, somewhat farther, but where the price may be somewhat higher?”

“No, you will take them to Bulawayo. I have seen it in a vision.”

“Did you see what made me choose that post, Wise One?”

“Could it not be that you wish to lay eyes on the great Moffat, who has his kraal there?”

The great Moffat was no misnomer. Few greater men had ever come to Africa from Great Britain than Robert Moffat, the Scotch missionary, teacher, traveler, and pioneer.

“That would be a good cause for going there.”

“But it comes to me there may be another cause. Only two months ago a tall ship brought a message to the burgomaster at Lourenço Marques, in Delagoa Bay. How did I, an old black medicine man, know of it? Because the message was not his *shauri* (business) but the *shauri* of another, whom the sender asked to be found, and since he was old in the way of Africa, he had the drums send forth the call, and for all drummers friendly to the white men to repeat it, so it would be heard far and wide. Meanwhile the message would be carried by a north-bound trader to the kraal of the great Moffat, since this has come to be a rendezvous for trekkers in the Zambezi country, where the lost one had lately made his way.”

“What was the name of the lost one?”

“He had two names. The first of them was Edward. The other I have forgotten.”

“Did the drums describe him?”

“He was darker of skin than the English and the Dutch, and had a big nose, and a gun that loaded in the middle, not the end.”

“I suppose you didn’t hear the name of the sender?” For sometimes this much was told, in advertising mail, so that the addressee could judge its importance.

“All who can understand the drums heard it, but it meant nothing to us black men—except one. I was that one, and I have forgotten it. But I

remembered hearing it before.”

Wise One laughed and spat.

“I have a curiosity to know in what connection.”

“Long ago I was slave of Dutch farmer folk, and the old grandfather had read many books. When an Englishman who came often to our kraals boasted of great journeys his countrymen had made, the grandfather boasted of great Dutchmen who had sailed the seas and found new lands. One of them sailed in a ship whose name was the *Half Moon*, which I knew was lucky. And the sender of the message was his son or daughter, or, more like, his grandson or granddaughter, for the name was the same.”

“Hudson?”

“Yes, that is right. I am old and foolish or I would have remembered.”

“You are not old by our counting, and if you are foolish, so is a jackal, a hyena, and a fox rolled into one. You were born among savages, but had you been born with a white skin, among the most knowing of peoples, you would have still won to high place.”

“I will remember the *bwana* saying so, long after the wind has brushed away his footprints.”

“And I will take my ivory to the kraal of the great Moffat.”

## 2

Wagon ruts led across the high veld from Manikusa’s kraals to Bulawayo, and our outfit made the journey in twelve days.

There were many beehive huts of the Bechuana natives, but only two structures large enough to be called houses. One was the trading post run, oddly enough, by an English-speaking Cantonese named Shen N’u. It was to him that I went first.

He was pleased by the appearance of my ivory and told me he would pay one Cape dollar a pound.

“Do you think I have as much as five thousand pounds?” I asked.

“I will offer you five thousand Cape dollars for it, before it is weighed,” he answered with a toothy grin. “If it does not go considerably more, my grandfather was a turtle.”

“I can make good use of the balance, but five thousand Cape dollars is the sum I require for a certain purpose, even if I have to transport it clean to

Sofala,” so I confided to him, in the way of lonely men fresh out of the Blue.

“Your purpose can now be fulfilled. Will you stand by to see it weighed, or trust the office to the blacks? They are used to weighing corn, or I miss my guess.”

“It is in my mind to call on Dr. Moffat, without delay.”

Some boys had already run to tell him of my arrival. I found him on a kind of porch attached to his roomy native-style house, the former, he told me proudly in a little while, the work of his own hands. Besides being a good carpenter, he was also a kraal-builder, a blacksmith, a vegetable and flower gardener, and a farmer; and all these craftsmanships had shaped his hands into wonder-works of human flesh, and built something indescribably impressive into his face. I could not doubt that they had helped him perform his still greater labors, the writing of his famous account of his missions and travels, the translation of the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress* into the Sechwana tongue, and giving savage people a written language of their own. He was still in his early sixties, ruddy, and vigorous, and he spoke with a Scotch accent in a movingly humble way.

“Did you say your name was Edward Stono?” Dr. Moffat asked, belatedly catching at a vague memory.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then I have a message for you put by. It arrived some weeks ago—it had been brought on a Portuguese vessel—and it came from America. But perhaps you know about it, and that is the main purpose of your visit here.”

“I have three purposes, one being the sale of my ivory to the factor. In the other two, I request your good offices.”

“It will take about fifteen minutes to produce the message. My native secretary has filed it, and no one but he can decipher his records, and he is running an errand to the chief’s house—” The good doctor looked distressed.

“After being delayed this long, it can certainly wait awhile longer. In fact, I’d like to have it wait until I have settled the third matter—one I had in mind a great deal longer than the news of the message.”

“Now that’s an odd thing.”

“I suppose it is. I’m following my heart in this, and perhaps a gambler’s instinct. Have you the latest map of the country lying east of Victoria Falls?”

“I have a rough map, drawn at Dr. Livingstone’s directions, and I think it is the latest.”

He took me into a plain but comfortable office, on the wall of which hung a better map of the Falls region than I had known existed. After studying it a few minutes, measuring distances with the doctor's forceps, I was able to indicate a minor tributary of the great river some twenty-five days' journey by wagon below the Falls.

"In how many years will this territory be settled?" I asked.

"Much sooner than you think. The Doppers have their eyes on Bechuanaland and Matabeleland, and the English aren't far behind."

"After it's been ceded by native kings—the first step in the settlement—how much could be bought for five thousand Cape dollars—a thousand English pounds?"

The doctor's eyes fixed on mine with a curious intensity. "Why—it's pretty soon to consider such matters—but if history repeats itself—and the land is opened to settlers as other strips have been—I should say between fifty and a hundred thousand acres."

"Well, I want to buy that much as a memorial to my wife." I began to speak rapidly, afraid that Dr. Moffat would think me a fool, and in great haste to tell him the good sense that my mind and soul, working together, had arrived at. "It's hardly enough land for what I hoped, yet it would be a start \_\_\_"

Just then a Negro, in white cotton shirt and trousers, with intelligence written in his face, appeared at the door.

"Do you want me, sah?"

"Get out the message that came for Mr. Edward Stono."

"Yes, sah."

"Now what were you saying, Edward?" And I knew it was right and kind for him to call me by my first name, and I felt the warmth and sympathy in his voice, and my trouble passed away.

"Doctor, you know how the game has disappeared in the regions settled by the Voortrekkers. They need the meat—and the good sport of hunting—but the time comes, and they can't find any. I had hoped that this tract of land that I want to buy could be marked off, with posts every half-mile or so, and everywhere on it the game left undisturbed. Some of the farmers might not like the notion, but in time they'd see that the animals will breed there and spread to other places where they could hunt. Even fifty thousand acres is eighty sections—a piece ten miles long and eight miles broad. A good many

could live there—bucks, buffaloes, even a few lions and leopards and rhinos. The area I've pointed out is especially good game country. She and I saw a good deal, on the night we spent there, separated from our outfit, without any fire. Doctor, if I turned over the money to you, would you take charge of it until the land is opened up, and then do what you can to carry out my dream?"

"Will you give me a free hand? I mean—if I can't get that particular spot—if for some reason it's not available—can I select some other that would be a good preserve for wild animals?"

"Oh, yes—"

The Negro reappeared, an envelope in his hand. Evidently he had known just where to look for it. Dr. Moffat took it and handed it to me. I laid it on the table unopened.

"Do you wish me to leave the room, while you read it?" he asked.

"No, sir. I wish to wait a minute until we finish what we were saying. I don't want anything to interfere with that. Or to tempt me to postpone it—or to let it go."

"I don't think there'd be any danger," the great missionary said, looking into my eyes. "And I'll say now, I'll not only do what you ask, but I think I can do more. I am a close friend of Paul Kruger, of Martin Pretorius, and of Sir George Grey. All three would favor the idea of a game preserve in the new country—to build on from where you began. I think that not eighty square miles but two hundred might be set aside as a sanctuary for the game. In these vast expanses, four hundred could easily be spared and the money you have donated would set a seal of solid fact, of earnest intent, on the whole enterprise."

I turned away to the window, steadied myself, and spoke.

"Four hundred miles would be twenty miles long, twenty miles wide. That was a long day's journey in our wagon."

"Then I'll do it in great joy—the best—the most—I can. Have you any name you'd like to suggest for the sanctuary?"

"Yes, I have. The Park of the Three Lions."

He nodded, and went out of the room. I opened and read the message. When Robert Moffat returned, in about five minutes, I was again standing by the window, looking out at the golden grass and the green and distant hills. It was as though for the last time.

“Edward, I look into your face, and it comes to me you’ll never see the Park of the Three Lions,” he said, when I turned to him.

“I doubt if I ever will,” I answered. “The wheel of my Fate has turned, and I’m going back to America. But many others will see it. And sometimes—in the moonlight—there may be a rider who’ll see it without being seen; at least my heart tells me so. And this much I know. Wherever she is, she’ll be glad.”

## BOOK SIX

### CHAPTER XIX

#### The Challenge

After one day's trek from Bulawayo, making generally southeast, we pitched beside a rippling donga in highlands thronged with game. "We will feast tonight," I told my two companions, so I went forth on horseback with the rifle, and soon returned with a fat gazelle. Hagar dressed the meat, roasting some on spits, baking marrow bones in the ashes, and saving the white fat for a relish, but there was business to be done before we could fall to.

When the coals were red I brought forth the paper given me by Robert Moffat, and, first in English, then in Afrikaans, read its writing aloud.

Edward Stono  
South Africa

My son, Mate Hudson, has been killed in a boating accident while alone at sea with Clay Hudson. You are the only survivor among my husband's sons who I think might help me in my great need. I call upon you, Edward, and if it is possible for you to answer, pray do so.

Mildred (Mrs. Mason) Hudson

"Does this mean that you wish to return at once to America?" N'kulu asked, after a thoughtful pause.

"It is my purpose to return as quickly as possible, and I wish to know if you both will go there with me."

"What would we do there, bukra? Always we have known one another's minds, and it has caused us three to move together like oxen long inspanned. It would be of benefit if you would tell us who is Mate Hudson, and who is Mildred Hudson."

I explained my relationship with Mate, even to his marrying the maiden to whom I paid court. Still I could not wholly explain Mildred Hudson's

calling on me in this affair. “Indeed, I did not know until I read this paper that she knew I was her husband’s son. Now I know that she knew all the time.”

“It is the way of women to know all the time,” Hagar said simply.

“But now that she has called upon me, I find I am not surprised, and instead my heart is warmed and stirred.”

Then Hagar rose from her squatting position and spoke with a rush of words.

“The old days are gone, bukra, and if you will give me leave, tomorrow I will begin a journey to my own place.”

“You are free to go, riding your horse, with a share of the drying meat,” I answered. “But where is your own place, Hagar? Surely not to the farm of Jan Du Piel.”

“I will not go there. I go to a kraal in Bechuanaland, not far from Kuruman. It is a long way, but what do I care for that? My father dwells there, still the best spearman in his clan, and there are many young warriors who would vie with one another to buy me, to take to wife.”

“I will be sorry to have you go.”

“Aye, but it’s best, for then you will no longer try to keep M’sabu alive in me.”

“I did not know of it, but M’sabu seems nearer to me when you are near.”

“It is a cheat on the eyeballs, bukra, such as came to us on the desert. M’sabu has gone. She has crossed the River, and may return to you only in dreams. You need not deny her that. Dream of her as your heart longs to do but only at night, when the stars shine, and you lie asleep. Think of her sometimes in the daylight hours, but do not let those thoughts come between you and living. I tell you she is gone, and you must make your life without her, as I will do. In the way of nature your time to die is a long way off. Meanwhile there are many years in which you must breathe, labor, weep, rejoice, journey, and, if my heart speaks truth, love woman. We both loved M’sabu beyond all telling—you because of a great loneliness and loss—I because she smiled at me, and I combed her yellow hair. Ask no other reason. There may be others, but I needed no more than these. But she has gone away, never to return. Let the strong life surge through your veins again. Seek great goals. Be true to your own—for you are not left alone; no human being need ever be alone. M’sabu loved you, so do as she would have you do.”

“What is that, black woman of the veld?”

“Live, O white man from across the sea. Live with all your might and main.”

“It may be you are a witch.”

“No, I’m only a woman, who loves you for M’sabu’s sake.”

She touched her forehead and her heart—oddly enough a Mohammedan salutation—then, turning away, she stood where the firelight met the dark—where the high flame revealed her shape and the glossy bronze of her skin, and where, when it sank, the dark rushed in and covered her. It was highly dramatic sign language of farewell. She had told me goodbye; the rest would be aftermath.

“N’kulu!”

The Zulu leaped to his feet. “Bukra!”

“I go across the sea to my own place. Is it your desire to remain here, either as a painted and plumed warrior of your clan, or maybe as the gunbearer to such a one as Heer Piet, or do you desire to join once more with the maroons on the green island, or can it be your wish to follow me still?”

“Bukra, I have seen the sun return twenty and ten years,” he answered, after a moment’s thought. “Wearing paint and ostrich feathers does not count with me as much as it did when I was half that age. Also, I have fought in better wars than those waged against a neighbor clan for women and cattle. As for finding and following such a one as Heer Piet, I have told you, bukra, of him being half-mad, and so it was great joy to follow him, for I never knew what he would do next; besides that, he was a mighty hunter, and it seemed to me that the grass bowed down for a mile’s width when he walked across it, as though from a strong wind. I could search all Africa, and not find another like Heer Piet. As for the maroons, when they run with the dons’ slaves in the forest, it is good sport, and my blood sings in my veins, but mostly they stay in one place and plant beans and maize and melons, and that is not a fit life for a Zulu. What does that leave, lord, but that I should follow you?”

“Is it your desire? Is the profit good enough? You are a man, so speak plain.”

“By your leave, bukra, I will ask a question. Do you expect to become a rich bukra?”

“I am rich already, by one way of thinking. That is, I have enough, and more than enough, for my next trek and the business it entails. You know that my weight of ivory came to almost half again as much as the sum which I had

bonded myself to give the great Moffat, and did give him. With this remainder, I expect to sail to America in the style of a Charleston aristocrat, and take you with me if you care to go, and live in that style while I pursue the undertaking for which I am called home. Thereafter, we shall see.”

“Still, you are not rich in the sense of the great planters of Cuba, or even of some of the Voortrekkers, with their farms no pony can cross in a single day, and countless cattle and sheep.”

“No, I reckon I’m not.”

“Bukra, I doubt if you will ever be. Always you will outspan, only to inspan again. There is ever another mountain you must cross, and another river whose gravel you foolishly wash. There are no diamonds in Africa—Heer Piet found them all—yet you do not believe it even now.”

“If I did not have to go home, I would prove your words are wind.”

“You will go from one hazard to another. I think it very possible you will die young, not live to ripe old age as did Heer Piet.”

“Hazard is unavoidable for a gambler. Indeed it is only another name for gambling.”

“Yet if it were not so, I would not follow you again across the great, rolling ocean. You have fed me well, you have shown me many strange sights, you have brought me into danger and forth again, wherein my heart beat like a war drum, and finally you have never treated me else than as a man, a brother with a black skin, and for that, bukra, it is my desire to follow you—no little weak and doubtful desire, but a great desire, filling all my body and soul, speaking forth in my dreams at night. I do not know what life is, but thereby I may live, not a weak life, but one red and fierce and crackling as a grass fire, before which even the lion runs away in fear. Ho! ho! ho!”

With this wild laugh, his head thrown back, and baying at the stars, N’kulu came into my service for as long—so our souls confided—as we both would live.

During the journey to America, N’kulu and I reversed a position we had taken on the out-trip. Instead of his teaching me a language, I taught him one. It was not one found in any book, but spoken with great gusto, and I thought charm, by the Negroes of the Low Country, and we called it Gullah. Of course it was not the real Gullah spoken by a people of that name in West

Africa; but an incredibly bastardized English. Nevertheless our plantation Negroes made themselves perfectly understood to us and to one another; I had often been homesick for it among alien tongues of Africa; mellow and quaint-sounding. I liked the sound of it.

I had no large purpose in imparting it to my follower. He would have picked it up himself on the Carolina shore, when neither his African lingua franca nor the harsh Afrikaner proved any longer useful. However, he would be saved a period of homesickness and a certain amount of loneliness if he could establish immediate understanding with our Low Country Negroes, and his usefulness to me would be increased. He picked up the dialect with astonishing ease. Evidently Gullah lent itself readily to the Negro lips and tongue. Instead of being a trial, being instructor to him made some otherwise long-drawn hours pass pleasantly every day.

Our trig schooner landed us at Baltimore, from where we made our way by coaster to the city of my birth and of my countless dreams. I thought it would be changed. I had been gone so long and so far. Instead, it was my dream come true, forgotten designs taking their places in the tapestry—the busy docks, the Negro stevedores with their chanted Gullah, busy merchants not quite aristocrats but making their dollars felt, small parties of the elect in satin and broadcloth, talking with gaiety but walking in grandeur as they visited the big passenger boats, the varied mingled smells of wet cypress, barnacles, fish, dusty burlap, balsam, and attar of roses; the great folk walking in the Battery, the houses opening on hidden gardens, their fronts locked against the street. The city was more populous than when I left, I thought, busier, and richer. But in the air was a contagion of anxiety, changing all the faces, that I could not explain.

There was no time to loaf, to pick and choose among old threads, to luxuriate in getting home. More than a year had passed since Mildred Hudson had penned her letter to me; this was the breaking spring of the year 1859, and I fell barely short of being twenty-eight years old. So N’kulu had hardly unpacked my bags—I still could not recover from the wonder of a Zulu warrior happily performing the tasks of a trained valet—when I sat down, dipped pen, and wrote:

Dear Mrs. Hudson:

I am sorry it has taken me so long to reply to your message, but only just now, after many inevitable delays, have I gained my home shores. If even yet there is any service I might do you, I beg that you call on me.

Your obedient servant,  
Edward Stono

I went downstairs in search of Julius, a sort of major-domo around the hotel, a breathing gazette of the births, deaths, betrothals, marriages, and larger happenings of the Charleston aristocracy. The large, impressive-looking Negro, with a dignified countenance and popping bespectacled eyes, had changed not a whit since I had seen him last.

“Is Mistress Mason Hudson at present in the city?” I asked.

“Dar ain’t no place else for her to go, no mo’.”

“Where is she living?”

“De big house, frontin’ de sea wall, was took over by Mas’ Clay Hudson, when he come back from—where it was he been. ’At was mo’ an’ t’ree year ago. Since then he done took over de plantation, Hudson Barony. So Mistress Hudson, she gone to live wif her daughter-in-law at a house on Queen Street.”

Julius promised to deliver my note to Mistress Mildred Hudson at once, and he returned with an answer within the hour. If I were not pressed for time, would I please call at four in the afternoon?

I dressed carefully as was my wont. A hired hack took me to an unpretentious house, as far from a shack as from a mansion, which eased my worst fears for the well-being of my father, his wife, and niece-by-marriage; and my hopes climbed a little more at the signs of the effort made to restore a long-neglected garden. Of course Mildred Hudson would grow flowers. She was in some kind of spiritual communion with them that no priest—only a woman—could understand. An old black woman, quaintly but tidily dressed, opened the door to me. I wondered what had happened to Nicodemus, who had admitted me to the great hall of Hudson Barony. The family would neither sell him nor turn him out, so it stood to reason that he had died. Why was it that the death of the Negro I hardly knew haunted my imagination more than the death of a white man I hardly knew? Perhaps the former had not had as good a chance in life. Usually he had not been in as good a position to fight back in the days before all fighting summarily ceased.

I noticed the delicate and beautiful furniture, warmly glowing in the late afternoon light. Already there was a good market for such pieces among newly rich Yankees; thank God they had not got their hands on the Hudsons’ intimate things, relics of a bygone glory. Let them bustle about their great cities, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. I would not trade the Battery for

the whole lot. I would see them all burned to the ground rather than Middleton Place alone!

When Mistress Hudson entered the room, walking with that proud but graceful step fixed in the bodies of the older women of her generation, I thought she had borne up remarkably well under the loss of her son. At my first glance at her, I found her very little changed from when I had seen her last. Then I noticed that her eyes had faded a great deal in color and brilliance. There was a tension of unremitting grief about her lips.

“I thank you for coming, Mr. Stono,” she said.

“I am proud that you sent for me.”

“I won’t call you Mr. Stono. I’ll call you Edward. I am sorry I have not received you heretofore. Will you sit down?”

“Thank you.”

“The idea of calling on you was put in my mind by Mate himself, only a few months before he was killed. Then I was troubled only about a business matter. Mate said that if you were here, you would help me. He said you helped him in a serious matter in Augusta.”

“What I did for him there, I did mainly at Salley’s request. The fact remained that I owed him an obligation of which she told me.”

“I know what it was. It concerned his championing you when I—had—rebuffed you. Now you may think I’m a poor one to ask further help.”

“No, it is a very welcome indication of an attitude toward me more cordial—at least less distant—than I could hope for.”

“Sometimes right comes out of wrong—I don’t know how or why. And, if you please, I’ll say no more in that connection.”

“Just as you please. May I inquire for Salley and Mr. Mason Hudson?”

“You may inquire for Salley—” Her voice broke strangely.

“What is it, if you please?”

“She will greet you in a few minutes. But plainly you haven’t heard—”

“Is your husband living?”

“No, my husband—your father—is dead.”

Her eyes filled with tears, mine as though with shadows from another world. I did not know what they were, or from whence they had come, or what was their meaning. I was reminded that I had never had a father, in the

usual meaning of that word—the dear, close relationship, the deeply human bond. But the existence of a worthy sire had helped to give place, order, and meaning to my life. I was what Texans call a maverick, neither church nor law having made any provision for my existence; I had half a family, not a whole one; instead of paternal memories as men sometimes have to lean on, I had had lies. Thereby, somehow I had become a gambler, perhaps the reason being I had less to prize than most men, less to lose. But I had been a good gambler. Sometimes I had gamed for someone besides myself.

And I could not yet lay down the deck. This was the clear confiding of my soul, the insistence of my inmost instincts, useless to deny. I would not have been called here, if my prowess had not been needed. There was one more game to play.

“I can hardly believe he’s gone,” I said at last. “The last time I saw him, he seemed so well—”

“He died of a heart attack only six weeks after we lost Mate.”

I waited, and then asked, “Was there latent heart disease?”

“Of course there might have been, but he had never given the least sign of it, and the doctor thought not. In truth, he began to fail almost at the moment the news was brought.”

“I wish I dared ask one question. But you said—”

“Ask any question you wish. Whatever it costs is a trifle compared to the cost of what I—we—may ask of you.”

“Did my father regret that he had given me birth?”

“I’ll answer that the best I can. For the first few years he was greatly worried about it—both for your mother’s sake and yours, and in fear he would be found out. I knew it even then, but I didn’t relieve his fears as I should have done—I was too bitter. Some bitterness was human and inevitable, but I didn’t give enough thought to his love for me—the reality of it—the long and endless proof of it—or remember that we are all flesh and blood with only a leaven of spirit. Later, when he began to give you books, he took an interest in you that was closely akin to pride. And when Salley told him how you had saved Mate, there came a glint in his eyes I’ll never forget.”

“All that time you knew—and never told him so.”

“I couldn’t tell him until almost the end.”

“I told him something once. I’m glad I did. We both paid a price. But perhaps human life, once given, is beyond price.”

“I think it is. And that makes me remember—with a greatly troubled spirit—what Lord Brougham said. But it’s not the time for that.”

I was fairly certain to what famous utterance she referred, but could not deal with it now.

“Have you forgiven my father—and me?” I asked.

“Could I have called you if I had not? No, I would have called you just the same, so great is our need. But the answer to your question is yes.”

“Is there anything more you want to tell me—now?”

“Very little more. Salley will tell you the main part; she can do it better than I. She has felt close to you for many years. She’ll call on you as her husband’s brother and my son. And I ask that you keep in mind one terrible truth. I told you of my husband’s swift collapse after the news of Mate’s death. So know and remember this. If your brother Mate did not die by accident—if instead he was done to death—it’s the same with your father. I ask that you help us if you can.”

She spoke slowly and calmly. At the end she rose and pulled a bell cord. After a dim and distant chime, the old Negress returned to the room.

“Please tell Miss Salley that Mr. Edward is here,” Mistress Hudson directed, this wording what I might have dreamed of hearing long ago. Then to me, “Sir, I beg you to excuse me.”

Mistress Hudson went out, and a moment later Salley stood again in my plain sight. I did not expect to see her look so young.

In respect to the still-early season, her own dark coloring, and perhaps to the recent close of her period of mourning, she wore a dress of black velvet, simply fashioned, with a bertha of ancient ivory-colored lace. Again I perceived, almost with a sense of shock, the elegance of her black hair, the moving brilliance of her brown eyes, and the impassioned dusk of her skin. Her lips were dark red. I knew secrets of their beauty—they had been imparted to me one night while the moon set. She was light-limbed and free-moving—in that she made me think of Trudi, riding an unimaginably distant veld. She held her head a little back, which emphasized the molding of her facial bones, the effect of which was at once primitive and aristocratic. She smiled strangely into my face.

“Salley, you look almost—not quite—the same.”

“Edward, you look almost—not quite—like a different person.”

“Can we go outside? The late sunlight will become you well. Most of our meetings have been outside.”

“All except one.” I wondered by what compulsion she had reminded me of both our brief victory and long defeat. I saw again the moon toppling westward. “You’re my mate, but he’s my Mate,” she had told me, wishing it did not sound so clever. Since then I had seen the sea of waters and the sea of grass.

She led the way not to the half-restored garden in the front yard but to a walled area, which early settlers had called a “close,” behind the house. No spade had been turned there lately, brambles grew wild, but there was a marble bench, fit for a show place, and out of keeping with this modest house. The latter struck me now as being very old. I had not noticed at first its antique roof and sturdy design. Quite possibly it was the residence of a well-off Charles Town burgher, in days before mansions of the Gadsdens, the Rutledges, the Laurens, and the Ravenals rose in glory. I thought it had stood here when the fleets of the Spanish and French attacked in 1706.

“I have so much to ask,” she said, “and nothing to give.”

“Don’t you think that feeling like a gentleman would still appeal to me?”

“I doubt if it counts with you any more. Maybe it’s too old a story—maybe the dream is over. The fact remains that you are Mason Hudson’s son, Mate Hudson’s brother. So are Clay and Arnold Hudson, but Clay is a renegade as far as the Hudsons are concerned, although he’s loyal enough to the Ashleys—and Arnold has had no use for us since the money gave out.”

“How about the venture in Alabama? Did it fail?”

“No. Last year it did quite well. Our heads are above water.”

“You might start at the first.”

“Then I’ll begin by refreshing your memory as to Clay’s antecedents. I told you once, but maybe you’ve forgotten. His mother, Uncle Mason’s first wife, and my father, were brother and sister. Their father was a Sass, but their mother was an Ashley, descended from a black-sheep cousin of the Lord Proprietor for whom the river was named. Clay looks back to him. According to legend, he is very like him. I saw a portrait of him once—and the two great aristocrats could be twin brothers.”

“Did your father look like him too?”

“Not at all. He was tall and red like most of the other Sasses. He had enough of the Ashley to be bad, but never evil; it has come to me lately

there's quite a difference between the two terms."

"Was your father's sister—Clay's mother—one or the other?"

"She was one or the other—and I think I know which."

"You can tell me the story now."

"It's rather simple. Clay has a very fine fast boat. It's catboat-rigged—so he can sail it alone—but it has the lines and deep keel of a cutter. People say it can outsail even the provost boats, but I doubt it. I don't know all the uses he makes of it, but one of them is fishing. And he persuaded Mate—against my will and protest—to go fishing with him."

She paused, and a very strange glint came upon her eyes.

"Well?"

"She came back with a big cobia, and Mate's dead body."

"He'd been drowned?"

"I'll tell you what Clay said. He was very calm about it—very polite—exceedingly distressed, but quite himself, Clay Hudson, a far-removed nephew of Lord Ashley. He had let Mate fish downwind in a tide rip off the Isle of Palms, holding her up by a line fastening the boom to the taffrail. In a hard gust of wind, the line broke, the boom swung around like a club in a giant's hand and struck Mate in the neck. He went overboard and Clay said he must have swallowed water, for when Clay dived in and got him aboard Mate was dead."

"Were they fishing from an anchorage, or drifting?"

"They were drifting, but Clay said he heaved his anchor the second the accident occurred, then went overboard and swam. He's a very good swimmer. I remember that from his childhood, when he came to visit us—his uncle, but especially me. However, he had to swim back against the tide and it took a little time and when he got Mate aboard and tried to revive him, it was no use."

I sat and thought awhile.

"What kind of a line was it?"

"I know about that, because he brought it for Uncle Mason to see. It was a weak line. It was frayed in several places. Clay had bought a new one, but they saw the cobia in the rip, and in their fever to make a catch they used the old one."

“How did the fish happen to be aboard? One they had caught before the accident?”

“No. Clay said it was the very one. Mate was using one of Clay’s fine lemonwood rods, with a big reel and very strong line. When he went overboard it got stuck under the taffrail. The fish was still on when Clay raised his anchor to sail home, and he hauled it in.”

“The story seems to hang together very well.”

“Perfectly.”

“Yet you doubt it. Do you care to tell me why?”

“I care to answer any questions you ask. Good God, that’s the least I can do. In the first place, it isn’t like Clay to use a weak line. He always takes very good care of his own skin—and if it broke he might be the one to get belted overboard, with the boat drifting out of his reach. It might even bash his head in or break his neck, risks which my cousin Clay would miss a dozen cobias rather than run.”

“What other use did he have for the boat?”

“I don’t know.”

I could make a guess in this instance, I thought. Still it would not sound very probable, and I kept it to myself.

“Is Clay rich?”

“The report is that he has money coming in from Panama, from large estates. It didn’t take much to buy our equity in the house and the plantation; since then he’s been paying on them regularly and liberally. I suppose the report is true. He lives very well, without visible means of support.”

I had heard him say that none of his family had ever been known to save a dollar, so my suspicions of him having invisible means of support was strengthened. Could Mate have found out what those means were? Somehow I did not believe that this alone could impel Clay Hudson to the risks of murder. The crime—if there was one—was even blacker than that.

“What do you want of me, Salley?” I asked. “I think I know, but my mind would work better if you told me in plain words.”

“When I speak for myself, I speak for Aunt Mildred too. I was Mate’s wife and she’s his mother and the wife of Uncle Mason, who proved to be one of the victims. I want to know the truth. That comes first. Even if it won’t do any good to find it out, I still want to know it. Anyway, it will do good. If

the story is true—if, just once, Clay Hudson is innocent—something very like a curse, more like an evil spell laid by conjure, will be lifted off my soul. If you can prove he’s guilty, I want him hanged. A descendant of the Ashleys hung by the neck—and, believe me, our courts will do it. Mate was greatly loved. Not only our friends, the people we grew up with, but all the people he ever smiled at mourned his death. Edward, can you handle a pistol well?”

I too had received and would never forget Mate’s smile, so I answered quickly, “Yes, I can shoot fast and quite true.”

“Then if you become convinced of his guilt—and still can’t find evidence that would stand in court—I want you to challenge Clay Hudson to a duel and shoot him dead.”

“I thought you meant, whether I could defend myself. I couldn’t act on any opinion not demonstrable to a court.”

Her gaze met mine in deep and latent antagonism. “Whatever your terms are, we’ll meet them.”

“I have no terms. I’ll do what I can. I’m a natural son of Mason Hudson. I believed for a long time that set me free—mistaking the law’s and the church’s irresponsibility for me, for an irresponsibility on my part to all and everything. It’s not so. Since time out of mind bastards have pondered their status, out of which arise their freedoms and their bondage, and Edmund cried, ‘Thou, Nature, art my goddess.’ But he was no more right than I was. Not having a father to come to, a brother to share with, has wrought deeply and strangely upon my soul. I am intensely lonely and have always been. I leap to any sonship or brotherliness that comes my way. This is badly put because I can’t think it through—I can only say what comes to my lips. Besides all that, I have a duty toward Clay Hudson. If he is what I think, I must see to him. If he deserves it, I must dispose of him.”

She was so astonished she could not speak. At last she laid her hand lightly on my arm.

“Edward, do you know Clay Hudson?”

“Yes, I know him well.”

“From what you know, do you believe he could murder his half-brother Mate?”

“I’ll give you his own words. ‘Cain killed Abel, and they were full brothers.’”

“Do you think it’s the same story?”

“In a measure the same, but I want evidence of that. Mason Hudson loved Mate. Did he ever love Clay?”

“No. No one could, except his wicked mother.”

“He was the strong son, and Mate the weak.”

“Mate developed a good deal of strength, after I had married him. He was largely responsible for what success we’ve had in the black belt of Alabama.”

“Clay was the firstborn.”

“And the highest born. Don’t forget that, because it’s immensely important. There was never a nobler strain of blood in all the Low Country—using noble in the sense it is used in feudalistic societies—as this branch of the great house of Ashley, the evil branch. Clay was only a boy when my Aunt Eva died, but he always bitterly resented Uncle Mason marrying and having other children to share his estates. He thought Aunt Mildred’s children were interlopers. Probably he didn’t care about you because you were outside the pale—”

“I think he did care.”

“I tell you again—maybe you don’t need telling—that he’s not just a bad man, as my father was. He’s an evil man, his life dedicated to evil; his heart is malignant. I found that out when I was very young.”

“Still there has to be an overt motive, if a jury is to believe he murdered his half-brother.”

“There is one.”

She spoke quietly and with great dignity.

“I ask you what it was?”

She breathed deeply, and said, “Me.”

## CHAPTER XX

### Sea Meeting

Salley did not have to say more. I looked at her, and the vision came to me of Clay Hudson, coveting her from his childhood years; the covetousness enduring and growing and overriding all his lesser lusts, clear to his present early middle age. It did not follow that he believed that by wiping away Mate he could get her for his own. Evil does not always move for a direct reward, only for evil's sake.

As I was thinking this, a look came into Salley's face, touched with both trouble and triumph.

"Do you remember, Edward, before you promised to try to get Mate out of Memphis' and Clara's toils, you asked me where the money you would need was going to come from?"

"I do remember."

"You haven't asked me that today. That, and your clothes—although those have always been good—and your bringing back a servant from Africa indicate it isn't a problem in this case."

"I made no big stake but I have enough."

"I want to tell you something. Before Uncle Mason died, he talked with me about you. The Alabama cotton lands were doing better, and he had a little money that he thought Aunt Mildred and I could spare. He asked how you would rather be remembered in his will, with a few hundred dollars, his sapphire seal ring, or your choice, up to two hundred volumes, of his books. I ruled out the money. The sapphire is a beauty, as you know, very deep blue, but I didn't think you'd want to wear the Mason arms."

"Not without the bar sinister," I said, grinning. "I hope you picked the books."

"I did. And he made another provision for you, the best of all. He arranged for Judge Lucas to take you into his office to read law. He said you told him you wanted to study law."

"I had a smattering of it in my late boyhood, but I wouldn't have thought he remembered."

Reading law would make a good screen for me as I pursued another inquiry. It must be I was a vengeful man, for I looked forward to it with joy.

2

My joy was an unreasonable joy. It is the kind that gamblers know when the game is going strangely, and the air does not taste like common air, and the shadows do not look and jump like common lacks of light, and the cards stick to a man's fingers as though they were alive, and combinations far beyond mathematical probability may come to pass at any second. I was thrilled through that my half-brother Clay had become my opponent in play not of his choosing. I meant him to remember all he said to me as I had sat in bonds in the barracoon at Puerto Miramar while he had presided in grandeur; and although the odds were top-heavy on his side—any player who had ever figured a percentage could tell that at a glance—still I loved the challenge of taking them on, cutting them down with every wit I possessed and perhaps, ere the cards fell and turned cold on the table, winning.

I might find my way to an old millhouse on an Ogeechee branch and talk to Faro Jack. I might go down to Augusta, and enlist, by such means as I could, the expert services of Clara Day. Meanwhile I honed my wits on a couple of hard facts. They were, to wit, as the saying goes, that if Clay had committed murder, which my soul, sensitized and more of a friend to me than before I took off for Africa, never doubted, why then it was a highly expert job, one to rejoice his strange, solitary, and flagitious soul, and it could never be brought home to him except by the testimony of eyewitnesses, or by a fatal mistake made by Clay himself.

He had got over the fear of having been seen and had probably never doubted the perfection of his play. This was my best card against the appalling high cards that time itself, so rarely the friend of justice, or often its enemy, had dealt him. A year had passed since Clay had sailed into port with his strange cargo, a fine cobia, not as pretty and bright-colored as when first hauled out of the sea, and a man's body with a white face and still-drenched clothes. The thought of that time having passed, every hour adding to Clay's safety and raising his conceit, and an hour added to those hours every time the town clock struck, gave me a fever. So I was hardly ensconced in Judge Lucas' offices, a cubbyhole to myself, a few books scattered about, and the right to witness unimportant documents that did not require the Judge's affidavit, when I sent a message to Salley to visit me in haste.

The day lay dark without being dismal, its clouds lowering but faintly luminous along their seams and joinings, and a light cool April rain lending a

wonderful *esprit* to the spring foliage. The greenest livery on the street was the oilskin hood, jacket, and skirt that Salley wore, whereby she walked swinging through the shower while most of the ladies must simper along under parasols. It was not a new style from Paris but a very old one from Colonial days—when Charleston women were even more dashing than now—that she had revived. When she took it off, underneath was a dress of deep green almost the shade of a certain grass called Charleston.

“I want the names of those I can trust and those I must distrust,” I told her, when all the doors were closed.

“Jeff Legare,” she answered quickly. “He danced with Clara Day—remember?—the night you and she came uninvited to my party. Jeff was almost Mate’s only friend. He’s shy and awkward, and inept, but absolutely true. He’d run any risk—commit almost any crime—that you ask in Mate’s name.”

“Who else?”

“You can trust Judge Lucas and almost all of Uncle Mason’s old friends, but always ask me before you confide in any of them.”

“What about Arnold Hudson?”

“Arnold dropped all pretense of loyalty to the family when we lost our money.”

“Butler Mims used to be rather close to Mate.”

“I don’t think he ever was. He made up to Mate, but he was much closer to Arnold. Now he’s closer to Clay than anyone else in Charleston. He might even know the truth of the murder—I’ll call it murder, because I feel—I know in my heart—that’s what it was. He’ll carry any story to Clay that you want to plant. But on second thought—a story got out that you beat him unmercifully at Bailey’s livery stable when he was going to horsewhip you for coming—and bringing Clara—to my party. The whole town chuckled over it. He’s not a popular character. But if the report is true, he won’t be any use to you.”

“The story is exaggerated. However, I’m glad he’s useless to me. I don’t want any truck with him.”

“He’s nothing, anyway.”

She wiped her mouth with her handkerchief and I got the idea that Butler had paid her unwelcome attentions since Mate’s death. Maybe he had been trying to serve as an emissary for Clay.

“Now this is just a chance, but by no means impossible—in fact, fairly likely,” I went on. “On the Isle of Palms live a good many slaves belonging to the plantation and quite a few free Negroes. The latter are given to fishing in the pass between that island and Dewees Island. They and the other colored watch the comings and goings and doings of the bukras, and what they see they often keep to themselves. It’s quite possible that someone on the northern shore, looking out at the tide rip that often forms in the pass, might have seen what happened.”

“If so, I can find out,” Salley answered with a sudden, dark flush.

“Good for you.”

“The minister of the African Methodist Church, Preacher Jessup, used to be one of our slaves. He hasn’t heard anything yet, or he would have told us. He may uncover something by careful questioning. The trouble is—well, I can’t tell you what it is—but all the slaves of the Low Country seem to have become closed-mouthed lately—lots of my friends have said so—and the free Negroes seem frightened out of their wits.”

I felt a tingle throughout my nerves as when a high card falls. It had come to pass that in choosing gambling as a livelihood and means of advancement I had wedded adventure. It was very like marriage; my life was interbound with it; it came to meet me everywhere and would not let me go.

It must be it had changed my soul as a wife changes her husband’s soul. I had embraced adventure when I had been denied access to Salley’s company, as some sort of substitute, but in a sense I ate my cake and had it too, for she sat with me now in a small, dusty office, dressed as usual with due respect to her own beauty but to charm me the while, and her eyes shone at everything I said and did, and she was giving me intense attention. The great lady who had rebuffed me from attendance at a beach party twelve years ago had implored my aid and presence far beyond the beaches and the sea that beat them. In Cuba I had heard of a slave dealer whom I suspected was my exiled half-brother, Clay Hudson; but no outside force or even concatenation of circumstances had made me seek him out and become so deeply involved with him that one of us might reasonably kill the other before we were done. In one sense—at least it seemed to me I had had free will—I could have left him out of the gaudy pattern that made up my life. But as a gambler, I had sought him out, challenged him for such satisfactions as he could give my body and soul, narrowly missed destruction at his hands, and now yearned to give him the full dose of his own medicine.

What in God's name could I expect from life, when I kept on making bets for all my goods? With the winnings from the greatest game I had played until then, I had gone to Africa seeking more of the same, instead of buying a neat business, or lodging myself in an office. There I had found Trudi. Any man of pride would have taken a strong stand against that cruel, child-beating fanatic, Jan Du Piel, but only an inveterate runner of risks, a wooer of Fortune, would have taken her away. Then all the luck that a gambler could dream of was poured into my hands—until it ended.

Once more I was involved with Salley and with Clay Hudson. It was no wonder to me that he coveted her; he was enough like me that this was inevitable, once the two came into juxtaposition. It was in his nature to kill Mate; I could have guessed that four years ago, and in that way—more than our wanting the same woman—he had become my great antagonist. By nature I must strive with those who thought themselves gods, and with empty giants who thought themselves godlings, such as Butler Mims. When the glory of having Trudi became less like a lost existence and more like a blissful dream of a bygone night, when Time had healed the proud flesh of my wound, I would again seek Salley's hand in marriage. There is no bridge across the River except remembrance. And I myself, without being other than myself, the bastard son of Marie Aubry, might yet win for myself a daughter of the Sasses and the Ashleys, kin of the Ravenals and the Hudsons, a woman of great beauty and grace and passion, and then as Faro Jack had gone to the Oconee to gamble with bass and bream, I would take my bride to the black belt in Alabama, and play at hazard with drouth and flood and hail and Yankee traders—and perhaps farther than that, and more exciting games!

Just now all the antagonism to my winning, the total enmity, was centered in one man. He was my half-brother. One of us was the Nemesis of the other. I wondered which.

“Salley, have you heard of any slaves coming into the Low Country lately who couldn't speak English?” I asked.

Her eyes widened slightly. “Oddly enough, I have. Cordelia Laurens mentioned that an uncle of hers, who has a plantation near Georgetown, bought a batch of twenty from a rascally trader who claimed to be from Florida.”

“What language did they speak? Did she think it was an African tongue?”

“No, they spoke a bastard Spanish.”

“Didn't she wonder where they came from?”

“The trader said they came off some tobacco lands developed by Spaniards somewhere near Tampa.”

“Have you heard of any other instances? Think hard.”

“Jeff Legare said that a Yankee who has drained and cleared an enormous plantation on the Savannah below Augusta had two hundred Portuguese-speaking hands. As a matter of fact”—her hands dropped in her lap—“such people have been showing up all through this part of the South for the last two years. What does it mean, Edward?”

“There’s been a heavy importation of contraband.”

“Where did it come from?”

“From various countries and islands where Negroes, worth a thousand dollars here, can be bought for a hundred dollars or got for nothing.”

“Not Africa.”

“No. That’s risky. From this side of the water.”

“Is that where Clay’s money’s coming from?”

“I think so.”

“He uses his boat to meet the slaver captains?”

“Probably.”

“Is that why he killed Mate?”

“I doubt if it had anything to do with it. But that’s what our Negroes know that they won’t tell. That’s why the free Negroes are so frightened.”

She paused a moment, then spoke with a twisted mouth.

“What did you mean when you said some of them might have been got for nothing? Did you mean free Negroes that had been kidnaped?”

“Yes, that’s an old trick of your cousin Clay’s—to deal in them.”

“That’s as bad as some of the lies Mrs. Stowe told in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.”

“I haven’t read it, and I never will. But I’m going fishing, too.”

I chose the first clear warm day that wind and tide were favorable to fishing. To maintain his reputation as an enthusiastic fisherman, Clay Hudson was almost certain to go today, and when I came to the yacht basin I saw that his trim catboat was absent from its mooring stake. N’kulu, not only speaking

but dressing like any sportsman's handy man, took his place in the bow of a handy-rigged smack that a middle-aged free Negro, known as Solomon, kept for hire. I had a lunch basket, a flask, and excellent tackle borrowed from Judge Lucas.

"Where do you think we'd better go?" I asked Solomon.

"Boss, you willin' to pass dis whole tide, and half de flood of de next tide?"

"Yes."

"'En wit 'is wind blowing whar she be, we can go most any grounds you please."

"Where do you reckon Mas' Clay Hudson went today? He always makes good catches."

Solomon's expression changed slightly and his tone fell. "I reckon he somewhere off de coas' of de Isle of Pam."

"Then let's try it there."

It was a long sail out of the harbor and around the headland; and I had plenty of time to watch the water and the clouds, the wondrous play of light, the glimpses along the shore, and the sea birds that kept us haphazard company. There were terns and skimmers and oyster-catchers, superb aerialists all, somewhat vain if I were to judge bird conduct by human conduct, elegantly dressed and feeling themselves a cut or two above down-to-business fliers such as coots, cormorants, and pelicans. I saw great fishes leap clear of the waves and wondered at their lives so hidden from us, except for seconds of great glory when they broke through the barrier that confined them—their precincts of water and weeds and old wrecks and uncharted rocks—and looked out upon the world as strange and new as heaven would look to us. And there was nothing to stop the long flow of my thoughts, revisiting old scenes and events, as I wondered why I had done this or that, and if it had been inevitable, and how it would count for me or against me at long last.

Few acts that I could remember possessed as little logic as this excursion to meet Clay Hudson. Otherwise, I would have been certain to run across him in a few days in Charleston, perhaps under conditions where he would have tried to guard his speech and mannerisms, and thus a gambler might fare better with him and learn more. By today's action I was declaring war; would it not be the part of wisdom to try to take him by surprise? Perhaps I was doing only what my heart desired. That was to meet him in an open place,

with no witnesses but N’kulu and a Negro fisherman, to startle him deeply, to make his thoughts fly, to intensify his consciousness of me until it could not leave him night or day, perhaps to kindle superstitions until they haunted his every moment, every thought.

Before long I made out his boat, gray-sailed, blue-hulled, hard to see against a green island or amid light and shadow. Solomon pretended he didn’t see it. He gazed interestedly on another course.

“Gemman, there’s some grounds down de wind from hee I’d like to try our luck,” he told me.

“Hold her more into the wind. I see Mr. Hudson, and want to come up alongside and see how he’s doing.”

“Yessah!”

The long space of water slowly but steadily shortened. I soon saw that Clay was drift-fishing, for black jewfish or possibly bass. When we sailed up within a cable’s length, it would have been sea etiquette for him to acknowledge our existence with a wave of his hand, but he did not, and continued to ignore our approach—the sign of a haughty or a rancorous man.

“Bring her up within ten fathoms,” I ordered Solomon.

He looked at me half in dismay, half in open-eyed wonder, not lacking in respect.

“Yas, sah!”

He even beat it a little. When he heaved to, fastening his boom to the taffrail, we were no more than forty feet on the catboat’s lee. Clay could not help but look at us now—any other conduct would be grotesque—so he and I had come face to face again. But now there were no ropes on my hands and feet. There were no walls or dim lamps or stifling heat. The cool breeze blew; away to the west the land dimmed by distance, to the north and south and east lay the luminous, illimitable spread of sea. In this game I could play my best. The sky was the limit.

Clay’s boat was a saucy little craft, fine and yare, but I thought of its uses, and Solomon and N’kulu and I with our plain high-smelling smack were not put to shame. Moreover, we sailed almost as well. But I was in no way in a class with him when it came to appearance, and I marveled that a keen-eyed English ship’s officer and Faro Jack had both spoken of a resemblance. His sensuous mouth was beautifully molded. His dark eyes, strikingly set, reminded me a little of Mate’s, greatly of Salley’s, but were more striking and magnetic than either. His nose had a high and noble hook, the Huguenot nose

enhanced by long Norman lineage. Still, although he might be the greatest of Charleston aristocrats, he was not a natural human being. Again I felt it in my bones.

“Any luck, Clay?” I asked.

“May I ask by what qualifications you address me by my first name?” he answered, not stiffly, not witheringly, but in an impersonal tone, adequate to be heard clearly and no more above the smacking of the light waves against the hulls.

“I am Edward Stono, whom you acknowledged as your half-brother. Surely, with all that between us, I needn’t stand on formality.”

“The light was not good when I saw you last, but I recall you now.”

“You meant to have a better look at me in the morning.”

He did not reply.

“That appointment failed,” I went on, “but we will have plenty of opportunities to view each other in the future.”

“I can hardly believe it.”

“I take more than a brotherly interest in you, Clay. There are several matters between us that need settling. My most immediate concern is the death of our brother Mate. Is this the scene?”

“Somewhat closer to the land.”

“I trust you are now using a stouter line to secure the boom to the taffrail.”

“The line is quite adequate, I believe.”

He spoke with sudden cheer, almost jollity. He was not one to bluff; I knew that a wave of pleasure had swept through him at my intervention in the affair. I thought of a boast scrawled in the dirt with a stick, “I did it all alone.” Although it hardly seemed possible, in one respect the lordly Clay Hudson could be compared to low-lived Harvey of Harvey’s Hustlers, and that was vanity. The dazzling inkling came to me that I had hit upon my great antagonist’s Achilles’ heel.

I made the best answer that I could.

“You didn’t tell me what luck you were having.”

“Not one strike, as yet.”

“It seems to me your luck is going to get worse. The clouds are lowering.”

“You think so?”

“I believe you’re out of luck. It’s all done and over. Do you remember what you told me was waiting for me when the morning came, and it was light enough to see?”

“I remember quite well.” He turned and looked me in the face, and his face went white, and in it was a torment of self-fury for the chance he had missed.

“When it’s light enough for me to see—not tomorrow, but not many tomorrows away—what you promised me will be waiting for you.”

“You amaze me! Now will you be kind enough to leave me to my sport?”

“It won’t be from a tree in the forest. It will be another kind of tree, in the jail in Meeting Street—*Hasta la vista?*”

## CHAPTER XXI

### The Shawl

In the next month my gains were trifling, while the truth drew farther, at its implacable unhurried gait, into the shadowy past.

I found out from Jeff Legare where Clay spent a remarkable number of his evenings. He was invited to very few of the social affairs of the old elite; and he declined the invitations of new-rich climbers, who wished to lend distinction to their parties by sounding his exalted name. When he did not sit alone, with a bottle and a book, he usually repaired to a particularly notorious tavern, called the Lighthouse, across the estuary. It was frequented by sodden sailors, small, sharp-toothed swamp rats, a kind of Low Country man known widely as white trash, and occasionally by harbor girls far down on their luck. The first three groups avoided his table, but occasionally one of the latter dared or was invited to sit with him. It did not surprise me that he got in no fights. A drunken roisterer would sooner tangle with a squad of provosts.

At the end of the month came a stunning blow delivered by a few lines of ink on the faintly scented page brought by a middle-aged Negress dressed in faded bombazine.

Dear Edward:—

Our old servant, Preacher Jessup, has kept his ears open and has even questioned an old conjure woman. He is positive that no one living on the Isle of Palms witnessed Mate's death; or if someone did so, the secret will be kept forever. What can we do now, old gambler? Only please don't give up.

Salley

There was something I could do. It was to pack my bag and take the train for Augusta and then catch a stage that let me off two miles from an old millpond branch of the Ogeechee. I hardly toyed with the hope of Faro Jack aiding and abetting me in any definite way, but I thought to see his rugged face and hear his voice and gather a little of his wisdom would lend force to Salley's appeal. I would have obeyed it anyway. Obey was a better word than grant, and answer, from my heart, was the best word of all.

By teachings and preachings I had now and then heard or read, Jack's sins should have overtaken him by now. Surely he was a sinner, having caught

many a sucker and skinned many a shark. Instead, few painfully upright lives of pillars of the church had come to such mellow and peaceful autumns. His strapping brown-skin girl still kept his cabin tidy, helped him work his garden and cornpatch, care for his pigs and poultry and clean his fish; she washed and mended his clothes; maybe too she ran his little still, but every Southern gentleman worthy of the name would let it go at that. The pond thronged with bass, bream, and catfish; trustful summer ducks darted down among the flooded cypress; po' joes and pond chickens and angelic white cranes lent charm to the scene.

The month was early May, spring was in full flush, ardent-hearted summer hung just around the corner, but a thunder shower brought down cold from the upper skies, so after supper we sat late by a chuckling fire. I told him of the main happenings since I had been away, so it came to pass that I spoke mostly of Trudi, and the wonder in my heart that she had caused, but the tale touched upon the great doctor from England whose face I would never forget, and of the black faces of Hagar, N'kulu, and the chief wizard of the Matshangana. Still I could not avoid speaking of Harvey, and, in the still midnight, of my brother Mate, and my brother Clay. Jack listened with burning eyes.

"I felt sure you would run into Clay Hudson again," the old gambler told me. "It was in the cards."

"Anyway, it happened."

"Have you read *King Lear*? I have, and understood 'most every word, and it's no wonder to me the tale has lived two hundred and fifty years. It's a tale to tear your heart out, and the worst of it is, it's true. I started to say that you and Clay are to each other like Edgar and Edmund, but the shoe's on the other foot, as far as bastardy goes. Edmund tried to kill Edgar, and brought about his father's death, then Edgar and he met. It was a meeting that had to be, and so is this meeting. If one of you don't win before then, the game will go on till the last card falls. It's a dreadful game, with death in the pot for one of you."

Faro Jack was gazing into the red coals, and his low tone held the darkness of prophecy.

"It began when you tried to set yourself up as a gentleman, your father's class instead of your mother's. It was a terrible undertaking, and you're not done with it yet. It was what made you set free your brother's kidnapped Negroes. That was the beginning of the great duel. His murder of Mate, the only one of your father's tribe who accepted you, made it like a marriage in

Holy Church, the vows in force as long as you both live. It may be you'll be unable to bring him to justice for this killing. To tell you the bitter truth, I see little hope for it—the time's too long, and he's covered his tracks too well. But in spite of the defeat, and a black one, you can take grim comfort you're not done with him yet. Even if you'd like to quit, you can't. The reason is, he'll wait his chance and strike again. And even though the deck will be stacked against you, he'll have to deal you a hand somewhere, sometime, and then if Luck is with you, you may win."

"Jack, I hope—I feel—I'll win before then—before the summer's end."

"Edward, is it a hunch?"

"I think it is. At least, I'm going to make a great try. I believe I can find a pard."

"I wish it could be me."

"There's nothing you can do. But there may be something she can do—if she will."

"You don't mean Salley?"

"No, she can't go down into that jungle. She couldn't find her way. But Clara could. Where is Clara Day?"

"She's hardly sixty miles from here as the wild ducks fly."

"Savannah?"

"Yes, she went there when Memphis died—you wouldn't believe it, but that cold-hearted shark left her a thousand dollars. She's set up a couple of little rooms, where she deals faro, and has three or four tables for draw and stud and casino, with a percentage for the house. But, mark you, that sets her free. She's got everything to lose, and what would she have to gain? Have you got the right to ask her? Think good, for there are more angles to it than you know."

I did not know what Faro Jack meant by his last expression, but I remembered Mate dancing with her, and before then I recalled him standing in attendance on her, as she climbed a flight of stairs.

"Yes, I've got the right to ask, and she's got the right to accept or refuse."

"That settles it in my mind."

"There's one thing I'd like to settle in my mind. I either heard—or dreamed—or imagined something a long time ago, and it may be important to this case, and it may have concerned some other person than Clay Hudson.

When I was a boy off Marsh Street, I knew a good deal I was not supposed to know. I believe I knew the reason that a young aristocrat, Mason Hudson's son, had to leave Charleston. But if so, I can't recall it. It's on the tip of my memory, but I can't get hold of it. Jack, did you ever know?"

For a few seconds, Jack's face was a study. Then it turned oddly blank and he shook his head.

"I can't say that I ever did. Whatever it was, it's blown over and forgotten."

I could not escape the feeling that, for once in my life, Faro Jack had not given me a straight answer.

## 2

The Lucky Chance Casino, not far from Savannah's historic theater, was neither elegant nor gaudy and it smelled fresher than most gambling dens, perhaps because a good deal of soap and water was used in its care. When I came in, midway the evening, there was a scattering of rather well-dressed people, persuading me it had a smaller and better custom than the flashier joints nearer the waterfront. There was no play against the house except faro, the fairest game in the lexicon of gambling, the other players making up their own tables. Hence there was much less sharpness, stakes were inclined to be smaller, and the faces that I saw did not look as mirthless and strained.

I doubted if all these mitigations of the evils of gambling went to Clara's credit. By nature predatory, at war with the world, it was not likely she had undergone a change of heart. More likely she was cunning enough to make a smaller profit, longer. However, the modestly furnished and neatly kept rooms reflected her personality; I recalled that she was almost always ladylike. I wondered if she had changed. Deterioration was often rapid and severe in young women of her calling. I had not had a good look at her yet.

With a good deal of anxiety I moved so I could gaze between two bulky people playing faro; and at once my heart warmed. Time had been kind to her; or else the extreme prettiness I had always seen had the durable qualities of beauty. As a little girl she had fought for half a hoecake and she fought with hidden savagery for food and roof and pretty, soft dresses and a few pieces of jewelry and hardest of all for the freedom that was her light and boast; but the scars of battle were not on her. Her large, dark eyes had never acquired a feline glitter. Her mouth looked soft and wistful. Oddly I remembered her going to sleep on my shoulder, on the cold ride back from the ball at Hudson Barony.

Her gaze flitted across mine. Her expression changed only slightly and unreadably; her hand paused briefly, then went on with the deal. I went up to her table and laid and lost a few bets. She spoke to me now, her voice fit to be heard at Saint Cecilia Ball, her words perfectly proper from a dealer to a player. But I thought her pupils had enlarged, giving the effect of greater luminousness. I was glad they had not contracted to bright points. It went to show that she had borne me no grudge in my long absence. Perhaps she still treasured—and sometimes wore—a fairyland gown of crimson velvet.

I drifted away, returning now and then until I could speak to her ear.

“Where, and how soon?”

“I close at midnight on Saturday,” she answered. “Knock on the alley door and I’ll share my supper with you.”

The signs so far were good. Evidently she had no jealous and ever-attentive lover, who could easily play hob with my hopes. Indeed I had harbored no great fears along this line—Clara had never been a one-man woman or a many men’s woman either, and I made the blind guess that, except for an occasional truce, she was at war with all men. But my hopes were not high either. How could they be, when I was playing such long chances? Sometimes, when the cards were hot, I had drawn from a whole deck to fill a straight flush broken in the middle; but I had never bet against odds as long as these.

So my thoughts ran, as I waited. There was no magic about Clara; she was not a conjure woman; I had never seen her accomplish a single clever feat. But I had seen her enter, proudly, on my arm, the wide, bright door of Hudson Barony, which took more nerve than one of the unregenerate trespassing the Gate of Heaven; and once in a long time pure courage won the pot. The hands of my pocket watch came simultaneously upright. I went out with the last to leave and waited in the alley until the lamps in the gaming rooms went out and a glimmer came in a dark window of a back room. Then I knocked on the door beside it.

She opened the door, and without a word gestured to a vacant chair. She returned to one by a table, on which a white cloth was but half-spread, and on which sat three half-filled paper bags, drooping and unprepossessing, that no doubt contained our supper, sent out by an eating house. No doubt she had intended to make me a pleasant spread, but fatigue or a sudden heaviness of spirit had sapped her energy. The lamplight flung on her face and she raised her hand as though to shade her eyes. I did not look at her yet but instead glanced about the room.

This was a combined dining room and parlor of tidy, by no means cramped, lodgings. They were furnished in good taste with a few inconspicuous touches of elegance. No doubt they were palatial compared to the shack in the piney woods where she was born.

“So you’re back,” she remarked at last, without the least accent of surprise or pleasure.

“Yes.”

“All the way from South Africa. That seems far as the moon. You crossed the ocean twice—and here you are safe and sound. And Mate—who never went anywhere—he’s dead.”

I felt a prickling sensation on the back of my neck—a symptom of deep wonder.

“Why speak of him?”

“I always think of him in connection with you. The night you came to Memphis’ rooms—the night we went to the ball. Edward, do you remember what he said when I told him his luck was about to turn? The only luck for him was what everybody got at last. He got it, all right—and so soon.”

“Well, what did you think about it? Clara, I want you to talk plain.”

Her eyes slowly widened.

“I don’t think I dare talk plain. Vulgar people like me are always thinking someone’s going to steal something—or someone is trying to kill someone—or there’s some other devilment going on. The aristocrats have got more faith in the human race.”

“Something must have happened—you must have heard something other than the newspaper accounts and I want to know what it is. It may be terribly important.”

“It isn’t. I’ll tell you that. It’s only a hunch I had when I heard he was with Clay Hudson.”

“You didn’t know Clay Hudson—did you?”

“Yes, I did. Well, I mean I saw him. He talked to me a little while. I asked him if he knew Mate Hudson, and he said they were half-brothers. He had come to Memphis’ joint to inquire for you. He said he knew you in Cuba.”

“He went to Jack’s place, too.”

“He was courteous—soft-spoken—with a winning, diffident manner. Yet he frightened me more than I can tell you. I thought if he ever got hold of you, you were a goner. And when he spoke of Mate—and Mate’s marriage to the girl you both loved—there came a sheen on his eyes. . . .”

“I’ve seen that sheen.”

“Well, is there anything to it? I have an awful feeling that there is, or you wouldn’t be here. And then—where will I be?”

She was slightly pale and drawn from fatigue, and I got a sandwich from one of the bags and had her eat it as I told her all—the little whole—of what Salley had told me. The homely human act permitted her to hear the story in true proportion, and to weigh it well. I related our failure to find a scrap of evidence that Clay’s story was not true. Then I explained that, unless an actual witness could be found, or Clay in some fashion incriminated himself, defeat of our cause was certain.

“Now comes the bad part,” Clara said, when I paused.

“Will you help us?” I asked.

“I won’t help you or that beautiful highborn woman you want to marry. I thank you for the dress—it was the most beautiful, the best winning I ever made in my whole life—I’ve got it still—and I haven’t forgotten I told you you could call on me again. But not a business as bad as this. I won’t say I won’t help Mate, but if it was anybody else than him, I’d tell you no right now, and a big plain no. What do you want me to do? Come out with it. Chances are you can go to the Devil. But I’ll listen if you want to tell me. Only tell me fast.”

“First, can you close up for three days?”

“I can close up for three weeks, if I wish.” A dark pride crept into her tone.

“If you went out with Clay, would he have any suspicion, from what you had said to him in Augusta that you were spying for me?”

“I don’t think so. I didn’t brag about knowing you well. He took a little interest in me—I thought so, anyway—but I never told him my last name and I doubt if he’s thought of me since.”

“Still you’d have to come on him in what seemed very commonplace circumstances, and then work fast. Butler Mims, for instance, or Arnold Hudson either, mustn’t see you in Charleston in time to warn their good friend, Clay. You’d go to the hotel and stay there until I brought you word

that Clay was at his usual hangout, a mug-house known as the Lighthouse. You might have to wait one whole day, or conceivably two whole days, but if you arrive on Sunday, I think that night would be the night. You'd go to the Lighthouse, pick him up, and"—my tone faltered—"lead him on."

"Where to, Edward?" she asked quietly.

"Wherever necessary, to find out all you can about Mate's death."

"You've got a lot of nerve."

"I suppose so. So have you, when you need it."

"Have you and Salley talked this over?"

"No, I haven't mentioned it to her. I spoke of it to Jack."

"Was he for it?"

"He agreed I had the right to ask you, and you to accept or refuse."

"Did you consider paying me?"

"No, only standing your expenses—not even those if you're in funds."

"Well, thanks for that much, anyway."

"Do you want to undertake it? I believe you know already, and there's no point in you delaying your decision."

"Damn you, Edward. Damn Jack, too, and every man but Mate."

"I reckon we've got it coming."

"Excuse me for not leaving out Memphis. The old penny-pincher left me a thousand dollars. What did Mate leave me? I know if you don't."

"No, I don't know."

"He left me—the two times I had any dealings with him—feeling like a lady."

"Well, I once did something—not nearly as hard or as bad as this—in order to feel like a gentleman."

She did not hear me. "Once when I was walking up some stairs—once when he danced with me. He accepted me as a lady. I mean, he didn't ask what I was, no suspicion crossed his mind, I was just one of God's children, a human being he was drawn to. I played him for nearly a thousand dollars. I wonder if he remembers it, where he's gone!"

She rose, poured herself a drink of whiskey, and wiped her mouth.

“If he does remember it, he’s forgiven me,” she went on. “He’ll remember he was human too—the most human being I ever knew. You stay here and I’ll take the steamer to Charleston early tomorrow morning. Don’t come with me. I don’t want you around. If I need you, I’ll send for you.”

3

Sunday passed freely and rather quickly as I wandered about sight-seeing green and beautiful Savannah. It was no common earth, this city; it had been founded and dedicated by one of the greatest humanitarians that modern times had known. By profession and fierce instinct, I preyed on my fellow humans; the most powerful drive of General Oglethorpe’s life had been to serve them. Out of the muck grows the lovely lotus flower. A Bombay Indian I had met in Capetown, by religion not a Hindu but a Buddhist, had told me so. “The jewel is in the lotus,” he said, his face alight. Out of the dirt and stink and heartbreak of English debtor prisons had bloomed this flower-festooned city of the New World, with its many pretty parks, and with it the state of Georgia, rightfully calling itself the Empire State, for it was bigger than all England, stretching from the Savannah River to the Chattahoochee, from vast Okefenokee Swamp to the Great Smokies.

But no longer did its leading citizens proudly trace their histories to Fleet and Newgate. In their parlors hung painted coats-of-arms. Their boast was faded deeds of gift bearing the hand and seal of a royal George. Rich and lordly, still they were like me, I thought. In their place I would do the same.

My wait became anxious Wednesday morning, when Clara did not return on the passenger boat from Charleston. In vain I met the packet steamer at midnight, and on Thursday afternoon a little coaster. No young woman of youthful face and pretty, girlish form came down the gangplank. At nightfall I was thoroughly frightened. Why in the name of all my gods had I yielded to Clara’s demand that she go alone? Had I not known with whom she was dealing? No, I had only assumed the knowledge, a spine-chilling fact. Fratricide was a strange crime. Clay Hudson was a most strange man.

The next few hours were as weirdly haunted as some I had spent in Africa. The air, so fresh and cool three nights before, turned sultry. My friendliest stars were dimmed in smoky haze. Like almost everyone, I looked to, and half-believed, in certain omens of good or evil fortune, and only the latter would show tonight, everywhere I gazed; and more telling than these was a deepening bleakness of spirit—an experience known to millions of my kind. Had some dreadful thing happened not just now, not a few hours past, but perhaps as long ago as Sunday night? What was to prevent Clay Hudson

from discovering that Clara was my spy? Only much good luck and no bad luck! And I had never been Fortune's darling. My empty hours—my empty arms—were proof.

At midnight I heard of a packet schooner, with auxiliary engines, just now put into dock. Her home port was Baltimore, a porter told me, but she often touched at Charleston to load or unload freight, and she had accommodations for a few passengers. I rushed to a cab and promised the sleepy driver an extra dollar for a pell-mell ride. Presently the old nag's hoofs clattered on the stone.

I came down on the dank-smelling wharf to find the ship dark except for watchlights, her gangplank taken in, and her deck deserted except for shipwatch. At my halloo a youth of about sixteen leaned over the rail.

"Did anyone get off here?" I asked.

"I reckon they did, but I was for'ard, muggin' up, and I didn't pay no 'tention."

"Did you have a young lady passenger from Charleston?"

"I heard we did, but she was sick and stayed in her cabin."

"Do you mean seasick?"

"I don't guess so. We had a smooth sail."

"Will you go and see if she's still aboard?"

"Nay, sir. Us seamen don't dast go near the passengers' quarters, and the steward's gone over town."

I got back into the cab and now we made full-tilt for the Lucky Chance Casino. A carriage was just leaving—we heard her rumble of wheels and clatter of horses' hoofs—but the rooms were dark, and likely it was occupied by a late customer seeking a game of chance. Instead of trying to overtake him, I got out. I had heard a faint sound that might be a door opening. A moment later the rear window did not look quite so black. It was either a glimmer of light from within or a trick of my eyes. As I stood still and breathless, it slowly grew.

I paid and dismissed the driver, then knocked on the side door.

"Who is it?" The voice was weary-sounding but unmistakable.

"Edward."

"Wait just a minute."

From where I stood, I could see the lighted window. I watched it, idly expecting to see Clara's shadow thrown on the shade. Instead I saw something that puzzled me in an odd, uncanny way. The yellow glimmer became distinctly less. Clara had turned the lamp low.

A moment later she opened the door, then, leaving me to shut it, retreated rather hurriedly to a chair well away from the table from which the lamp threw murky beams.

"Forgive me for my rude ways," she said, "but I'm fagged out."

She was something more than tired. I had come in from the dark and my pupils were wide and receptive, and I could not fail to see instantly that she had been through an ordeal far more devastating than she wanted me to know. Her cheeks were haggard, her lips pale, her eyes appeared red, her light and shapely hands were shaking. Rather surprisingly on this sultry night, she wore a black lace shawl over her low-collared blouse.

"Let's make this short," she said. "I've got to get to bed."

"Just as you like."

"As short as the Devil, if you please, but he's pretty long—at least his shadow is that he casts across the world. Excuse me for babbling. I'm not drunk. I haven't even had a drink. I'm just a little lightheaded from—let's say lack of brains."

"Was the trip a failure or a success?"

"You'll have to decide that. I know he murdered Mate. Well, I don't know it, he didn't come out and say so, he only dropped the hint, and when enough liquor was down him he made it pretty plain. I've never seen a man hold so much booze. If I hadn't connived with the waiter to bring me tea instead, I'd been under the table in an hour. He was cold as a fish but after a long time he warmed up."

"Well?"

"Well, hell. When the evening was far enough along, he told me something else. I think that on this alone depends the success or failure of my noble efforts. You'll know, I don't. I think it was important because it jarred him—saying it, I mean—and he changed the subject and didn't mention Mate again."

She had been pale when I came in. Now she turned ashy gray and breathless.

"What did he say, Clara?"

“Mate didn’t drown between the Isle of Palms and Dewees Island. It was between Dewees Island and Capers Island.”

“Clara, that gives me new hope.”

“Oh, you’re not just saying that!”

“We can start the search again. Why did he lie in the first place? Was he afraid that someone had seen him, and we’d find that someone? If he exists we will find him. We’ll comb both islands. I don’t know what you’ve been through—”

“You remember how you used to want to be a gentleman. Whether you’ve given it up or not, act like one now. I mean this minute. Don’t ask me another thing. Put on your hat and make off. Maybe I’ll see you again some time. In the sweet by-and-by.”

There came a hysterical note in her voice. Not knowing what else to do, I rose at once.

“I’ll tell you one more thing that might interest you, though it has no connection with the case,” she went on, struggling against tears. “You may not believe it, but it’s true. Your old friend Clara Day—once Memphis’ shill and now proprietor of the Good Chance Casino—well, she’s a lady.”

I looked at her and believed her.

“I didn’t think I could ever be. I didn’t think I could be Sunday night, but for the sake of Mate—and I suppose you—I made it.”

She went to the door with me and opened it. A sudden gust of fresh air off the sea blew aside one end of her shawl. For an instant was revealed a narrow crimson welt that ran from under the back of her dress onto the side of her neck.

The door closed behind me. I looked up at the stars, shining now the late wind had blown away the murk, and, suddenly, I remembered something which only lately I had tried in vain to recall. It was a whispered story, told in my boyhood, of why Clay Hudson had had to leave Charleston. Now I asked the stars that he should leave Charleston again, by my sending, and on another, longer road.

## CHAPTER XXII

### The Verdict

One of the best drops for cobia in any of our waters lay close to the southern shore of Capers Island, where the configuration of the land caused a brisk tide rip with choppy waves. Indeed in all the pass between Capers and Dewees Island it was by far the most likely place for Clay Hudson to have heaved to on that fatal morning. Beyond was "high mash," as the Negroes call it, a wide expanse of marsh grass interwound with tidal creeks, and a favorite resort for mullet-netters and fishermen with hook-and-lines. From the open sea Clay would not be sure of seeing all who had poled bateaux into the wind-blown reed, but if he had brought Mate to cast in the rip, they would have certainly seen him.

After my furtive survey of the ground and long talk with Jeff Legare, it came to pass that N'kulu, known now as Ned Coon by such Gullah-speaking Negroes as had made his acquaintance, went to live in a deserted cabin on a half-tilled plantation, owned by an absentee landlord, on Capers Island. According to public report and the records of white people, he was a free Negro who farmed on shares a few acres of cornland, grazed a couple of cows, and ran a few pigs and chickens. But the colored knew better. There had come into their midst the most powerful conjure man in the island's history. He had magical equipment such as his predecessors, who meddled with roots, cow's horns, and pig's teeth, never dreamed of. One item was a spear with dried blood on it, another the two-toed foot of a bird that had stood as high as a horse, a third, and the most potent, a human head shrunk to the size of a coconut. The most remarkable attribute of his conjure was, it would work only to do good, never to do harm. It would lay ghosts, put a crimp in evil spirits, restore a wavering love, but it would not bring a rival to a lingering death, or blight a woman's beauty, or even drive her to distraction with a toothache. The most astounding thing about the conjuror himself was that he would take a case of "credick" not to be paid for till the crop was made.

That "Ned Coon" would soon know every great and guilty secret of the island, I had no doubt. Was there, among the rest, the witnessing of a murder not committed by a poor white, quick to draw his knife, or a passion-maddened Negro, but by one of the great bukras of the land? The laws of chance ran heavily against it, but I played the lone card for all it was worth. I

had no other choice; besides, deep in my heart—more in my daydreams than in my hard-hammered thoughts—I believed that it would win.

“Murder will out.” The ancient adage is far from a fact of human life, yet it contains a great deal of human truth. The mark of Cain is a reality, whether or not it is visible to the casual glance; and good men who know of unpunished murder are haunted in their beds. In any case, my ruse had an early and sudden upshot, startling in the extreme. Clay Hudson had not perfectly covered his tracks. It came to me in a great rush of hope—that evil was no more infallible than good. Almost every normal human being longs for that assurance, and suddenly I found it. Whether I had found victory lay in the lap of the gods.

The movement of event that must now whirl on to failure or fulfillment began with the delivery to me, on a sweltering July day, of a mess of diamond-back terrapin by a free Negro shrimp fisherman dwelling on Dewees Island. “Ned Coon tell me to carry you these,” he told me in unrecordable Gullah. He stood holding out the bag in one hand, his hat in the other, never dreaming he was bringing me a summons of unestimable moment. A moment later, he had gone.

The mists of moonlight found Jeff and me in his knock-about, making for the southern shore of Dewees Island, he knowing every fathom of the course. We found our way to a beach cottage, no more than a shack, Jeff’s retreat from a world to which he had never become acclimated; and here, in the hushed night, came N’kulu, in the company of a lank black man, about forty, with curiously delicate features and an air of distinction and purposefulness.

“I’ve seen you, several times, fishing in the creeks,” Jeff said to him when he saw him in the lanternlight. “Your name is Phineas.”

“ ’At right, suh,” the Negro answered in an oddly deep voice.

“Ned Coon, you’ve brought him here to tell us something,” I said, speaking Gullah, not the strange-sounding Afrikaans that might frighten Phineas.

“Yas, suh. Somp’n ’at he told me. He told me so his soul could res’. He’d already made ’fession to de Lawd, but I told him he had to make it ’fore de law, or he couldn’t git right in his heart.”

“Phineas, will you sit down while you tell it?” Jeff asked, waving his hand to a bench.

“No, sah. I’ll stan’ up. After ’at, I’ll sit down for a minute ’cause it’ll be harder wuk than sawin’ pine knots.”

“I’ll stan’ up wif you, Phineas,” N’kulu said.

“You can start then.”

“Bukra, I couldn’t tol’ it at all if Ned Coon hadn’t tol’ me I ’bliged to tell it. He said if I kept it secret any mo’, Old Debbil take my soul. And I reckon he would. Nothin’ been the same wi’ me and Molly, she my woman, since I seen what I seen. De owl and de bat, dey come and dey come. De buzzard, he shadow it flick-flick over de cabin. We hear de sound of laughin’ down in de swamp—de Debbil laughin’ at me, ’cause I ’fraid to tell of de Debbil’s work I seen wif my own eyes. To tell de truf, I mighty ’fraid right now. I know Mas’ Clay gwine kill me, soon or late, unless somebody stop him. Wo’s e an ’at, he send me off on one of ’em ships ’at come in night and hide behind de island, den I go back into slavery way off somewha’ in de sugar-cane field; and once a man free, like me, he rather die than be slave agin.”

“Phineas, you’ll be safer after you’ve told us than when you kept it secret,” I said. “If Mas’ Clay knew you’d seen what he did, but hadn’t told anyone, he would kill you sure to shut your mouth forever, but after you’ve told it, what would be the use?”

“He’ll kill me jus’ the same, if he kin, for the Debbil of it.”

“We’ll guard you all we can.”

“ ’At all I ask. My mammy tol’ me, when I come to manhood, ’Phineas, you’s a black man, but be a man right on.’ Mo’ ’n a year ago now, de moon was in de las’ qua’ta after de full moon o’ early April. I’d caught some shrimp in my net, and about half-tide, I got my bateau to pole out to Fishduck Creek, to try ’n catch a mess o’ spot-tails. ’Fo I pushed off, I waved to Joe Wadley, to fin’ out if he want to come wif me. No use yellin’ at him, ’cause Joe, he deaf and dumb.”

“Can Joe talk at all?”

“He can talk good on his fingers, and I learn enough to talk to him a little. He used to belong to ol’ Miss Wilcox, and she taught him ’at, and to spell good. He mighty glad to go. But as we was gettin’ into de creek, Joe look over the high mash, and he seen Mas’ Clay’s boat comin’ into de pass. Right away he sign to me to go back. All de colored mighty scared of Mas’ Clay, but Joe he wo’s e o’ all.”

“Did you see who was with him?”

“Yas, sah. Dey was a young bukra wif him and I thought it was Mas’ Mate. Afta I’d took Joe back where he could git in a little skiff he keep moor

on a sandbar and went out agin' alone, I took ova de high mash, and 'at time I catch a good look, and it's Mas' Mate for sho'."

"How far was Mas' Clay's boat?"

"Why, it wa'nt mo' 'n a quata-mile."

There would be no trouble about a Low Country jury believing that a colored man could identify a bukra at a quarter mile. A beady-eyed tern wasn't in it with him for long-range and accurate vision across a seascape.

"Do you think Mas' Clay saw you?"

"Not then, he didn't. He might of got a look at de boat befo' Joe went back. We passed a piece of low mash where de boat might show. And he didn't see me after 'at, but I seen him."

"Tell us what you saw."

"I didn't put out no bait. I foun' a place where I could jes' see over de mash, and I frowed out my anchor and jes' waited. I wanted to see what he gwine do. Somepin tol' me he hadn't come all 'at way, clean to de rip by Caper Island, jes' to catch cobia. Pity quick he heaved to, fast de boom to de taffrail, rig up Mas' Mate, and let him fish in de rip behind de boat. And in jes' a little while, Mas' Mate he got a strike. I could see de pole bend, and Mas' Mate brace himself. And 'en I seen somethin' Mas' Clay do behind Mas' Mate's back. And fo' God in Heaven I seen it plain."

We waited while Phineas caught his breath.

"He whop out his sheaf knife, and in one whack he cut de line fastenin' de boom to de taffrail."

"You saw the boom swing round?"

"It was almost too fast to see, but I seen it hit Mas' Mate and knock him overside. I see de big splash. And den I see what was de wo'se of all. Mas' Clay he jes take de tiller and let de boat drift wi' de tide, stayin' close to Mas' Mate, but not comin' up on him. He didn't heave his iron, and go swimmin' after him. He jes' waited and waited, givin' him time to drown."

There came visions into Phineas' round black eyes. He saw again the high marsh, waving in the wind, the expanse of blue water, the drifting boat, the small murderous figure at the helm.

"After awhile, he wait long enough, and I reckon he was afraid de body would sink, but they wan't much danger in de rip. So he got close to de body and heave his iron and slip overside. I t'ought maybe de good Lawd make

him drown, but in a minute or two he come a-swimmin', and I seen him come up on de lee side and crawl aboard still hangin' onto Mas' Mate. He wait awhile longer, jes' to make sure, 'fore he drag him aboard. And den he light one of his little cheroots and smoke it. I didn't see de match and I couldn't see de smoke, but I see his hand go back and fort' to his mouf, and I knew what he was doin'. And he stan' there like he own de whole ocean."

"What did you do?"

"Bukra, I kept on a-watchin'. I was mighty scared, but de Lawd tell me, in my ear, to watch close, 'cause I was His witness to what Mas' Clay Hudson did to his brot'er, Mate Hudson. I was de only witness in all dat mighty sweep of water and mash.

"By and by, Mas' Clay take Mas' Mate's pole dat stuck under de taffrail, and boat de big fish. Then he took the line he done cut, and he put it against the housing and pound de ends wif de ax, and den he pounded it two or t'ree places along both de pieces. I knew what he doin', as well as though he told me. He making de line look old and worn, so he can say it broke in a gus' a wind. Den he take his knife and he do somethin' wif it wif de ax, and I t'ink he dull the edge of it 'cause it must be razor-sharp to cut de line in one hack. Den slow and steady he fasten a new line to de boom, fix it to de taffrail, and take up his anchor. Den he go sailin' back to town."

Thus, suddenly, the story ended. Gray-faced, Phineas looked at Jeff and me with imploring eyes. A sheen was on N'kulu's eyes. I could imagine him once more as a plumed and painted warrior of the Zulu.

"Sit down, Phineas," Jeff said kindly. Then he turned to me, and I saw that he was fighting devastating sorrow, the outcome of profound disappointment. I was saved from it only by the curious kind of optimism which is the greatest and perhaps the only reward of a gambler's habit of mind. Not even four aces will always win. A pair of deuces will not always lose. Fortune is never quite as good, or ever quite as bad, as the cards show.

"Tha' we is," Jeff said in Gullah, "but wha' is we?"

"Nowhere," I answered, "yet."

"Explain it to me, Edward. You've read enough law to throw a little light. The judge would believe the story, so would the jury, any man who heard it would believe it. Surely society won't countenance cold, calculated murder —" He paused.

"The story could never get to court in its present form. The farthest it would get is a magistrate's hearing, after someone had sworn out a warrant

for Clay's arrest. There isn't a scrap of corroborative evidence—he has only to say the Negro had a grudge, and no magistrate would hold him for trial. Still, you never can tell—” Then my heart got rid of its cold cramp, and I turned to Phineas again.

“Phineas, it was more than a year since all that happened.”

“Yas, sah.”

“When you repeat that story, before a law man in Charleston, leave out about Joe Wadley going back. He may have gone back, but for the present you've forgotten. Tell it as though he was with you all that time—that he too saw the line cut, and Mas' Mate knocked overside, and Mas' Clay leaving him there to drown. Say 'we seen,' not 'I seen.' Can you do that?”

“I reckon I kin, but wouldn't I get in trouble wid de law?”

“You can remember later, if you have to. And if you don't do it, Mas' Clay will get away like a fish off your hook, and he'll never have to answer for what you know he did.”

Phineas sat twisting his gaunt hands. “Mas' Edward?” he called at last.

“Yes.”

“I never seen you 'fo tonight, but I seen Mas' Jeff a heap o' times. I don't know your name, but all us colored know de name Legare. I want to ask him straight out.”

“Very well.”

“Mas' Jeff, if I go to de jailhouse for not tellin' de truf, I'd be mighty shamed, me bein' free and all. But if you say for me to do what Mas' Edward tell me, I will.”

“Edward, can you keep him out of jail for perjury?” Jeff asked me.

“Yes, sir. At the most he'll be reprimanded for a slip of memory.”

“Will it do any good? I don't see how it can, because Joe Wadley would certainly be questioned sooner or later.”

“It may do good. I've seen a pair of deuces win over a full house. In poker there's such a thing as bluff—in fact, the game used to be called that—and I'm not sure it won't work on Clay Hudson. I want to try it. I want to bring the bastard science of the gaming dens into a magistrate's court. When everything is said and done, that's the only science that I know. If I succeed, it will be the greatest hand of poker I've ever played. If I don't, I'll take my medicine whatever it is.”

“I’ll take it with you, old man.” Jeff turned to the wide-eyed Negro. “Do just what Mas’ Edward says.”

2

In Charleston there existed an ancient and honorable society for the help of the afflicted, white and Negro. From its secretary I received a list of all deaf mutes residing in the city, and the names of their nearest of kin. Many of the people on the latter list could talk on their fingers, as the saying goes, but there was not one that I knew well, or had any reason to believe would risk an official reprimand or perhaps a more serious penalty for a flagrant piece of subterfuge in a magistrate’s hearing. Actually there might be several who would do so. It had warmed my heart to discover that the death of Mate had neither been forgotten, nor, among the many who had suspected the truth, forgiven. Some who take lightly the solemnities of court and who live by their own half-humorous code, would do it for the Devil of it, trusting to get out with a whole skin. I knew the adventurousness of human kind.

Clara Day would undertake it, if she knew sign language, and if I asked her to. But I was glad that, since she was not competent, I need not call on her again. Thinking of her, my mind jumped to another of her sex, and in that respect at least, somewhat like her, even if before the world she cut an entirely different figure. This was Miss Arabella Wilcox, one of the *grandes dames* of Charleston, who dwelt with a staff of servants in a time-honored mansion facing the sea wall. She was one of the directors of the aid society. She had spent a great part of her life—having never married—teaching deaf mutes to communicate and the lame to walk and the blind to make their way as well as possible through a lightless world. One of the beneficiaries of her humanitarianism was Joe Wadley, Phineas’ friend, now living on Capers Island.

She was said to be high-tempered, rather imperious, impatient of restraint, and an implacable enemy of the Devil and all his works. It happened, one of those little flukes of chance that sometimes prove mighty factors in an enterprise, she was a distant and affectionate cousin of Mildred Hudson. But she gave no sign of any of this when, having written me a formal note in answer to my request for an audience, she received me in her ancient mossy garden. Her greeting was courteous, but I could not call it warm. How could I expect it to be when I was a notorious gambler, not long returned from Africa, now on an unknown mission?

A hoary-headed butler brought out mint juleps, expertly made. The hospitality mitigated the effect of her severe dress and somewhat distant

manner; and I was able to plunge into Phineas' story. Still this green garth with its cool stone cloistered from the world seemed the wrong scene for a wicked tale of fratricide; and I feared Arabella Wilcox would not believe it with all her heart and soul, and even if she did, she would stay calm.

I had misjudged her. Her stillness changed to that of profound emotion.

"I knew that Clay Hudson would kill before he was through," she said. "Somehow I didn't think his victim would be Mate—I thought it would be Salley, for refusing his love. That would have been an act of supreme egoism on his part. They both had Ashley blood, so she was the only woman worthy of him, his own woman. Killing Mate was not nearly as grand a gesture. Actually it was little more than vicious spite."

"I'm glad to hear you say that—for a particular reason."

"Since you've mentioned it—what is it?"

"The more common a murderer he is, the more likely he will provide the rope to be hanged with."

"He is a common murderer. Believe that, and have confidence in yourself, as well as faith in your cause. I wish I could help you."

"I'm going to give you the chance—the chance to help me play a chance to win. And it's no piddling chance. It's a good, solid chance. As a gambler, I feel sure that it's worth running. And I believe we have no other."

So I told her what I wanted her to do. As I talked, I watched her face, especially her brilliant and beautiful eyes, and not once did I see her flinch. She had only a few questions. . . .

"Would I have to do it again when he's brought to trial?"

"No, Miss Arabella. He'll either convict himself at the hearing before the magistrate, or he'll never be tried."

"You'll give him every opportunity to convict himself?"

"Either through vanity—or through panic."

"I too think it's a runnable chance. I used to play a pretty good hand at macao and whist. Also, I've won more bets on horses than my rightful share."

"Will you do it? If you're caught at it, Mr. Meadows will give you a severe reprimand." Mr. Meadows, usually called Judge, was the magistrate who held hearings on arrests for capital crimes.

“No, he won’t. I’d tell him I’m old, and can’t interpret as well as I used to, and I misunderstood.”

“He may believe that—even though he looks at your eyes and hands—but I wouldn’t.”

“I think you’re of a mind to pay me a compliment, and I’d like to hear it.”

“I’m practiced at appraising manual dexterity and power of vision. You have very beautiful and fluent hands, and I doubt if your eyes miss much. I thank my lucky stars I am to have such an able partner.”

### 3

Ned Coon, as he was known, and Preacher Jessup, unfalteringly faithful to the family that had set him free, arranged a watch over all waters adjacent to Charleston into which a seagoing vessel could run and lay in hiding. There were not many such waters; most of the island coasts were too thickly inhabited to be clear for smugglers.

Before dawn of an early August morning there came a brief, sharp rattle on my windowpane. I went out into the dark and found a young Negro, who gave his name as Ben, and said that he lived on the southwestern end of “Jim” Island. Was he free or slave? He was slave, but Ol’ Mas’ was visiting on Edisto, and the straw boss Mas’ Parker, had let him off to run the errand Preacher Jessup had done asked him to, if the ’casion came. A ship had slipped into the inlet at the previous sundown. She flew no flag and her name had been painted out and her hands were swarthy and heavily mustached and spoke in a foreign tongue. As a final indication of her business, the bright-skin boy named ’Manual, who was known to work for Mas’ Clay Hudson, had gone aboard the ship, then taken off for Charleston on horseback.

“Horseback?” I asked wonderingly. “The ship must have found a berth close to shore.”

“Yas, sah, she lying in Stono Creek, so near de land you could t’row a stone.”

It was a good augury, I thought.

The sun was not up before I had gotten word to Phineas and to deaf-and-dumb Joe Wadley, stored away for safekeeping at Judge Lucas’ plantation; and they were with me, at the door of the magistrate’s temporary quarters near the bay, when the official arrived at eight o’clock to begin his daily duties.

“Judge Meadows, I wish to swear out a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Clay Hudson,” I said, when he had taken his chair.

“For what crime, Mr. Stono?”

“The murder of his half-brother, Mate Hudson.”

Judge Meadows was a quiet man. He was hardly ever known to raise his voice, and his expression was habitually calm.

“It is customary for the person making such a serious charge to give the magistrate his reason for so doing.”

“Phineas, give his honor a very brief account of what you saw off Capers Island. You need not, I believe, go into detail; I think you will be called upon to do that when Judge Meadows holds a hearing on the case, to determine whether Mas’ Hudson is to be held for trial.”

I thought that the multisyllable words I had used might confuse Phineas. They did not in the least; like most Negroes he knew the legal processes regarding arrest; and he answered to the point.

“Jedge, we seen him cut a line so de boom of de boat would swing round and hit Mas’ Mate in the neck and knock him overboard. Then we seen him let him drown.”

Meadows eyed him gravely, then turned to me.

“You would not have brought the man here, unless you believed his story,” he said. “Moreover, there is general feeling that all the facts of Mr. Mate Hudson’s death have never come to light. I will accept your oath and issue a warrant for Mr. Clay Hudson’s arrest, and hold a hearing on the case as soon as he is brought into custody.”

That should be very soon. Time was moving fast, but I did not think it moved against us; Clay Hudson made a practice of rising late and having breakfast in his garden, and the tide to help him on his way to Stono Creek had not yet started to flow. I asked the magistrate if it would be proper for me to accompany Sheriff Bowman when he served the warrant.

Meadows looked at me curiously. “Certainly, if you wish to do so,” he answered. “The thought occurs to me that you have been the prime mover in opening up the case.”

“It is for this that I returned from Africa.”

“I may tell you in confidence that the widow of the victim approached Sheriff Bowman many weeks ago. At that time he was unable to give her any

encouragement. According to a report as to why the elder Hudson remembered you in his will, you were something more to Mate Hudson than a friend.”

“That is correct.”

“This will jar the city to its foundations.”

I could believe that; I could know, too, that, whether or not my great gamble won, Clay Hudson would be finished in Charleston. However safe he remained from the retribution of the law, Phineas’ simple story would put him forever beyond the pale. Maybe I would have to be content with this half a loaf. It might be I would not attempt the *coup de grâce*; for it needed the most careful timing and a run of high cards between now and the fateful moment when I was either to nod to Arabella Wilcox, or shake my head. As for me, I had nothing to do but look, listen, divine the position of the cards, and make that one decision.

I felt a lightening of heart as Sheriff Bowman, his deputy Dan Manville, and I were shown in what was once the garden of the Hudson mansion facing the Promenade. A frightened Cuban servant brought us there, and although Clay Hudson was never more grand as he looked up from his breakfast table at us lowborn visitors, I saw his brows knit and there came a swift change of light, indicating some terrific inward tension, in his dark eyes.

“Could not your business wait till I finished breakfast?” he asked coldly, addressing Sheriff Bowman.

“No, sir, it could not.”

“I don’t think it’s that important.”

“You may think differently, when you know what it is. I hold a warrant, made out by the magistrate, for your arrest for murder. We’ve come to serve that warrant.”

“May I ask who ‘we’ are? I see your deputy, whose presence is no doubt lawful. But you will need a good excuse for permitting the intrusion of the third person.”

“If you mean Mr. Stono, he swore out the warrant, and Judge Meadows said he had every right to see it served.”

“Every right, and with sterling pleasure,” I said quickly. “You once told me, Clay, that I was at the end of my rope—but it didn’t prove to be true. Now I can tell you the same thing—and this time it’s a sure thing. When you took your brother’s life, you should have looked carefully into the high marsh

that overlooked the scene—provided, of course, you had any care for your own life. It was not easy to encourage the two witnesses to tell their stories. They held you in quite justifiable fear. They are over it now. Their safety has been guaranteed. You yourself can listen to their accounts at the magistrate’s hearing in a very short time, then you can judge the truth of what I say. Your time has run out. Sheriff Bowman, I suggest you clap handcuffs on this murderer, and haul him to the courthouse.”

“Mr. Stono, I don’t think we need do that. The testimony of the two Negroes won’t become official until the hearing. Meanwhile we’ll treat him like a gentleman—until he shows himself unworthy of it. Will you come now, Mr. Hudson?”

“As soon as I speak to my servant as to his duties.”

He pulled a bell cord and the Cuban re-entered the room. Clay spoke softly to him in Spanish in an even tone, but I was listening with all my ears, and three times I heard him use the word *batel*, meaning a small vessel. Nor was Diego’s mien as perfect as his master’s. His swarthy face became quite pale.

“I am ready now, officer,” Clay said, gracefully rising. As he did so, he gave me a view of his perfectly formed, sensuous lips curled in a faint smile. I did not know what it meant. I thought it might be in some strange victory or farewell. But I saw the beauty of molding of his face, its signs of ancient lineage and exalted race, and, once more, its resemblance to Mate’s. I wondered if Cain’s face had resembled Abel’s.

I had seen the steam of evil coming up almost like swirling smoke in the gambling dens. Wondering at the root of the evil in Clay, the root that had flowered fratricide, I could not explain it by the bad strain of the Ashleys, for Salley too was of that strain. It came to me as a kind of inkling that it had some distant but powerful connection with Africa. Before I could seize it or make sense of it, the vision faded.

At eleven o’clock, Sheriff Bowman brought his prisoner into the temporary courtroom of the magistrate, Judge Meadows. With him was not Butler Mims, as I expected, but another lawyer I used to know, Matthew Whitlow. Had Butler refused to take the case? I hoped so fervently, because of the effect of such a refusal on Clay and hence on my play; and, after all, it would be quite like Butler to flee what he thought was a sinking ship. Still he may have been merely unavailable at the moment, and intended to come to Clay’s rescue at the trial. Meanwhile the blunt-nosed, porcine-eyed shyster was an opponent not to be despised.

“We meet again, Edward,” he told me, holding out his thick hand. “And you’ve come up in the world, to be swearing out warrants for Mr. Clay Hudson. But this time you’ve bit off more than you can chew.”

Still his eyes wobbled as he spoke, and he plainly feared he was treading on thin ice.

Sitting quietly on a bench to one side were Phineas and Joe Wadley. Not far off, neatly and quietly dressed, the epitome of Charleston’s Old Guard, sat Miss Arabella Wilcox; and I saw Clay’s slight but perceptible recoil as he caught sight of her. The county solicitor was present, so was the deputy sheriff, a clerk with his pad and pencil, and a newspaper reporter, but except for Jeff Legare there was no audience, for this was only a preliminary hearing, not a trial. I looked in vain for Salley and Mildred Hudson. I did not know why they had failed to appear—it stood to reason Miss Wilcox had told them of the event—and perhaps it was simply a matter of good taste. So wild was my gamble, so great the chance of its failure, that I was glad of their absence.

But I rejoiced at the living eyes and purposeful demeanor of Miss Wilcox. I wished I were gentle-born.

The benches were hard, the heat extreme, the fly-specked windows let in sparse light from a breezy but gray day. I went to one of them for a quick view of the harbor hardly a hundred yards distant, and what I saw gave a sudden and sharp lift to my spirits. Fast to the dock, with its sail ready to spread, lay Clay’s boat. His Cuban servant had brought it there—for what contingency? When Miss Wilcox gave me a questioning glance, I smiled into her eyes.

“I have called this hearing not to try to determine the guilt or innocence of the person charged,” the magistrate began when the room had grown still. “But only to determine if there is enough evidence to hold him for trial. I will first hear from the free Negro, Phineas. Phineas, step forward and face my chair.”

The tall, gaunt Negro did so, and at Meadows’ request, he began to speak. He told his story as simply as before, employing the Gullah dialect, and it was as though he was telling us what was just now before his eyes. We, his hearers, saw him standing there, with a wonderful dignity in his face that could be nothing but the sense of his own great mission and a solemn pride in his having mastered fear; and we saw the judge at his bench, only a plainly-dressed magistrate sitting before a paper-strewn table, listening with profound gravity; and we caught glimpses of one another, the sheriff and his deputy

and the clerk sitting in their shirt-sleeves, the latter writing rapidly, all with deeply attentive expressions and sweat-damp faces, while Matthew Whitlow wore his customary black coat and string tie; and the prisoner and Jeff dressed as I was, in cutaway coats, jeweled stocks, bright waistcoats, and tight trousers in the style of the upper crust; and on the prisoner's face at first was a haughty smile. And we saw the big but shabby room that was now a court of law, and the dirty windows, and the light beyond pouring through gray clouds reflected by the sea.

But as we saw all this, we saw the pictures painted by Phineas' simple words. The owl and the bat, they came and they came. The buzzard's shadow flick and flick over the cabin. From down in the swamp rose the sound of the Devil's laughter. So he was obliged to tell, this time before the Law, of Mas' Clay's boat heaving to in the tide rip, and of its two small figures busied, one at the helm and the other with fishing gear. A knife flashed. The boom swung around. And we too watched that awful waiting, until Clay heaved his anchor and at last slipped overboard, and we too watched him swimming back with something in his arms. But although he came aboard himself he did not at once bring his burden. He left it in the water a good while longer. . . . And then a fly's buzzing sounded loud in the hushed room, and the flesh of Meadows' jaws looked drawn and hard as flint.

Matthew Whitlow half-rose from his bench, then sat down again. His client's smile had turned to a grimace.

"Did anyone go with you that day?" Judge Meadows asked.

"Yas, sah."

"Who was it?"

"Joe Wadley, who deaf and dumb. He go wi' me a heap o' times."

"Miss Arabella Wilcox, I have asked you to be present at this hearing because you know the sign language employed by deaf mutes, and in fact taught it to our next witness, Joe Wadley. Ask him to tell his story, which you are to interpret aloud."

As she rose to take the seat Judge Meadows indicated, her gaze brushed mine. I gave her a slight nod. In grace and ladyship she sat down, and her right hand began to ply, its fingers in rapid, constant changes of position, before Joe Wadley's eyes. When her small white hand dropped in her lap, Joe raised his big black but fluent hand. As its fingers flew Arabella Wilcox's voice came forth into the silent room, pronouncing words at intervals of several seconds, giving the effect of reading very slowly.

“I am . . . Joe . . . Wadley. . . . I live on . . . Capers . . . Island. . . . On that day . . . I went . . . with . . . Phineas . . . fishing . . . in Fishduck . . . Creek. . . . I looked . . . over . . . the . . . high . . . mash . . . and I . . . seen . . . Mas’ Mate . . . and Mas’ . . . Clay. . . . Pretty . . . soon . . .”

The tale went on, its main facts as Phineas had related them, but with added detail. The black hand never rested, its flying fingers never stilled. But now a change came in the scene—a change of mood—that I had never dreamed. Joe’s eyes became lighted by an intense fury. Twice he gestured toward Clay, then he pointed at him with his left hand, the leveled forefinger accusing beyond any indictment I had ever heard in a courtroom.

The air in the silent room appeared to crackle. I knew there would be an explosion, but what form it would take was still a formless vision in my brain. Then with a hoarse cry Clay Hudson leaped to his feet.

“Yes, I did it,” he howled, as he ran to the door. There he stopped, whirled, and fixed his mad-dog eyes on mine. “I drowned my baby brother who usurped my rightful place. But you’ll never have it, you lowborn bastard aping a gentleman!” Then, still howling as he ran, “The curse of Agoon on you all!”

Agoon was the West Indian conjure god—but I did not think of that now. I acted on impulse and, for the first and probably the last time, in concert with Matthew Whitlow. The sheriff and his deputy had now collected their wits and sprang up to pursue the fugitive, but in the rush of excited men to the door I managed to collide with the fat, puffing Bowman while the shyster lawyer, with a last and feeless loyalty to his client, tripped up lean, swift Dan Manville. Thus the two officers were the last to make an exit except for my partner and me.

We came close together in the now deserted room.

“What did you ask Joe, with such wonderful results?” I said to her in low tones.

“I asked him to tell the court how Mas’ Clay Hudson tore down his fish trap off Capers Island,” the lady answered.

Excited by the race, she too hurried from the room. I made for the window that overlooked the bay, and in a matter of seconds saw the end of the first part. Running like a youth, Clay gained the dock and, not even pressed close by his pursuers, leaped aboard the boat and raised his sail. The brisk seaward breeze filled it instantly—I could imagine its flamelike crackle—and a widening streak of blue water began to show beyond the piling. He

was an expert sailor; I had never seen a boat get under way as quickly and cleanly.

He was fully fifty feet from the dock when Dan Manville made his belated appearance. He did not even reach for his pistol—he was only a deputy and a poor white and the idea could not cross his mind—but for a few seconds he stood poised on the brink as though inclined to dive in and swim after the runaway. Luckily for him—for Clay would have certainly struck at him with an oar—his dignity or some other consideration restrained him. In the few seconds before Sheriff Bowman and Judge Meadows appeared on the scene, the smartly sailing craft began running before the wind, well out of reach.

Still I refused to believe that the highborn yachtsman could outrun the provosts soon to give chase; or, if he did, he could get aboard a friendly vessel in time to clear the port. Actually I had never considered this. My first doubts rose when the patrol boat took such a deal of precious time to get under way. It appeared there was a confusion of authority or a failure in its delegation, whereby a superior officer had to be rounded up to sign the order. Cursing did no good; when finally she put to sea, bearing Dan Manville, Jeff, a dozen bluecoats and me, Clay Hudson's cutter looked like a toy boat far and away down the harbor, and Clay himself like a tiny stick in its stern.

The officer of the bluecoats looked long through a glass, then handed it to me. I got a good focus and then an unforgettable view of my opponent. He never deigned us a backward glance. He stood with what I thought or dreamed was grace; his hand appeared to lay lightly on the tiller but truly it was strong as steel and there was death in it yet for those who impugned his right to reign or blocked his course. But I still did not know the keystone of the evil in his soul. I could see its flower but not its root; by what black mass and miscreancy it possessed him, I could not dream.

Nor did I dream it was my last clear view of Clay Hudson.

"There's a squall making up off James," the officer said, taking back his glass. "He's changing his course to make for it, and if he gets inside it, we've lost him."

"Cap'n, he's sailing mighty close to the outlying buttresses of Fort Sumpter," one of the crew replied.

These were wave-washed and a hazard to strange shipping, but Clay was supposed to know them like the palm of his hand. How he had misjudged his course only the Devil knew. The man's voice had hardly died away when the deep keel struck; with the naked eye, we saw the craft's brief check, her quick

list as he reeled on, and then her sudden flounder in the choppy waves. The thought came to me, with something like a wish, that Clay would go down with her; but life was too strong in him to yield up till the last ditch.

“There he goes, swimming for James Island,” the officer cried, holding the glass steady. “His black head shows plain in the chop.”

“He’ll never make it,” I answered.

“I don’t know about that. He’s an easy swimmer, or I miss my guess. If he’s screened by the squall, he can land anywhere on that beach, cross the creek to Morris, and rendezvous with the smuggler that’s probably got her glass on him now.”

For about five minutes not one of my shipmates said a word, and there was no sound but the sail’s hum and the slap of little waves against our hull. Then I heard my own voice rise in a wondering tone.

“Cap’n, there’s some sort of commotion in the water where he’s swimming or so it seems to me.”

“I’m under the same impression. See what you make of it.”

The officer handed me the glass. I could make nothing of it but splashings, no more revealing than the odd fact that quite a few gulls were flying in that direction. He looked at me with a white face and spoke again.

“Now, if Mr. Hudson had been hurt in the wreck and bleeding a little . . .” His words died away. The sailors looked at one another, with round, awed eyes.

I started to speak, for I remembered a like commotion, overside from the *Sally Tucker*, out from Puerto Miramar, when Clay Hudson, then known as Cap’n Walker, had saved transport and burial expenses for six sick Negroes. A similar pack might have gathered about Clay. I could dream it was the same pack, for such bands range the ocean, and Fate might have liked to round out one of her strange tales. But perhaps Clay had met with only a big school of barracudas, not one of which would weigh over fifty pounds, but all of wolfish appetite and with teeth like rapiers.

I did not speak, because I was looking for a black dot in the turmoiled water.

“Can you see anything of him?” the officer asked, handing me the glass.

After a long scrutiny, I handed it back.

“No, sir, I can’t.”

“Well, we’ll sail up that way for a close look. But I’ll tell you right now we might as well put back in port.”

I wondered to what port Clay Hudson had gone, or what infinite open sea.

## Aftermath

My hand is wearied of the pen; and since the pattern of my life can never change—ever it will be the climbing of jagged and beautiful mountains, with many defeats and falls—I am in haste to lay it down. But there came to pass one event, with preliminary incident, so intimately bound with these previous events, at least as their epilogue, that it should be chronicled with them.

After Clay's arrest and disappearance, my standing in Charleston changed rapidly and markedly. The real reason was the remembered grace and charm of Mate Hudson; plainly a great number of people had liked him, had deplored his death, had suspected a situation akin to the truth; and these gave me my full due and more for bringing it to light. My ill-fame as a gambler did not reduce in the least the flood of human warmth poured out to me. Lonely as the last catamount in the swamps of the Santee, I had never dreamed of such a thing and, although I felt sure it would not last long, I reveled in it. And not only the rank and file extended their hands to me; I suddenly began to receive signs of esteem and even fellowship from the quality. And in this development, the bar sinister did not militate against me. An open secret now, with many of high position it counted in my favor. The blanket on whose wrong side I was born at least was no common rag.

Indeed, my dream of being accepted as a gentleman of the Low Country bid fair to come true.

Meanwhile a minor public honor came my way. The sudden death of a Charleston member of the lower house of the state legislature had caused a vacancy that could be filled permanently only by election; meanwhile it was customary for the Governor to appoint a member pro tem. On Judge Lucas' recommendation, the dignitary consented to give me the little plum, for the few weeks of its term, I was expected to take no more than a figurehead's part in state affairs, and otherwise follow my leader; but I could make a maiden speech in regard to the Convention for Secession soon to form; and later, when I came to practice law, the appointment would look well on my record. There was very little to gain but apparently nothing to lose, and since Judge Lucas had gone to some effort to get me the accolade, I accepted it gladly.

The fact that Butler Mims was an outstanding member of the body, with the reputation for political acumen, had entered into my decision, but I did not know in what way. It stood to reason that it would have made me lean toward the other side.

Any concern with Butler Mims was a harking back to the past. So were my brief and rare dealings with Salley and Mildred Hudson; they appeared to have no bearing on the future, or hold no promise for it. When, in her small, neat parlor, Mistress Hudson tried to thank me for what I had done in memory of her son, she broke into tears; and a moment passed before she was again her quiet, gracious, reserved self, telling me that I must take the will of thanksgiving for the deed.

Salley sent me, without a word, a beautiful pair of dueling pistols that Mate had inherited from a Hudson forefather. Mounted in silver, and beautifully engraved, they were flintlocks of obsolete model, but I knew that Mate had treasured them, and I thought the gift was a noble one, and perhaps of more appropriateness than I could readily bring to mind.

I saw her, graced by candlelight, at a small supper given by Judge Lucas in honor of the Governor. She did not stay long, and the few minutes that I talked to her tête à tête I spoke mainly of Africa, its grassy plains, its rocky *kopjes*, and lean mimosa forest, and principally its swarming herds of game.

But she took the opportunity to congratulate me warmly on accepting the passing honor of my appointment.

“Every man of ambition should take part in public life,” she told me, “and since I’m going up to Columbia shortly—for a long visit with my school friend, Helen Bettis—I expect to go to the capital to hear your maiden speech.”

“It’s a mere formality—letting me make it is the customary gesture on the part of house leaders.”

“All the more reason for you to make a good one.”

“For an immediate Convention for Secession?”

“If that’s what you want—if you think it’s best for the South. What’s the use of waiting until next year? It seems to me the die is cast.”

She left me then, and a few minutes later waved me goodbye. I did not see her again until Miss Bettis entertained for her at a garden party at her ancient family seat overlooking the Congaree River. Many of the guests were public figures; the Minute Men had marched by torchlight only the night before; most of the talk revolved about the great political issue of the day, whether South Carolina should secede at once, leading the movement in the South, or wait for concerted action with other Southern states. Still, when I asked Salley to walk with me, she slipped her hand in mine, the sound of

voices quickly died away, and the trouble that lay so heavy on the South seemed forgotten and gone.

“It reminds me of Miss Abigail Cumming’s garden in Augusta, when I was a dreamer,” I told my companion when we had found a rustic seat.

“I remember it was about this time of year,” Salley replied. “The roses and honeysuckle were all gone, but a few red japonica were beginning to show. I wore orange, I remember. It went so well with the autumn foliage.”

“Today you wear garnet. You don’t know—but you do know, of course—how wonderfully it sets off your olive skin and brown hair, and your dark-red lips. Your beauty has waxed since then. Even then, cub that I was, I never doubted it. It was always one of the verities of my life.”

“From that I would almost think you are still a dreamer.”

“Not of impossible dreams. I won’t submit to their persuasions. Even unlikely dreams have rough going with me now.”

“I’m sorry to hear it. And I don’t see why, considering how many are coming true. You’re a guest of the Bettises. In another year you’ll be practicing law in Charleston—you’ve already received a temporary appointment to a state office. Once you called yourself a captain of the deck. People hardly mention that any more—it was just part of the wild oats you sowed. Victory is in your hands.”

“Well, we’ll talk straight. It’s necessary, sooner or later. You and I had a closer bond in that garden six years ago than we have now.”

Her expression changed subtly. “I don’t know if that’s true. Certainly I don’t know why—unless we were both so young.”

“I had hopes of having you then. Of winning your hand in marriage—and that’s the way I said it to myself. Now I look in my heart—and I can’t find any.”

“You said to talk straight, and I will. I look everywhere for Mate, and I can’t find him. He’s in my heart but nowhere else. Certainly he’s not in you.”

“No, you would hardly imagine two men more different.”

“Yet you were very fond of each other—and you did more for him than anyone else alive. You think I’ve forgotten that. You may think I’m ungrateful—”

“No, but those very acts you speak of—services, you might call them—serve only to set us more apart.”

“That doesn’t seem possible.”

“Yet, it’s true, and I know why. Every one of them reminds you of what he was—and what I am. Practicing law-making a little speech—getting invited to parties—can those things change me? You know what I am. If I’m no longer a captain of the deck, I’m still a creature of the night. You might be able to love a man like me, but you won’t marry a man like me. I’m going to say something that sounds crude, but it’s plain, and you’ll understand, and to my great regret it’s true. Before Clay Hudson ran from the courtroom, he called me what I am. Before I left Clara Day one night, she told me too. I’m not a gentleman, and can never become one. I might fool others, but I don’t fool you. I’m not of your social station. The marriage would be a *misalliance*.”

Her eyes became round and glistening. “Edward, I swear to you I hadn’t thought that—”

“You don’t need to think it. You’ve seen me operate, and that’s enough. Well, you didn’t see me when I pulled Mate out of Memphis’ coils, but he no doubt told you about it. I used my skill as a gambler—the tactics of the underworld. You did see me bring Clara to Hudson Barony, and frighten you into postponing your engagement to Mate. And you’ve found out by now the methods I used to break Clay. Trickery—deceit—the practice of a gambler—the ways of the underworld.”

She leaned toward me, and it seemed I had only to open my arms for her to come into them.

“Well, I can’t eat my cake and have it too—”

“A marriage of compromise would not suit me.”

“Then what does it mean, Edward? What can it mean, but that there isn’t any hope for you and me?”

“All the king’s horses—and all the king’s men . . . It was Clara who said that. Still, I won’t marry someone like Clara. It’s a dilemma that can’t be resolved.”

“Then will you take me back to my friends?”

The day came that I was to make my maiden speech in the South Carolina House of Representatives. It was to be the preliminary to a full-dress debate whether the assembly would pass on the Senate’s bill setting the date of the Convention of Secession for January 8, or to pass a new bill putting it

forward to December 6. I favored the later date, and under the direction of Mr. Lesesne of Charleston, one of the most moderate of the leaders, I prepared to say as much, giving substantial reasons; but this was the only meat in a ten-minute address; the rest was to be a tribute to the state as was invariably made in maiden speeches by new members. It was well gotten up and would surely be well received.

I felt no twinge of stage fright. In fact I was unable to attach any real importance to the event. The fact remained that almost all members answered present to the roll call, and several men from the upper house—friends of Judge Lucas with whom I was soon expected to practice law—dropped in to hear me. The visitors' seats and public benches were largely occupied, almost altogether because of the debate to come. I looked in vain for Salley.

The speaker had announced the order of business and had begun a brief speech introducing me when he was vastly surprised to see a member get up from his chair and raise his hand. The interrupter was a large man whom I knew well—whom I had known most of my remembered days—and suddenly there came to me an inkling vivid and swift as lightning that this seemingly trivial occasion would prove one of the most momentous episodes in both my past and future days.

“The gentleman from Charleston, Mr. Butler Mims, has attracted the attention of the chair,” the speaker intoned. “Sir, you have the floor.”

“Mr. Speaker, you have told us that the newly appointed member, Mr. Stono, intends to give us his views on setting a time for a Convention of Secession,” Butler said in his resonant voice. “I wish at this point to request that he leave that subject to senior members, and instead give us his views on an even more crucial matter, which we must know before we can take any of his utterances in this chamber at face value.”

“I'm not sure that I understand you.”

“Pray let me explain. At this great time of crisis, all who are not with us are against us. It has come to my knowledge that Mr. Stono has before now acted as a liberator of slaves in the neighboring island of Cuba. I am not speaking of his own slaves—in fact he has never owned any. Those that he freed belonged to another, and regardless of the way the owner got possession of them it strikes me as very strange that a South Carolinian would by trickery permit them to escape into the Cuban forest. All I wish to ask Mr. Stono is, does he believe in the institution of slavery? If he avers that he does, I have no more to say. But if he does not, then I feel that this house should know that we have an abolitionist in our midst.”

“This is a very serious challenge. Mr. Stono, do you wish to answer it?”

“Sir, I’ve always answered every challenge put to me by Mr. Butler Mims.”

But I hardly knew what I was saying. I gazed at the still attentive throng, and felt a sense of moving Fate, perhaps of irretrievable disaster. And my heart was suddenly so full.

“All of us will be glad to hear that Mr. Mims is mistaken,” the speaker said quietly after a slight pause. “If he is not—but we will wait and hear.”

“Mr. Mims has made one great mistake of fact. The four hundred Negroes whom I helped to escape in Cuba were not properly slaves, but free Negroes that had been seized in Haiti to be sold in Cuba.”

“Then they were slaves right on,” someone growled.

“The gentleman from Charleston, Mr. Stono, has the floor,” the speaker reproved him.

“Mr. Speaker, this has never been put up to me before. I have never put it to myself. If my words come haltingly, I beg that you and the gentlemen excuse it. Strangely, the words that rush into my mind were spoken by Lord Brougham nearly half a century ago, his famous description of slavery. He called it, ‘that wild and guilty fantasy that man can hold property in man.’ ”

To my surprise, someone applauded loudly. I looked, and it was an elderly, stout man with a very red face, and he was clapping with the full sweep of his arms, like flapping wings. A nearly empty bottle was somewhere about. I knew he had not understood a word I had said.

“Most of the civilized world has come to that opinion,” I went on. “Nearly twenty years ago Great Britain set free every slave in her vast dominion. It has been ten years, now, since any human being in France or her colonies wore the chain of slavery. Last year the Portuguese government decreed freedom for her slaves, after a period of tutelage. It’s been thirty years since slavery was abolished in Mexico and for over forty years every Argentine has been born free. In what nations is the institution of slavery growing and thriving still? In Brazil—in Cuba—and in the Southern states of America.”

“I’ve heard enough,” came a deep voice from the assembly. A brawny man, who looked as though he might have come from the Piedmont, hurled up from his chair, and started for the door. Instantly men were getting up all over the hall; without deigning me a glance they fell in behind the leader—ten—fifteen—twenty and more marched out with a heavy clump of feet.

They seemed to walk in step. If I had tried to speak, I could not have made myself heard; the only other sound was the frantic clapping of the fat, red-faced man. The rest of the members were waiting a moment more, some looking me in the face in rage or cold contempt, others gazing at the floor as though in embarrassment.

I should sit down now, I thought. It would be the gentlemanly act, now that all my pretensions to gentlemanliness had gone by the boards. But by the same token there was nothing more to lose, and my heart was on fire.

“Mr. Stono, you have not yet made a direct answer to the member’s question,” the speaker said in an icy voice.

“I will do so, if I may have the floor for a few minutes more. I submit that if the South would free her slaves, even if this body would declare against slavery, the word would go forth through the world and in our quarrel with the North—over tariffs, over representations, over the right of secession itself—our weak hand would become a gigantic hand. As long as we uphold slavery, we fight on the wrong side, and on the losing side. It is not that we are an ignorant and gross people. All of us know the difference—”

But hardly anyone could hear me now, so loud was the clump and scrape of feet as man after man, band after band, made for the door. Among them were the most fiery secessionists, followers of Robert Rhett, and moderates from the upper Piedmont. And now the spectators began to leave, many of them booing and yelling. But the clerk with a face of flint continued to write in his record. A newspaper correspondent who had been feverishly taking notes threw his notebook to the floor. The fat man with the red face had dropped his head on his breast and fallen to sleep.

Then the speaker rose, and headed for a door behind the rostrum. The clerk laid down his pen and closed his book. I raised my voice in a shout.

*“That wild and guilty fantasy that man can hold property in man.”*

Then suddenly the nightmare-like scene was over. I looked for Butler Mims, but he had gone; and the sleeper and I were left alone in the empty, echoing hall. I think I smiled at myself and at Fate—and my own and everyone’s subjection to Fate, regardless of his handsome dreams—and smiled too that I was a pretty good gambler, who would back his hand.

Gathering up my notes, I started up the long corridor to the doorway. As I did so, I saw a girlish figure emerge from some recess in the entranceway and appear to stand waiting.

I did not know what was coming. I dared not guess. My soul seemed rising out of my body in some great ascendancy, almost transfiguration, but I called it back and bade it not be a fool. As I came up to Salley, her eyes glistened with tears but she gave me a dim and lovely smile.

“A pretty kettle of fish,” she said in low tones. Yet I heard her plain.

“I’m sorry to throw you down.”

“I don’t know that you have. Like our old friend Butler, I’ve got a question to ask. Edward, South Carolina is going to secede from the Union. What will you do then?”

“That’s an easy one. I’ll go with my state, of course.”

“Then will come war. I can almost hear the marching and the cannon. Where will you be?”

“Somewhere in the ranks. I’ll find a place there all right—among other po’ whites from the South. I won’t even have to change my name. Some captain from the mountains will be glad to enlist me, when he sees how I handle a gun.”

“The South will lose. Uncle Mason said so, before he died.”

“It won’t be the first time I’ve lost all. And the war won’t last forever.”

“You won’t have lost all, if you count me.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“It ought to be plain enough. If you want me, I’ll be waiting for you. I’ll do better than that. I’ll take you before you go.”

“Don’t say it unless you mean it. You refused me when I was winning—and now I’ve thrown away my dream of becoming a gentleman.”

“It wasn’t a dream, Edward. That’s the wonderful part of it. You were one all the time. Neither of us had the sense to know it. And if you don’t believe me—what I said just now—try me—”

She opened her hands a little. When I held out my arms she ran into them with a childlike cry. We stood in the empty hall, a lonely and forsaken place, but neither of us would be alone again. Her kiss told me so, and her rush of words. I forgot my lonely oneness; it had ceased to exist.

I did not know what life meant—an allotted time, to aspire, to love, to strive—but it was no dim lamp in the dark of non-existence, no trifling boon.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Gentleman* by Edison Marshall]