

The Tuareg



Part One

FLEUR CALDWELL &
ROGER GREGOIRE D'AVEN

GEORGE DIGUIDO

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Chapter 1

Virginia - May 1828

As debarkation point for African slaves enroute to Piedmont and Tidewater plantations, Bermuda Hundred, a settlement near the convergence of the James and Appomattox rivers in Virginia, had passed its heyday. Yet exports and passengers for England were still taken on there.

In the early light of an unseasonably cold morning, with chimney smoke oddly out of place against trees fully leafed in green, a woman of eighteen years carrying a leather portmanteau with initials F.C. etched into a brass escutcheon strode briskly toward a ship at the end of the wharf, her seemingly confident manner concealing a great reluctance to her upcoming journey. Halfway to the ship she turned and smiled a smile she did not feel at three people who had come to see her off.

Pastor Clarence Townsend and his wife, Eunice, having arranged for the journey, waved from their carriage, Mrs. Townsend daubing her eyes with a handkerchief and blowing her nose noisily. The young woman's would-be suitor, Carter Brimley, wheeled his horse and trotted sadly off.

As the young woman wended her way among bales of tobacco being loaded by black stevedores, a sailor spotted her and summoned several of his mates. So the rumor was true: there was to be a woman passenger. Greatly impressed by her confident walk and aristocratic bearing, thoughts somewhat less than pure filled their minds at the sight of her almond eyes, jouncing red tresses, and a suit that, despite its full skirt and mound of swinging petticoats, did little to conceal the trimness of her figure. How, the sailors wondered, will she take to a ship's rough bunk? Not to mention Mr. Twigg!

Pausing at the gangplank as a Customs official checked her papers, she overheard the crew's banter.

"Ho, lads! Peek at what's comin' aboard."

"Pretty little vessel."

The woman looked up at the men and smiled.

"Trim hull. Real trim hull."

"Aye, and slippin' right into our port."

"Ho, I'd like to slip into her port."

The Customs official escorted the woman aboard and she went directly to the sailor who made the crude remark. Smiling, she asked, "What is your name, sir?"

"Jones, ma'm. Edward Jones."

"I see you are clever with words."

"Yes, ma'm. Guess I am."

"Remarkable, because I don't suppose you've had much education, have you?"

"No, ma'am. No edgy-cation a'tall."

"Well, then, here's some," said the young woman, striking the man's face with her papers.

Taken aback, the man shuffled away as the crew guffawed and bombarded him with a chorus of disapproval. "Edgy-cation Jones, his new name, haw!"

"Ho, Edgy! Finally learn something?"

The commotion brought the captain up from below. "Ah, Miss, forgive me for not being on deck to welcome you aboard, so to speak. I presume you are Miss Caldwell?"

"Fleur Caldwell."

"Good! I'm Hugh James, master of this vessel. Please forgive my raucous crew, too. A day on short rations should curb their vile tongues. I run a clean ship, as you'll see. Aye, lass! Let me get this vessel under way and I'll join you shortly.

"It's a fine wind, men. Get some sheets down and prepare to cast off." He beckoned to a seaman who had been scrutinizing Fleur. "Mr. Twigg. Take the young lady's bags down to the cabin next to mine."

Twigg's long, unwashed hair tumbled over a sea jacket that could have once been white. A parrot perched upon his shoulder, and Fleur, having never seen a parrot, extended her finger toward it inquiringly.

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"Graaaaarrrk!" the bird screeched, flapping nervously and losing a feather. Fleur recoiled.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that, miss," Twigg snapped. "Ain't right smart." Hurrying aft with the bags, Fleur followed, noticing the back of his jacket soiled with bird droppings. At the quarterdeck stairway where she could not descend without gathering her skirts, Twigg waited below, his gaze riveted upon her ankles. The door to her cabin was open and Twigg started to enter. Fleur stopped him. "I'll take the bags." The man threw them onto the floor and departed, his bird screeching all the way down the corridor.

The smallness of the cabin shocked Fleur. Virtually a cell, it had no windows, a ceiling claustrophobically low, a bunk, a washstand on which reposed a Bible, and no water closet, but a chamber pot. She would, of course, have the captain move her to larger quarters.

"Why, miss," he explained later, with the ship's boy in tow. "There are no larger quarters, 'cept my own." Fleur eyed him. "'Course, if you're that unhappy, I'll swap with ye."

She paused as if considering the offer. "Well . . . that's very kind of you, but I suppose I can make do." The man had passed her test, seeming genuinely concerned about her well-being. Warnings from Eunice Townsend on the perils of traveling with "heathen seamen" had made her apprehensive.

The captain instructed the ship's boy, Peter, twelve, to do everything he could to make his passenger comfortable. Saluting smartly, he and the boy left.

Fleur was relieved. The day promised to be a sad one. She was unsure whether or not to go on deck while the ship was passing her home. She had not seen it for four months, during which time the Caldwell attorney had processed Andrew Caldwell's Will and arranged to sell Rollingwood's livestock.

Most of the Great House still stood, though heavily smoke-damaged. To discourage interlopers, boards had been nailed to windows and doors. If the approach to the house at the end of a row of thirty-six live oaks was impressive, from the river it was spectacular, rising on a sweep of land thrust from the shore — under certain conditions appearing to be on an island. When mist hovered the river, the 'island' disappeared and the building's white-columned porch and balustrades seemed to grow ethereally out of smoking water vapors.

Those in passing ships invariably pointed. "Shocking, isn't it? The Caldwell place, Rollingwood Sweep. Magnificent site. Terrible fire last Christmas Eve. Killed both Caldwells and a few slaves, too. A shame."

Carter Brimley had hunted quail on the site a week before Fleur's departure. The building was a specter, he reported, surrounded by weeds, not a soul around, with rain soaked window boards looking like ugly black eye patches.

Mindful of this, Fleur decided not to go on deck. Why watch my entire life pass by in five minutes? But she soon rationalized that one look might afford a better idea of what would be needed for its restoration. A skillful artist, she would sketch the plans in London. Donning a cloak, she left her cabin, hurried up the stairwell and raced to the prow — cloak and tresses trailing wildly. Seamen on deck exchanged glances; this was a different woman from the composed one who had boarded earlier.

Ahead lay the island marking the western limits of her father's property. As a child she played there: swimming in the slough; building make-shift rafts; counting cows on their way back to the barn at dusk; skinning her knees climbing oak, hickory and walnut trees; trying to find the Indian cherries before the birds did. A stand of timber next, then Quarters, a bend in the river, and the Great House. But seeing the slave cabins, she feared seeing the house might restart the nightmares she had while living there alone after the fire.

Pastor Townsend had advised against staying. Obstinate she stayed, retaining a small staff of servants while leasing the field hands to neighboring farms. A month later, plagued by nightmares about the fire, she moved in with the Townsends.

The morning after the tragedy Pastor Townsend had written Fleur's London uncle, Whitaker Caldwell, her only surviving relative, save for his twin, William, a missionary in India. They agreed Fleur should move to London and live with the uncle until she became of age to inherit Rollingwood. As her legal guardian, Mr. Caldwell would finance her continuing education. Since he lived alone, Eunice Townsend insisted he hire a companion for his charge.

The cabin boy joined her at the rail, babbling about his upcoming sea voyage. She tried to discourage his idle chatter, wanting to be alone when the ship passed the house. "Oh, lookit, Miss," he said as the ship rounded a bend upstream from Rollingwood. "A house right in the river!"

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Just then the bosun called him below and Fleur was relieved; the ship was coming opposite Rollingwood's pump house and root cellar, where the night of the tragedy had begun. Seeing them, she trembled and saw it all again...

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"I'm tired of dancing," Carter Brimley said. "Let's stroll."

Fleur knew what was on his mind, but she had handled him before. Donning warm garments they left the ballroom and went directly to the pump house, black in the bright moonlight against a light snow, the usual destination for their mild intimacies. Inside, the young man kissed her fervently, hands caressing her long neck and slipping into her low-cut dress onto her breasts.

"Oh, God, Fleur, every night I dream of making love to you." His lower body pressed firmly against hers. "You are so beautiful."

"How many girls do you tell that to, Carter?"

From her tone he could not determine whether she meant to be playful or serious. Dropping to his knees, he thrust both hands under her dress until he felt the cool smoothness of her thighs.

She removed his hands. Though exciting, this was an exploration of virgin territory.

As handsome as he was, Fleur was not interested in him physically; his intellect was the attraction. A graduate of the University of Virginia, he had as his goal being elected to the General Assembly in Richmond, and lately had been speaking in favor of the manumission of slaves. To Fleur, giving negroes their freedom was heresy, but she enjoyed debating him; he was articulate and argued his case well.

His advance rebuffed, Carter settled for working above Fleur's waist, again pulling her close.

"No, shhhhhh!" she whispered. "Voices! Did you hear?"

"Oh you're just saying that to get me to stop. Whose voices? "

"Negro. Like an argument. Next shed. Root cellar. They've quit now, but nobody should be there this time of year, let alone at night. Let's look!"

"God, Fleur! No! Let's get help!"

"Shhhhhh, quiet! They might've heard us, but they'll start up again if they think we've walked by."

Minutes passed, with the cold beginning to penetrate their garments before the voices again sounded. Bolting from the pump house, Fleur ran forty feet through drifted snow to the next shed. Carter, thinking her foolhardy, followed.

Many footprints led to the root cellar, and voices in argument were coming from inside. Throwing open the door, Fleur saw in the dim light of a lantern a heavy-set negro, whip marks on his bare arms visible even in the semi-darkness. With him were two of Rollingwood's field hands, Sam and Tom-Jack, and the plantation's driver, Quash. The stranger held a pistol at his side. All were startled at being discovered.

"Who are you?" Fleur demanded. "To whom do you belong? What are you doing here?"

Quash answered. "Miss Fleur, I'm sorry you had fine dis out. Now why doan you go back to de big house an let me handle dis? Sam an me 'bout got it unda control."

The man was a runaway. "Give me the gun," Fleur said.

Carter was alarmed. "Fleur!"

"Ef I given you dis, I'm a dead man."

"No! You're not! My father will just send you back to where you belong."

"Dat's dead, missy."

"Where are your free papers?" She knew he had none; his look confirmed it.

Carter said, "Let him go, Fleur. Conductors will help get him up north where he can get a job on a ship and purchase his freedom."

Fleur ignored this. "And with the gun, which as you know is illegal for a negro to have, where do you hope to go?"

"Canada, missy."

"A long way off. How many bullets do you have? Six? Will you kill that many times to go free?"

The man slumped.

Quash saw his chance and charged. The gun went off — fortunately, into the dirt — and in an exchange of blows Quash was knocked down. In his haste to leave, the runaway tripped and dropped his weapon in the dark. Sam leaped at him but the man shook him off and fled. Quash immediately shoved Tom-Jack into a corner and kicked him. "Dis ain't no

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unagroun railway, unnerstan dat, nigger?" Sam found the weapon, dashed out the door and headed for the Great House with Fleur and Carter after him.

The sound of the shot had been heard in the house, carrying a quarter mile in the crisp night air. When Fleur and Carter arrived, Sam was reporting to her father and had given him the gun. Every one of the Christmas Ball's male guests was gathered on the porch as the women huddled in the open doorway. House servants looked on from windows. The merry tinkle of a music box came from the ballroom. Mrs. Caldwell ran down the porch steps and embraced her daughter.

"In da root cella, Mista Cal'well, suh," Sam was saying. "Tom-Jack wuz hidin' a runaway from Lynchburg dere fo two weeks, suh. Me 'n' Quash caught'm, suh."

"Who fired the weapon?" Andrew Caldwell asked. "Is anyone hurt?"

"Oh, everyone's entirely fine, suh. Th' man had th' gun an he shot it. Only to scare Quash 'n' me, though, suh. Nobody hurt."

"Is Tom-Jack a conductor, Sam?"

"Oh, no conducta, suh. Dat's why he kep th' man fo two weeks. Didden zackly know what t'do wid 'im. Jes felt sorry."

"Where's the runaway now?"

"He skedaddled, suh."

"All right, Sam. Tell Quash to keep Tom-Jack under guard, and on the day after Christmas bring him to my library at ten in the morning. I'll deal with him then. And good work, Sam."

"Thank ya, suh. An' a Merry Christmas t'ya all, suhs an' ladies."

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The ship approached the Great House and Fleur forced herself to look. It was as Carter said: a specter. How could she remake it into the home she once knew? True, the west wing could be rebuilt, but what were wood, bricks, wallpaper, chandeliers, and furniture without those whom she loved? The moment she spotted her bedroom window and the trellis used to escape the fire, she was transported back to her bedroom on the night after the runaway slave incident.

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It was early morning Christmas Day, and she had had trouble falling asleep after the gaiety of the Ball and thrill of the root cellar. Halfway between asleep and awake she imagined she heard someone shouting, "Fiah!" The cry became more insistent. "FIAH! De big house! FIAH!"

Leaping to the floor, she donned slippers and a robe, intent on waking everyone. Opening her door, she was greeted by a rush of heat and smoke. Slamming it shut, she ran to a window and threw up the sash. A glow reflected on the woods behind the house and on the snow and sky. The negro shouting the warning ran by again. "Fiah!"

Arson! thought Fleur. That runaway! Climbing through the window and down a trellis, she ran through the snow. The west wing! Good Lord! Her parents' bedroom.

Negroes began arriving from Quarters, wild-eyed, shouting, organizing bucket brigades.

Fleur raced toward the west wing, which was entirely in flames. A strong wind whipped sparks around like fireflies.

"O God! Mother! Father!" Precipitately, she ran toward the inferno. Shrieks from the women alerted the men who dropped their buckets and raced after her, the swiftest halting her with a leaping tackle. "Release me!" My mother! Father! I must find them!"

The men dragged her away from the heat and flying embers. "No, Missy. De men are lookin' f'dem already." A wall crashed, shaking the ground.

"Oh, mother, father, I should have warned you. Please, Lord, tell me they escaped safely. Please!"

The men pulled her to a group of weeping house servants who knew not what to do to comfort her. Some began singing:

*Steal away. Steal away to Jesus. Steal away home.
I ain't got long to stay here. My Lord calls me.*

"No! Stop! The Lord hasn't called them. They're here! Somewhere! Looking for me." But with each passing moment her mind let in more reality.

During the next hour neighbors arrived, attracted by the noise, smoke, and a sky prematurely light. Horror-struck by the destruction at the scene of such recent merriment, they went to Fleur's side, fumbling for words.

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Fleur stared dumbly.

Half an hour later the Townsends arrived from Bermuda Hundred, and Fleur responded only to her pastor's voice, kneeling in the snow and praying with him. The house women knelt with them, weeping, wailing, "De Lord is love. De Lord will save us." A bucket brigadier dashed up to report the wind had shifted and that this would probably save the greater portion of the house.

"Devil take the damn house!" Fleur shrieked, lashing at the man.

As pink flushed the southeastern sky, the pastor was called away. The senior Caldwells had been found, overcome by smoke, apparently in trying to rouse the cook, Pauline, and her family from their basement rooms. Returning to Fleur's side he said, "The Lord chose not to answer our prayers." Fleur fainted. By the time she was revived with snowy compresses, made comfortable with blankets, and made to sit on a salvaged chair, the sky had turned lighter.

The Townsends hovered over her, the house servants weeping behind them.

"I'm all alone," Fleur said.

"Miss Fleur, listen, please. No one understands why the Lord gathers His good folk to His house before their time. But His promise is sure. Your beloved parents are now in Heaven with Him. It's hard to rejoice in this now, I know. But you're not alone. Tomorrow I'll write your uncle in London. He is your flesh and blood, and it'll do you good to be with family at this time. He loves you and will be only too happy to take you in."

Fleur was aware enough to know she did not want to be with her uncle. She did not know him; he had left the family before she was born. She always knew there had been trouble between him and her father. No, she would not leave Rollingwood!

A sad murmuring from the witnesses gathered in that Christmas morning's frosty light commanded Fleur's attention. The pastor tried to shield her view, but she saw field workers struggling to lift two tarpaulins out of the smoldering basement.

Near to fainting again, she was aware of someone picking her up and carrying her to a carriage. One thought droned in her mind as she was driven away: I should have saved them. I saved only myself.

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The cries of the sailors roused her from her reverie. She went down to her cabin, threw herself on her bunk, and slept. Awaking on a pillow sodden with tears, she washed, donned a cloak, and went topside to gaze at the fading Chesapeake shore.

Dropped from the spars by seamen aloft, canvas sheets thudded into place, curved to the wind, and hurried the ship forward. To Fleur, the vessel seemed impatient to escape the land's embrace, eager to explore the other side of the horizon. Shouldn't she? Her uncle had written that she should come. True, there had been that "family trouble" between her father and his brother, Whitaker, the London uncle, concerning Whitaker's lost share of the inheritance. The pastor claimed not to know the specifics. Fleur did not believe him; as her father's lifelong confidant, surely he knew. Whatever the trouble, Fleur feared her uncle might hold it against her. Even so, the plantation would legally be hers in two years, after which she would return home. To what? Her parents had hoped she would marry Carter. Fleur replied that she had known Carter all her life; he was too predictable. Moreover, she did not love him.

Thereafter, her father joshed about her not being a true Southerner, about her turning away every eligible young man, about her having sights set on 'other' horizons. "You are a wilderness person," he said. "You've some of your grandfather's pioneer spirit in you, and it's no hindrance, either, that your mother was half Choctaw, and your grandmother full Choctaw." To his colleagues, he said — not unboastfully — that he could see her marrying a crude Kentucky man, see her floating down the Ohio, Mississippi, or broad Missouri on a raft with a fur trapper or buffalo hunter.

Fleur appreciated that he knew her well. She considered herself different from her parent's generation. And from her own. This she relished.

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The ship cut the water with a sibilant hiss.

Should I marry Carter and bear his children? Is love really that important?

The cabin boy appeared again. "Are y'cryin' 'cause you're afraid, miss? Don't be. I've never been on the ocean an' I ain't afraid."

"Not the reason, Peter." Realizing it would do her good to quit rumi-

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nating and talk to someone — even this mere boy — she said, "Peter, remember the great house you saw up river? It was mine."

"But . . . it . . ."

"Exactly. Though only partially. My grandfather built it, my father was born in it, and so was I. When I return from England I'll restore it just the way it was.

Talking for her own benefit, she did not hear the boy's "Goshamighty!"

The boy, thoroughly seduced, looked at Fleur with something close to adoration, not recognizing the strange stirrings taking place in both mind and body. "Oh, Miss, hooray for you."

The ship's prow dipped deep, spit waves, and headed out to sea.

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Chapter 2



At Sea - March 1828

Twenty-seven nautical miles off Cape Palmas it was noon and dark. Ever since a daybreak that slid imperceptibly in, the two ships had been locked in combat: *Fearless*, an old, lumbering Royal Navy frigate bristling with guns, and *Reaper*, trim slaver, running swift and empty. For hours, their captains had jockeyed for position. Lowering clouds, black as ten thousand bats in flight, smothered the waters, providing sanctuary in which to hide and maneuver.

In this moaning sea even the foolhardy would have run for cover. Yet each captain had chosen to fight, caught by that sudden pump of blood that thrills men at the thought of battle. So swollen was the air from rain and spume that neither man could see his adversary for any appreciable period. Yet the slaver's captain, Hamilton Hawk, could sense where his English counterpart was, having studied for hours his every reaction to *Reaper's* maneuverings.

At Hawk's side stood the Frenchman who boarded at Nantes. The crew gave him wide berth. To them, he and his huge greatcoat of jet-black cut a mysterious swath. That he was patrician they could see; he acted the part. They could not understand his interest in the small cadre of slaves aboard as indentured seamen. That he could converse with them in their language seemed strange. His relationship with their captain, too, they thought odd. He stuck close to him, and when talking to him always did so curtly, with never a spirit of camaraderie. They concluded he was a spy, and they were correct. The ship's owner, Whitaker Caldwell, displeased with his African slave-smuggling operations, had hired the man to observe and report on the entire procedure from start to finish.

"Man the forward guns," Hawk shouted. "Englishman should cross

our prow soon, 'bout three hundred or so yards ahead." None of the crew saw a ship, but if Hawk said the enemy was ahead, then by God, he was! At the rail, the Frenchman pressed his eye to a telescope. "More sheets, Mr. Fawcett," Hawk commanded his first mate. "Give me speed to strike before the Limey can come 'round and kiss us with a broadside."

Minutes later there slowly materialized in the gloom ahead a gossamer image of spreading canvas. Lookouts shouted from above.

"Ready guns," commanded Hawk. Two thirty-two pound, short-range carronades were run out.

The English captain cursed vilely; he had been outsailed. In this position his superior firepower was for naught; the oncoming slaver's narrow silhouette made a poor target. The English crew, predominantly boys conscripted by press gangs in London alleys, was fearful. The ship bearing down with all sails flying seemed an avenging angel with welcoming arms.

"Ram home the balls. Aim low! Time to the roll! Fire when ready!" Hawk's commands, themselves like cannon shots, were followed by an eruption of sound and smoke as two iron balls punched flaming holes through the turbid air. "Ho, men, they are struck!" And with this as their cue, the slaver's crew cheered.

A quarter league away, half a sea rushed into jagged holes at the English ship's waterline, and minutes later, lurching like an ailing sea creature, she slipped under, silent save for the screams of her reluctant sailor boys from London's alleys. With a semblance of a smile, Hawk turned to the Frenchman, seeking approval. Impassive in his jet-black greatcoat, the Frenchman returned no acknowledgment.

To avoid other English patrol ships Hawk now hugged the windward shore. But angry winds caused him to fall behind schedule. Well he knew that Whitaker Caldwell was somewhere down the coast waiting, no doubt fuming. So be it. Ultimately a course was shaped eastward, its object being a bay between two promontories.

That afternoon, *Reaper* reached its first checkpoint, a rock in the water shaped like a 'T'. The weather remained foul. "Prepare to shorten sheets, mate." Hawk said.

Fawcett relayed the order. "Next checkpoint's a flat headland, suh,"

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he reminded. "Hard t'see. On the windward side should be a signal fire." He stole a glance seaward. Lightning flashed. "Can't get there too soon, suh."

"Get another set of eyes aloft, Mr. Fawcett. Extra rum to the man who spots the signal first."

Presently, *Reaper* rounded the promontory. A fire on the beach brought shouts from the topmast crosstrees. "Ho!" shouted Hawk. "Hold to port, helm, and mind the current." Waves crashing broadside increased the ship's roll, and winds in the riggings flapped canvas loudly. In the bay, the heat was stultifying. "Hold, helm. Anchor two-hundred yards from shore, depth permitting."

Fawcett said, "Suh, that snorter's bearin' right 'pon us. We goin' t'have time?"

"If we don't," Hawk answered loudly, wanting the Frenchman to hear, "we haul anchor and run." If Caldwell's spy was to object to not loading the full consignment of slaves, Hawk wanted to know now. The Frenchman said nothing.

"Blimey, cap'n," Fawcett said, "that little Spaniard, Mendez, must be desperate to get rid o' the niggers, loading from a beach like this."

"Mate, the British caught'm dead to rights loading from Gallinas last time, and ran one of Caldwell's ship aground. Limeys've been patrolling there ever since. Which is why we're here. And if you buggers want to keep eating, we load from here if that's what Caldwell wants. If I know him, he's not in the barracoons at Gallinas drinking the Spaniard's rum, but on this beach. Hell, Mendez won't be able to scratch his balls without the old man's approval. But if that storm turns spiteful, we scoot." Hawk again made sure the Frenchman heard. *Aye, I'll board a few bodies t'show the old man I was willing. If I have to run, I'll say his damn French overseer advised that. To cover me arse, I'll fetch a few more bodies up the coast. Old man shouldn't give a fiddler's frig where I get 'em as long as I offload five hundred in Jamaica.*

Fawcett interrupted his thoughts. "Run up an American or Spanish flag, suh?"

"Ain't necessary, mate." Hawk lowered his voice. "Frenchman's already decided to leave before that storm hits. Right?"

Fawcett winked.

On shore the signal fire was billowing smoke, and scores of people

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were dashing from the forest onto the beach. "Hard alee! Hard alee!" bellowed Hawk. "Anchor here."

The ship shivered and came about, pitching and rolling in two fathoms of foaming green, one nautical mile from the frantic activity on the darkening lee shore. And on that pestilential strip of sand, the premier British slaver, Whitaker Caldwell, fussed and cursed, livid because his ship was late.

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Chapter 3

West Africa - March 1828

For one sweating week, Whitaker Caldwell had lived on the fly-infested beach, rebuffing every attempt of his caboceer, Don Pedro Mendez, to help pass time by learning something of the Guinea Coast's pidgin lingo — a thankless task, considering Caldwell's only interest in the region was to squeeze from it every last ounce of profit possible.

Dutch and Danish slavers were undercutting his business. Accordingly, he had recently engaged the services of a young Frenchman formerly attached to the COMPAGNIE DU SENEGAL in West Africa, dismissed from service for "drinking, fighting, and trafficking in slaves." The renegade had been born in Africa and spoke several of its important lingos. Caldwell had given him free reign, hoping to pump life back into his slave factory operations — installations whose caboceers had grown rich, fat, and lazy. Like Don Pedro Mendez.

Caldwell — now a British citizen — had recently sworn off hands-on management of arduous slaving trips in favor of conducting them from the comfort and safety of his London mansion. There he lived the respectable role of a legitimate shipper, having wangled his way into English society by virtue of the fortune made from smuggling bodies to both Americas. Yet here he was on the Coast. Drenched in stinking sweat, he cursed his Spanish caboceer whose idea it was to load from this beach. Yes, the Frenchman would eventually oversee this work, but only after Hawk and the Frenchman transported this waiting cargo across the Atlantic — roughly a three-month roundtrip.

In a forest clearing bordering the beach, five hundred blacks — yoked at the neck and chained at the wrists — were encamped. Being captured they could understand; slavery as a consequence of tribal warfare was

endemic in Africa. Why they were brought to this location and what they were waiting for they could not understand.

Don Pedro Mendez also cursed Hawk's delay. The week with Caldwell had seemed endless, listening to his complaints, fulfilling his every whim. Dipping a cupful of water from a calabash to satisfy the old man's latest request, Mendez unfastened his trousers, let trickle into the cup an ounce of yellow urine, and stirred the solution with his finger

Seeing Caldwell sprawled on the sand virtually overcome with heat, but with eyes searching the horizon, Mendez thought, *Man half dead but still look for ship. English all time work... all time money. Now he come and make trouble, say Pedro's fault to lose ship at Gallinas. What can Pedro do? Mucho English around.*

The Spaniard was short, stocky, and about forty. His amiable moon-like face sported a long black moustache, his pride and joy because it tickled the fancy — as well as certain parts — of his native women; their men had no such decoration. Like all who managed trading forts and barracoons for absentee owners, he diverted into his personal warehouse the choicest of the European goods destined for the purchase of slaves. Given the abundance of alcohol and trinkets at his disposal, a goodly number of coastal women were eager to share his bed and board.

At Caldwell's side, he proffered the cup. "Drink, senior. Feel better."

"Hell's fire, Mendez. I can't hide in this rotting jungle one more day. Tomorrow we return to Gallinas. God, this African water stinks!"

"No worry, senior. Last night Pedro pray to Virgin Mother and she say *Reaper* come today." The Spaniard hastily made the sign of the Cross.

"Don't! I hate that!" Caldwell snapped. "Even if one of your dammed miracles came true and Hawk got here in a minute, you'd still be pressed to get all these coons out before that storm hits." Offshore, clouds spit bright streaks into dark water.

"Oh, no worry, senior. Pedro have best Kru rowers on coast."

"Rowers be damned! I don't see how we can load without losing half my coons. And that, Spaniard, translates into *mucho dinero* — good English money that keeps the world spinning. *Comprende?*"

Mendez did not understand the simile but he understood the tone.

"You're damn lucky another cruiser hasn't shown."

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"No luck, senior. Pedro keep up with everything. African Squadron is only five ships between Sherbro and the Bight. One time seven. But *Snapper* sink and *Tartar* crew mucho sick."

The Englishman swatted a fly. "Mendez, I don't give a witch's teat how many ships they have. All it takes is one thirty-six-gun man-o'war under some nigger-loving-son-of-a-bitch offspring of a Scottish minister, and I'm out of business. *Comprende?*"

Laboriously, the Englishman rose from the sand. Tall and sixty-four, his was a bone-thin El Greco figure, with narrow oval face, thin lips, and long white hair in need of serious cutting. He might have been attired for a stroll in Regent's Park, save for his expensive sopped-with-sweat waistcoat, torn satin knee-britches, and filled-with-sand high buttoned shoes. Nor would he have carried a whip there. He limped when he walked, for which one of his shoes had a built-up heel.

At the base of a palm tree, he called to a lookout perched high up. "Anything?"

"No, senior."

Five minutes later the lookout cried, "Sail! Sail!" All eyes turned seaward. A vessel scraped along the edge of blue against a veil of mar-shalling lead clouds and an ominous distant rumbling.

Mendez ran to the tree. "Is man-o'war?"

"No, senior. *Reaper!*"

Drawing his pistol, Mendez fired a shot. A runner bolted onto the beach and lighted a pile of driftwood. Smoke billowed skyward. A second shot called eight teams of four men from the forest, members of the coastal Kru tribe, dragging long bark canoes.

Caldwell managed a rare smile; loading today meant he could return to his sloop at Gallinas and return to London. His niece, Fleur, was expected there sometime in July.

A native with a string of cowrie shells around his neck approached and addressed Mendez in the Kru tongue.

Caldwell sensed trouble. "What did the savage say?"

"Chief say rowers no go to *Reaper* more than two times. Storm mucho danger and in water is sharks."

"We shall see. Sound the last signal."

A shot summoned a shackled *kaffle* of men, women, and children

onto the beach. From inland tribes, they had never been out of their sheltering forest. Now they saw what could only be heard and smelled during their concealment — a lake with no distant shore. And on the water, a huge canoe. Or were those black and white fins on its back those of a sea monster? The Spaniards removed their neck chains and prodded them through thundering surf into the wildly pitching Kru-manned canoes. No captive understood why fellow blacks were cooperating with alien whites.

Whitaker Caldwell, who had been inspecting embarkation procedures down beach, limped back to his caboceer and the native chief. "Good God, Spaniard, ask this savage why the Krus aren't filling the boats."

"Senor, chief already say water rough. Boats sink."

"Don't believe the wily bastard. He just wants more money because he knows we have to get all the coons out before that storm hits. Order him to load eighteen, or he doesn't get paid."

Mendez translated; the chief shrugged. Lightning had increased, wind was salting the beach with spume, and a driving rain began to fall. "Quickly, Mendez! Go tally how many have already been gotten out."

The Spaniard and the chief headed down beach, relieved to get away. The Englishman covered himself with his coat and lay on the sand, mumbling incoherently over what he recognized was his loss of control.

Sometime later Mendez wakened him. "Senor, message from *Reaper*." He handed Caldwell a sealed envelope signed by the Frenchman.

Caldwell ripped it open, read it, and jammed it into his pocket, his eyes seeking the ship.

"Senor! Two canoes sink! Sharks eat men!"

"Scarcely my concern. Just tell me how many coons have been loaded!"

"Pedro think three hundred. Krus take boats out of water and go home."

"Home be damned! Talk to the chief. Use your influence."

Mendez turned and hurried down beach, Caldwell following. A fully loaded canoe had slipped crossways in a trough, and as rowers in an empty inbound canoe were throwing a rope to it they collided, tossing twenty bodies to the sharks.

Shrieks from the men in the water. Shrieks from their women on the beach. Thunder from the waves and sky, and a surf delivering driftwood for tomorrow's shore. The suddenly mute women could only but accept

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the will of the sea gods.

The entire village of two hundred souls now drifted onto the beach, including children and the aged. The work was done. The deities had exacted their toll and the Europeans would distribute *dashes* of beads, blue cloth, knives, and rum. Seeing their chief approach with Mendez, whom they knew and respected, and Spaniards carrying trunks full of treasure, the villagers chanted: "Rum, massa. *Dash*, massa."

Mendez ordered the trunks opened.

"Wait, Spaniard!" Caldwell drew his whip. "Savages have a crying need to know who's in charge. Your problem's always been that you don't show them." Brandishing his long leather whip, the Englishman made for the crowd.

B-A-A-R-R-O-O-O-O-O-M!

Heads turned seaward at the sound of cannon fire.

Hawk, noting that canoes had quit coming, had given signal he was weighing anchor.

Caldwell hurried to the water's edge, where a heavy comber immediately knocked him down. "No, Hawk, no!" he screamed as he scrambled to keep his tumbling body from being washed away.

Mendez dashed into the surf and dragged his employer ashore, hating that he had to. "Senor, maybe Hawk see British ship."

"You said there'd be none for another three days!"

"Senor, listen." Mendez knew the risk in rebutting, but Caldwell would be returning to London while he had to continue working with the natives. "We go now to Gallinas." Mendez knew the Krus would have worked longer for him had Caldwell not been present.

Face contorted, Caldwell reached under his pant leg, fumbled at his boot with the built-up heel, and produced a small pistol. "Enough sedition, Spaniard! Tell the chief to continue loading. Wind's dropped. They can make one more trip. Possibly two. At any rate, I alone say when they can quit. Hawk won't leave if he sees canoes coming out." The Englishman's smile was terrible. "Your cooperation now, Spaniard, will help me forget that, at heart, you're a savage. You eat and drink with them, and lay with their women. But that'll soon change."

Mendez, not as stupid as Caldwell believed, inferred he was marked for either dismissal or extinction. Quickly assessing the situation, he realized his position was, for once, stronger than Caldwell's. "Why gun?"

Gun shame me in front of Krus. Krus should think Pedro in charge. For respect."

"Do as I say and I'll put it away."

"No! No want Don Pedro? Kill him!" He knew the old man would not. The Krus would slaughter the Englishman once the Spaniard was gone.

Caldwell knew it, too.

The chief's hop of delight said he recognized a showdown when he saw one.

Caldwell dropped the pistol into his coat pocket and slumped away, the villagers scrambling to open a path for him. He would not forget this. When the Frenchman assumed supervision of his slave factories he would have him kill Mendez.

The rain lessened and the clouds gave promise of dispersing. Those women who were newly widowed stayed by the shore, looking seaward, now and then stooping to pick over small pieces of splintered boats. Mendez instructed his men to distribute the *dashes* to the expectant, waiting villagers.

Presently, the Europeans began yoking the remaining captives with neck chains, readying for the long retreat back to Gallinas. As the shortened *kaffle* reentered the forest, Mendez selected a young girl with markedly protruding buttocks, had her unlocked, and led her into a thicket.

On the beach, Whitaker Caldwell slumped against a fallen tree. A stranger to defeat, he watched morosely as *Reaper* headed out to sea. *Damn Hawk to perdition. If he'd been on time we could have loaded the entire consignment. Oh, he shall pay for this when we meet in London.*

A quarter hour passed during which the Englishman's eyes never once left the receding vessel. Transfixed by it, unwilling to accept its leaving, his mind fashioned it into another craft — a rowboat on the James River in Virginia when he was a child.

* * * * *

The boat was leaving the wharf at his father's plantation, Rollingwood Sweep. His father, Nehemiah, and two of his slaves were heading downstream to set crab traps. Whitaker — nine years old — was crying on shore, wanting to go along.

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Young Whitaker did not know then that his deformed foot was a shame to Nehemiah; a reminder of the Lord's commandment that the sins of the father would be visited upon his children even unto the third and fourth generation. As for Nehemiah, he cared not to be reminded that he himself had been guilty of that most heinous breach of the Lord's command: that no man should lie with another. He himself had done it once, and forever after believed the ill-formed foot of his offspring, Whitaker, was God's constant reminder of that sin.

All the more crushing was it to Nehemiah, then, when — years later — he discovered the identical weakness in Whitaker who had instigated a sexual relationship with his twin brother, William. Nehemiah, placing all fault on Whitaker — the stronger willed of the twins — disinherited him immediately and banished him from his house.

* * * * *

Dusk enveloped the beach. The sun, trapped at the horizon between clouds and sea, beamed final shafts of gold onto the beach as if trying to beautify the ugliness there. Failing this, it sank, and darkness rushed in. The slave ship, *Reaper*, its sharpest lookouts aloft, strove to put leagues between itself, the storm, and the British African Naval Squadron.

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Chapter 4

At Sea - May 1828

"Beggin' y' pardon, Miss Caldwell." A deckhand approached her on the first day at sea. "Cap'n James's best wishes, Miss. Asks if you'd like t'take lunch with him at eight bells?"

"Eight bells?"

"Hour from now, Miss. Be prompt. Cap'n likes that."

Seventy minutes later, Fleur left her cabin, having gauged the time on her hourglass.

Captain Hugh. F. James, sixty-two, greeted her with pocket watch in hand. "Ah, the Lord loveth punctuality. Entire universe runs according to His schedule."

Fleur was pleased; he had ignored her tardiness, and later proved to be an entertaining spinner of yarns about pirates, storms, and shipwrecks.

"Speaking of wrecks, my ship's named after Captain Riley's *Commerce*, wrecked off Africa's northwest coast in '15. Since I go to Gibraltar after dropping you in London I'll be on that water again, sailing from the 'Rock' to the Canaries. Riley published a book about his wreck. I don't read many books other than my Bible, but I read that one. All about his and his crew's wanderings in that great desert, Zahahrah."

Apart from meals with the captain, Fleur sketched shipboard activities and members of the crew. "Sir," she addressed Crosstree, a freed Jamaican slave. "Would you pose while I sketch you?"

"Oh, Miss. De cop'n forbid de crew t'be roun de young lady."

"Pooh! He'll never find out."

"Wat you want wid my face, anyway? You kin sure fine better lookin fella dan ole Crosstree."

Quickly Fleur started drawing and, surprisingly, he stayed put.

"Oh, Miss," he cackled, when it was finished. "Dat's very fine. Sure looks like Crosstree." He pocketed the sketch and paused a few moments to pass the time of day.

Other seamen including Twigg had been watching. And because Twigg had continually annoyed Fleur with his leers, she thought being friendly might help. "Mr. Twigg, may I sketch you now?"

"Lady, what I want from you ain't no picture."

Fleur immediately informed the captain of Twigg's remark. "The man doesn't belong on a Christian ship," he replied. "I'll have the bosun administer a dozen lashes, confine him to quarters, and on arrival in London, dismiss him."

The punishment took place the following morning to the roars and taunts of the crew. Fleur witnessed it with satisfaction, and as he was led past her, he muttered a vile remark under his breath.

"This uncle you're going to," the Captain asked one day. "What's he like?"

"I don't know. He left home before I was born. I have another uncle, William, a missionary in India. He was in Virginia on furlough once when I was eight. He loved horses and taught me how to ride. I cried when he left.

"But each time I asked about Uncle Whitaker, I was told it wasn't good to uproot the past. Our cook once let slip she knew what the trouble was between him and my father. I thought it unusual that a cook would know family secrets and I didn't."

The captain stroked his beard. "Well, servants always seem to own knowledge of this kind. Sort of a fringe benefit to their menial tasks, I suppose." He chuckled.

"Hardly a laughing matter," said Fleur.

"Sorry." He touched her hand lightly. "However, you may be fretting for nothing. Many families have closets with skeletons in 'em. But many years have passed and your uncle's probably forgotten what happened and is looking forward to meeting the niece he's never seen. Never worry, Miss, about troubles coming in on the tide. Most often they sink in little boats, disappearing under other waves of life long before they reach your port." Tipping his cap, he left.

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Fleur, realizing it was harmful to remain aft where she had been imagining the ship's wake as her connection with home, turned and walked briskly to the prow.

Up front, the wind was keener; the prow, a knife in the water; the sea spray therapeutic, blowing a strong salt smell in her face. Ahead lay a limitless sheet. Open. Flat. Clean. The spread of an unwritten book. Her eyes swept the sky above, scanned the broad expanse ahead. At the edge where the waters finally cascade off the ends of the earth, mighty cloud fortresses thrust up — heroic sentinels — guarding the entire eastern horizon before plunging back once again, lighter, in the south.

Strengthened by the sight, she turned and went back down to her cabin. She did not see the clouds break up into angry black enemies, nor the war that began among them, lighting the entire sky in her path ahead with electric blue flashings.

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Chapter 5

London - July 1828

Topside, Fleur shivered in the pre-dawn fog as *Commerce* slipped silently past the steeples, chimney-pot roofs, and St. Paul's Cathedral of Great Regency London. Despite misgivings about meeting her uncle, she found it comforting that someone in this huge complex awaited her arrival. As longshoremen tugging at lines eased *Commerce* smoothly into a berth at St. Katherine's docks, Fleur scanned the dock, crowded with seamen, merchants, barrels, and boxes, looking for a man she had never met. That he had done well in London, she knew, word having come from Uncle William in India who regularly corresponded with both her father and Uncle Whitaker.

A large coachman alighted to open the door of a maroon phaeton for a thin elderly man who stepped awkwardly onto the cobblestoned street and limped toward the ship's gangplank. A woman followed: stout, forty-five, graying hair under her bonnet.

At the gangplank a dozen crewmen awaited Fleur. 'Edgycation' Jones, who had been dispatched dockside for flowers, handed her a tiny bouquet. Crosstree shuffled forward with a small wooden board onto which had been fastened a number of knotted ropes. "Missy Cal'well," he began self-consciously. "On dis day o' your regretted departure, we wants you to know dat even doh dere's nevah ben no lady on dis ship befo, we're glad de fust wuz you. An' ole Crosstree make dis board speshul fo you! I tell you, Missy. Larn dese knots an' dey be your fren fo life." The Jamaican smiled graciously and retreated.

Fleur took the board and thanked the entire crew. Captain James stepped up. "Well, Miss," he took Fleur's hand. "I'll now escort you to the arms of your loving uncle."

Fleur cast her eyes around for one last look. Twigg was being ushered onto deck by two men, a rancid smile on his face as his eyes met Fleur's. Quickly permitting the captain to lead her ashore, Fleur had the uneasy feeling she had not seen the last of this seaman.

The thin old man stepped out of a bustle of dockworkers and Customs officials. "My dear niece." He studied Fleur, his hand shaking visibly. "I presume you are she. A thousand welcomes, dear child. I am your Uncle Whitaker." He was surprised at Fleur's height and bearing. *How*, he wondered, *did brother Andrew, no giant, spawn such an imposing specimen?* Having expected a less mature looking female, he feared this could make his plan more difficult to implement.

"Thank you, uncle dear." Fleur embraced the man lightly and felt him recoil. "I'm happy to meet you and be at end of a tiresome journey." Her voice was edged with hoarseness.

Caldwell did not introduce the woman near him, greeting Captain James instead.

The woman presented herself. "Good day, Miss," she curtsied, her smile showing several gold teeth. "I am Anna and very pleased to meet you. But you poor thing, you sound as if you've caught a death of a cold."

The captain ordered two seamen to carry Fleur's luggage to the coach, and Whitaker Caldwell limped tiredly after them. Fleur and the captain exchanged their goodbyes, and Anna said, "Come, miss. Come home."

In the coach the uncle was spread, asleep across a seat, his gangly frame having the appearance of a thrown marionette. En route, Anna did her best to acquaint Fleur with London's sights, ignoring a constant barrage of the coachman, Sylvester's, corrections. "Ye gads, lydie, th' dyte was 1695, not 1795. And 'twas th' Normans, not th' Saxons."

The coach entered the Caldwell mansion through a gate, beyond which a two-storey stone building dotted with countless windows, bays, and chimneys, rose from a verdant expanse of lawn and shrubbery. Following a circular drive, it rolled to a stop under a portico just as rain began to fall.

Caldwell exited first. A band of servants appeared at the door to help usher the women and baggage inside. "My dear Fleur," Caldwell said,

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"I've some pressing business to attend now, but Anna will show you to your rooms."

"Come, Miss. I'll draw a hot bath, make a fire, and you can get a spot of sleep before supper." Fleur followed her wearily up a broad marble staircase, lagging momentarily on a landing to lift the faceplate of a suit of fourteenth century armor.

Morning light filtering through laced windows awoke her to the sound of rain dashing against glass. Behind an ornate fire screen embers glowed faintly, and in the room's semi-darkness, ponderous furniture loomed ominously. Six chimes from a mantel clock brightened the mood considerably. Hunger, and the realization she had slept through the previous afternoon and night, drove Fleur from the warmth of her bed. Someone had opened her bags and laid out a morning robe. Doffing her dress, she washed, donned the robe, and descended the staircase. In the kitchen she helped herself to the remnants of a meal — milk, bread, and blueberry jam on a huge oaken table, and then resumed her exploration to a chorus of gongs, bells, and chimes, sounding from different parts of the house. She noted that her uncle's home, with its Persian rugs, gold-framed Turner landscapes, scores of ship's models, Chinese vases, and floors of green Italian marble, was more ornate and eclectic than Rollingwood's.

In the library she stopped to warm herself at a fireplace, above which hung a gold leaf-framed portrait of her London uncle. But perhaps not — the expression of this man was softer. His eyes, she thought.

"It's my twin, William." A voice said. "Your uncle in India."

"Mercy, uncle! You startled me."

"And you interrupted me!" Caldwell was at his desk writing letters. His response annoyed Fleur. "I'm sorry." She started to leave.

"Wait! Who did you think that was?"

"Why, you. At first. But the eyes . . ."

"Go ahead, say they are kinder. Yes, the artist captured them well. The eyes of a Christian, you see. Nary a trace of guile, unlike my own."

Fleur's thought exactly. "I wouldn't say that."

"No, you wouldn't. Nor would your parents. At least not to my face."

Fleur did not appreciate the remark.

Caldwell drew a long breath. "William was the finest person I ever knew."

"Knew? Why, uncle...is he...?"

"Might as well be, for all the good I get out of his being away so long."

Fleur was relieved. "When did you see him last?"

"Six years. He was on furlough when the portrait was painted. He should be coming home again soon."

She noticed the man's voice softened when speaking of his brother. "Marvelous! While I'm here?"

"I've little time to speculate on that." He continued writing.

"You're busy, uncle. I'll leave."

"Halt! May as well have our first talk. And don't look so bloody uncomfortable. Let me say I'm sorry your visit is due to the cruel misfortune that befell your beloved family and my dear brother Andrew." (Fleur knew this kindness was spoken only for her benefit.) "Unfortunately my schedule precluded correspondence with them all these years. "Tell me, did they talk much of me?"

Fleur decided two could play this game. "Oh, very much, uncle." This was not true. "Mama and Papa appreciated that Uncle William's letters kept us informed about you." Somewhat true. "They were proud of the success you'd achieved." Not true — Whitaker was persona non grata in Fleur's father's home.

The old man cranked up a smile. "Tell me, niece, to what extent was Rollingwood damaged? Your family minister's letter was scant on details."

"Only the west wing is gone. The Great House remains."

"Your pastor mentioned that your father's lawyer, a John M. Smyth, has all pertinent papers."

"I assume so, uncle."

"Assume?"

"Uncle! I don't know! The pastor handled this business. And I feel it improper of you to make inquiries of this kind. Rollingwood is mine, not yours. I will answer no further questions."

Caldwell clenched his teeth. *Young whippersnapper has the grit of my accursed father, Nehemiah, who disowned me.* Forcing a grin, he said, "No offense, dear. I've only your interests at heart."

"Uncle, may we please continue this at another time? My throat is sore."

"Wait! There's something else."

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Fleur considered exaggerating the seriousness of her condition, but thought it politic to hear the man out.

"In a fortnight, niece, I host another of my dinner parties, attended by the cream of London's luminaries. Though talk is largely politics, the men bring their wives. I should like you to attend. Anna will be there, too. But first go with her to Bond Street for a proper gown."

Caldwell consulted his pocket watch. "Now, since I'm to be your legal guardian, a certain provision should be appended to your father's Will. Townsend agreed. If you agree, I'll have my attorney write Townsend over both our signatures authorizing Mr. Smyth to include this provision as a rider."

"What provision, uncle?"

"That in the event of your untimely death, the property would pass to me. Of course, given the difference in our ages an early demise on your part is most unlikely."

"Don't be offended, uncle, but may I see the Pastor's letter where he agreed to this?"

"Yes, later!" Caldwell locked his papers inside his desk and, seeming to brighten, said, "I have now an attractive proposal. Because of your dreadful experience I thought it might benefit you to leave our damp London for a more salubrious clime. In about a month I depart on a business trip and want you to accompany me. To Africa."

The rain had stopped and sunlight through the window illuminated Fleur's face. Caldwell saw her start. "Oh, you'll be staying with friends of mine while I conduct business. The Harrises. Pleasant people. Have a daughter about your age."

"But Africa is so... so... different."

"Niece, I'm only going to Tangier. Just across from Spain. Practically in Europe. The African sun'll do you good."

"Yes, I suppose."

"Capital! It's settled then." He hurried out the door.

A servant entered. "Will you take breakfast now, Miss?"

"In my room, please. And kindly ask Anna if she'll join me."

"She's gone to Leadenhall Market, Miss."

Fleur drifted up the staircase to her room. Fresh-cut flowers adorned her table in a vase of Chinese jade, replacing those given her by the men of the *Commerce*. Another connection to her past broken.

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Chapter 6

July 1828

From her window Fleur watched the guests alight. "My, but Londoners dress well. Am I presentable, Anna?" Fleur's gown of green satin, cut low in front and back, revealed a generous expanse of fair skin. Her hair, styled at a Burlington Arcade salon, was done in a Grecian knot, high in back, parted front, soft curls at the temples.

"Why, Miss. When that handsome young chap from the newspaper spots you..."

"And how," Fleur interrupted with mock surprise, "do you know about handsome young chaps?"

"Well, when Mr. Caldwell employed me I attended one of his soirees — to learn about house protocol. I met the chap then. Very bright. Henry Sloane. Editor at the *Morning Chronicle*. You'll probably disagree with his politics because he's for Abolition, Parliamentary Reform, giving government seats to Catholics — those sorts of things. I hear he almost always gets into a row at dinners like these, sometimes duels, because he doesn't get drunk like a gentleman. More like a coachman. Like Sylvester, say."

"Sounds interesting," Fleur said.

"Keep your eye also on two other men. Seems they come to these dinners solely to argue. Gardner Cole, the Abolitionist. And Edwin Dunhill-Keyes, former sugar planter. Filthy rich. So! An abolitionist and a slave owner. Don't be surprised if the fur flies."

"Anna, I've heard every argument for and against owning slaves. But duels...? Do they really settle arguments with guns?"

"Swords sometimes. Let me tell you of Mr. Sloane's latest."

A servant interrupted, summoning them downstairs.

Against the background of a Haydn string trio, thirteen Londoners were chatting gaily as the drawing room doors opened to admit the two women. "Ah, gentlemen, ladies," Whitaker Caldwell's voice rose above the music. "May I present my dear departed brother Andrew's beautiful daughter, Fleur, recently arrived from America. Her companion, Anna, some of you have met before. Fleur?" Caldwell extended his arm.

Fleur placed a gloved hand on it, thinking, *So! Uncle can muster a bit of savoir-faire!*

First to be introduced was Gardner Cole, fashionable in black coat, white shirt, gray flannel pants, and knee-length boots. A full head of graying hair framed his good-humored face and gold-framed spectacles.

"Mr. Cole, I've heard *so* much about you," exaggerated Fleur, extending her hand. "Perhaps I can hear you speak someday?"

Cole kissed her hand. "I understand you were raised on a plantation. You may not agree with my position."

Fleur smiled. "In which case I'd tell you."

Cole turned to his host. "That Caldwell spirit, I see!" To them both he said, "Which reminds me of another Caldwell. William. You know, Whitaker, we're having him transferred to Sierra Leone."

"No. I've not heard from William in ages. I'm delighted. Stationed in Africa will mean I shall see him more often."

"And I too," Fleur said. "Such marvelous news."

A ruddy-complexioned man came next, his blue, silver-buttoned coat, vest, and trousers contrasting nicely with his skin color. On his arm hung a spare woman with a gown of rich burgundy matching the ruby pendant at her throat.

"Edwin and Lady Dunhill-Keyes, Fleur. My dearest friends," Caldwell said, his arm across the man's shoulders.

Fleur took the woman's hand and curtsied.

"The Dunhill-Keyes are former planters from the Caribbean, niece. Practically your neighbors." Minor pleasantries were exchanged and the neighbors moved on.

The Reverend Mr. Humphrey Witherspoon, Church of England, was introduced. But Fleur's eyes were on the person behind him: reed-like, curly brown hair, tan cashmere coat, and a maroon cascade tie sporting a

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pearl stickpin. Fleur mumbled something to the Reverend and he went away.

Caldwell presented Henry Sloane, youngest ever of *Chronicle* editors. He was, as Anna implied, good-looking. "I shall see you later," he said.

Next came Captain Rowlands of His Majesty's Navy, introduced as an advocate of in-shore cruising, whatever that was. And another *against* it, Sir Charles Drummond and wife. And so they followed: one for Babbage's machine, which would "relieve the monotonous repetition of similar mathematical calculations"; another against the machine because it was "dehumanizing."

A junior Member of Parliament and his wife, Tories, followed. Last came the Thomsons, merchant and wife. Thomson employed Caldwell's ships to export, "*Odonto*. A white powder dentifrice containing exotic Oriental herbs which eradicates tartar and renders the breath pure and sweet." Thomson's wife handed Fleur a tin of the stuff and said, "Look for the name 'Thomson's.' Accept no substitutes."

Their breezy manner midst this sea of seriousness delighted Fleur.

Dinner was announced and the party moved into a dining room dripping with chandeliers. Fleur happily took her seat next to Henry Sloane; Anna was to her left, and at table's end, Caldwell was flanked by Cole and Dunhill-Keys. A generally low level of conversation prevailed as Fleur and Sloane spoke of ocean voyages.

"But Edwin! I shan't accept that premise," Cole all but shouted. Heads turned.

"Gardner!" Caldwell interjected. "As Edwin said, the public found your pamphlet inflammatory."

"Forget the public. The reaction of *The Times* this morning is more significant."

"True," Caldwell said. "*The Times* agreed that Parliament's policy of leaving the amelioration of slave conditions to Caribbean islands was akin to — as you put it — asking the fox not to leave too much blood on chicken coop walls. Very amusing." Caldwell's cackle lacked warmth.

Edwin Dunhill-Keys resumed his interrupted argument. "Gentlemen, amelioration is a moot point. Nowadays, most blacks are Creole — island born and much less likely to run afoul the driver than when they were imported from Africa."

"Not imported, sir. Smuggled!" said Henry Sloane.

Cole agreed. "Edwin, Sloane is right. Negroes are being whisked out of Africa in greater numbers than before the trade was outlawed."

Caldwell broke in, "Oh, the poor devils are indeed smuggled. But His Majesty's ships have slowed the illicit traffic considerably.

"Scarcely enough!" Sloane said.

The planter replied, "Sloane, as a newspaper man aren't you aware that entire economies have been built on impressed labor?"

"Sir, the world will work fine though slaves are freed."

Mrs. Thomson, of dentifrice fame, objected. "Gentlemen, please! Why always politics at dinner when we've so many other problems? There's a good deal of sin in the streets, you know."

Several seats removed, Mr. Thomson tried to catch her eye.

She continued: "Why not talk of doing something about those 'Fashionable Impures'? George and I cannot attend Opera without having to rub elbows with them."

At Mr. Thomson's obtrusive cough, Mrs. Thomson suddenly found renewed interest in her roast beef. The conversation quieted and at dinner's end the women retired to the drawing room. The men lingered over wine.

Dunhill-Keys addressed Sloane, "On Barbados, sir, blacks outnumber us two to one, and that makes for an uneasy watch. On Barbados, six hundred and fifty blacks broke loose and destroyed much property."

"Had they been free they'd not have to break loose."

"Sir! English homes were destroyed. By slaves! English blood was spilt. By slaves! English law was challenged. By slaves! Do you condone this outrage?"

Sloane's voice raised. "For shame! A slave owner, the very perpetrator of outrage, dares speak of outrage."

Caldwell thought Sloane might have precipitated a duel. But Dunhill-Keys only said, "For slaves to right the scales of their presumed injustice now could mean no white family left alive in the islands."

Sloane answered, "It is safer to continue riding the tiger than to dismount. Particularly for those lacking courage."

The planter's head temperature rose.

Caldwell suggested they rejoin the ladies.

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In the drawing room, Fleur asked, "Anna, who are these 'Fashionable Impures' Mrs. Thomson spoke of?"

"Prostitutes, Miss. Upper class."

"Apt name," Fleur said.

"Apt?" an older woman asked. "Revolting rather."

"One is known as 'Belladonna,'" Mrs. Thomson said. "The worst one of all. Though I suppose in this context it could mean she's the best."

"Supposedly, Henry Sloane's in love with her," Anna offered.

Mrs. Drummond was aghast. "Imagine! Falling in love — love, mind you — with a courtesan."

Other women chimed in:

"Sloane's a dunderhead."

"I hear he's Belladonna's favorite. If, indeed, trollops can have favorites."

Fleur thought, *I must get to know this man!*

The men joined the ladies, clustered in small groups around an immense *Isfahan* rug.

Caldwell addressed the planter's wife, "What are your comments on the Caribbean situation, Lady Keyes?"

"My friends in the islands constantly fear for their safety. Our erstwhile PM, Canning, once advocated prohibition of the whip. What control have we over beasts other than drivers with whips?"

Henry Sloane had been fidgeting. "Sir, a cousin of mine was killed in the islands. How many of yours died there? None, I daresay, because here they squat, in commodious quarters on placid English uplands, stuffing their Tory mouths on fat rounds of beef while their managers collect rents from sweating serfs."

Silence followed. Sloane was displeased over his loss of control, but Caldwell smiled contentedly.

Anna whispered, "Fleur, this young man may be in a spot of trouble. Dunhill-Keyes is reputedly a deadly shot."

"Miss Caldwell," Sloane diverted attention from himself, "as the only one here who has lived on a plantation, we should be interested in your opinion."

Fleur's views, calcified by a rigid Southern milieu, were well defined. "Naturally, I feel sorrow at the plight of slaves, and though we may not like to consider any race as cursed, Scripture records this."

"Scripture?" Henry Sloane said. "Surely, Miss Caldwell, you've misread the Good Book."

"Not so, sir! Genesis talks about Cush, Ham's first son. Cush in Hebrew means black. Black became the curse God set upon slaves."

"Pardon, Miss. Why does black or any color have to *mean* something?"

The Reverend jumped in. "Black is a symbol, Mr. Sloane. Symbols are important to every culture." The minister, a rotund man with sagging jowls and a huge paunch, had darting eyes that bulged from lids barely able to cover them. Thick, silver-rimmed spectacles emphasized the eyes disproportionately, and his glare during sermons always made the parishioners in the first two or three pews very nervous. Heavy, sensual lips bubbled droplets of saliva as he pontificated. "In Amos 9:7, when the Lord was exceeding wroth with the errant Israelites, he likened them to black-skinned Ethiopians. A symbol, you see."

"The text please," asked Sloane.

The minister rose. Conversation ceased. The musicians quit playing Boccherini.

"'Are ye not,' the Lord asked Israel, 'as children of the Ethiopians to me?'"

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't see how this equates black with slavery."

"Of course, Sloane," the minister said, enjoying his pulpit, "because these things are couched in symbols. In Leviticus, the Lord tells His people to take slaves. 'Thy bondmen shall be of the heathen,' He said. And the heathen, the bondmen, were Ethiopian negroes. Ergo, slaves."

Sloane shook his head. "Very well. You believe slaves to be heathen and therefore unbaptizable. Why, then, do you berate other Protestants for trying to save the poor wretches after you've abandoned them to perdition?"

The Reverend chose not to answer directly. "Mr. Sloane, ladies, gentlemen, I know one thing only. A more dastardly example of human barbarity can scarce be found than that which these savages perpetrate in their dark, God-forsaken forests. I refer to the negro practice of human sacrifice; the tearing out of hearts still living." The minister riveted Sloane — whom he imagined in a pew — in his unblinking stare.

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For a moment, Sloane stirred coffee no longer in his cup as everyone pretended they had not been hanging onto every word. Fleur felt sorry for him.

Finally he spoke. "Tell me, sir, is that negro practice any more barbaric than the one practiced by *Christian* seamen who, to collect insurance money, fling sick but still living slaves overboard to the sharks? At least the unenlightened Africans sacrifice lives out of religious zeal. Your Christians sacrifice them for filthy lucre." Rising, the young editor excused himself and left the room.

"Bravo," Fleur whispered into Anna's ear. "I like him."

"He's an Abolitionist," Anna reminded. "I'm surprised at you."

Fleur shrugged. "I'm surprised at me, too."

* * * * *

A servant entered with a message. Caldwell read it and clapped for attention. "Gentlemen. Ladies. Some small matter has come up. I shall rejoin you shortly."

In the vestibule, Hamilton Hawk waited, resplendent in a coat of bottle green, silk shirt, pantaloons, Blücher boots.

"You've been in port two weeks, Hawk!"

"Caught the earliest stage I could, sir. Then a damned highwayman chased us clear into Watford. Had to hole up there a while."

"Hole up, indeed." Caldwell knew Hawk had spent time in whoring. He limped into his library with Hawk following.

"Good money this trip, sir." Hawk handed a leather bag to Caldwell, who hefted it and evinced a rare smile.

"You were days late at that beach, Hawk. Why?"

"Foul weather! And playing cat and mouse with a Limey, sir. Eventually sunk 'er."

"At the beach you weighed anchor and ran. Why?"

"Frenchman's orders, sir. His inexperience y'know. But you'd put him in charge."

"And where *is* the Frenchman?"

"Business in Portsmouth, sir. Sent this report of our recent trip." Hawk shoved a sealed envelope at Caldwell who pocketed it.

"All right. Make sure he's with us when we sail in two weeks." Taking several large denomination bills from the bag, he handed them to Hawk. "Tell your crew they'll be paid at that time. Now! I have guests!"

They parted without a handshake. Caldwell put Hawk's bag, which was stuffed full of money, into his desk drawer and reentered the Drawing Room. He was pleased; not only with his business, but with his roster of influential guests who continually bolstered his status with those in London's society able to ignore his being American, a cripple, and, most important, that certain of his business elements were alleged to have connections with slave smuggling.

In a chair in a corner, Henry Sloane waited for Witherspoon to release Fleur's ear, discouraging every attempt by others to converse. Too, he preferred staying clear of both the Reverend — whom he considered a pompous, disingenuous ass — and the arrogant, condescending planter. Both aroused him to anger. He rued his loss of control at table. Before that, he thought his arguments had been impressing the American.

His gaze lingered on her well-turned shoulders, curve of neck, and on breasts that seemed close to erupting from her gown. And though Sloane was a man ever susceptible to feminine charms, he nevertheless realized that Fleur's attractiveness flowed also from her apparent interest and excitement in everyone and everything around her. *How can one so young comport herself among strangers with such grace and assurance?*

Seeing the Reverend kiss Fleur's hand, he moved quickly to her side and flippantly remarked, "Was the old windbag haranguing you into converting? I feared he'd never quit."

"Oh, he was pleasant enough." Fleur smiled. "Although his stare is awfully intense. He told me something of the Kingdom of Morocco. I'm excited about that because uncle is taking me there on a holiday."

"So he mentioned. I rather doubt it's a good idea."

Fleur laughed lilyingly. "The minister didn't either. See? You *do* agree on some things."

Sloane said, "Have you ever noticed how amazingly the mind works? Despite my intense political involvement at dinner my mind remained on something else."

"Am I supposed to ask on what?"

"On Fleur Caldwell. I couldn't ignore how ravishing she looked."

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"Ravishing? Ravishing is a strong adjective, Mr. Sloane. Newspapermen particularly should choose their words carefully. Is that what you mean, or do you want to substitute a term less intense? Say, "pretty"?"

The riposte caught Sloane off guard. "No, I meant ravishing! *That* face," his head gestured toward a young woman. "*That* is pretty! Nice. But . . ."

"My, my, Mr. Sloane. Let "ravishing" stand. I didn't think you noticed. You argued all during dinner."

He ran his hands lightly down Fleur's arm. "Your uncle's home is magnificent. My career is progressing. I expect to own a home like this someday. I imagine the upstairs is magnificent, too."

"Uncle would show it if you asked."

"No offense, Miss, but I wouldn't ask him for a farthing. Now, the subject."

"Still the upstairs, Mr. Sloane?"

"Yes. And don't be so formal. Don't you know my first name?"

"It's Henry."

"How well you pronounce the initial. Now, there are at least forty rooms upstairs. Let's go up and count. And perhaps enter into one you wish to show me?"

"I do not wish to show you anything."

"Nothing?"

Sloane's look was so downcast that Fleur added, "Not now."

"Thank you, fair lady. I assure I had no dishonorable intention."

She did not believe that. But he was bright, charming, and his rakish reputation as described by Anna did not hurt. The guests began to depart. Anna excused herself and went to her room.

"I must trundle off, too," said Sloane, touching Fleur's hand with his lips and keeping them there longer than necessary. "Good night. Good night!" he drawled, his expression suitably dolorous. "Parting is such sweet sorrow that I shall say good night 'til it be morrow."

Fleur trapped him with a smile until the response came to her: "Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast. Would I were sleep and peace, so sweet to rest."

"Why — you know the Bard!"

"Father hired able tutors. But we had the lines reversed."

"*Did we now?*"

"You spoke Juliet's, and I spoke Romeo's."

Impressed, the editor went from the party that night thoroughly bewitched and not a little struck by Cupid's errant darts.

By midnight, the Reverend Mr. Humphrey Witherspoon and his host had relocated to Caldwell's library where they sat drinking brandy.

"Nice chat with your niece," the minister said. "Intelligent girl. Asked many questions about Morocco, and seemed both excited and fearful about her pending trip. Wished she knew more about Africa. Now look, old man, do you really think taking her there is a good idea? There's still lots of white slavery in the Barbary, you know."

"She'll be staying with friends."

"So I understand. Nevertheless, you'll pay a tidy ransom if a sheik takes her captive. My wife's brother had to pay a fortune to retrieve his cousin, a maiden lady who'd fallen into the clutches of some minor emir in Oran."

Caldwell preferred dropping the subject, but the minister continued, "The ransom so outraged Clarissa's brother that he joined THE KNIGHTS LIBERATORS OF WHITE SLAVERY IN AFRICA. Worthless organization! But those Moslems are a wily bunch, playing off English against French, French against English. We should punish them."

"Humphrey, in '16, the Royal Navy all but destroyed Algiers."

"Whitaker! We didn't follow up! We keep consuls there! There are still English hostages in Barbary dungeons."

"You're wrong, Witherspoon! That's largely over, because after the American, Decatur, bombed Tripoli, the United States refused to pay another penny in tribute. No sense taking prisoners if no one'll pay."

The minister poked a pudgy finger at his host. "You're right! Money is the one language Moslems understand. That and force! Which is why I say, let our ships' guns argue the freedom of our Christian hostages. Destroy the heathen! Oh, on this I'm surely one with the Lord." The reverend's saliva was bubbling freely. "We should act, I say! I detest mere lip service."

Caldwell regarded the man coolly. *You miserable hypocrite! How fortunate you and your Christian ilk don't get as agitated over niggers —*

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only whites. Can't you see that in condoning slavery, the Church pays nothing to its vaunted doctrine of brotherhood but the lip service you detest? If you don't follow teachings of your own invention, why should I?

* * * * *

Caldwell had been involved in the slave trade ever since he ran away to England after his father, Nehemiah, discovered the homosexual relationship Whitaker instigated with his twin, William. A shouting match at the top of a stairs ended when young Whitaker struck Nehemiah, sending him tumbling down the entire flight. Nehemiah's wife, Sarah, heard the commotion and ran to his side, beseeching help. The servants and her other sons, William and Andrew, had followed every word from behind partially closed doors but were too frightened to intervene.

Nehemiah lay as still as death. Then, face etched with pain, he pointed a shaking finger at the stunned Whitaker. "Begone! Ye are no longer my son and shall not reap the fruits of my labors." Both legs broken, he fainted.

"Please, Whitaker!" implored Sarah, seeking help to lift her husband. But her ashen-faced son bolted down the stairs and out the door.

For the remainder of that long, hot July day, the young rebel lay hidden in the tall sweet clover grass of Rollingwood's perfumed summer fields, listening to the lazy drone of fat bumblebees, and to the negro workers intoning:

*"I got a right - we all got a right
I got a right to the Tree of Life."*

To the cries of his mother and brothers he remained deaf. Toward evening he crawled to a section grown with sweet potatoes and began devouring the raw vegetable. A passing young field slave caught sight of him and started on a trot for the Great House, joyful that he had found the master's son. Whitaker shouted the boy to a halt, threatening to whip him to death with his belt unless he said nothing.

After midnight, Whitaker harnessed horse and carriage, loaded it with much of the household silver, and left for Baltimore, intent on trading it for passage to England.

William, besieged with guilt, could not fathom why Whitaker alone had been banished; in his view they were both at fault.

Sarah had pleaded on William's behalf. "Don't expel him, too. Whitaker has always had the stronger will. He led William into this."

To William's credit, his mother's intervention did not absolve him in his own eyes. A week after Whitaker's flight he announced he would leave Rollingwood. As atonement he would go to Boston, study to enter the Anglican ministry, and devote his life to serving the Lord. Over Sarah's objections Nehemiah agreed and, at William's request, consented further to strike the young man's name from the Will.

"I need no inheritance or worldly treasure," William said. "These I gladly renounce, for the meek shall inherit the earth."

Andrew, age thirteen, became sole heir to Rollingwood.

William became a preacher of some repute, and through correspondence remained on good terms with his parents, who guaranteed him a small annual stipend provided he did not attempt to find or communicate with his "sinful brother."

When the elder Caldwells perished in an Indian raid in western Carolina, William returned to Virginia and pastored a small church in Petersburg. Years later he officiated at the marriage of Andrew to Annjeanette Fleury, a sixteen-year-old French and Indian half-breed from Mississippi territory.

* * * * *

Five years before Parliament outlawed the trade Whitaker Caldwell bought his first vessel and fitted it out as a slaver. Obscene profits from this eventually enabled him to own a fleet of ships under the aegis of CALDWELL & GREAT EASTERN ENTERPRISES, half of which operated legitimately. The others were so scheduled that a pair always sailed different legs of the "triangular trade" — two running cheap goods from England to Africa, two packed with slaves for the Caribbean, two transporting island rum and sugar to England. Caldwell made one African trip yearly to meet with various slave chiefs, but ultimately deciding he was too old for this, sought a captain whose abilities could meet the challenge of England's patrol cruisers. He found the privateer, Hamilton Hawk.

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With the respectability money bestowed, Caldwell entertained lavishly in his Georgian Regents Park mansion. He felt a psychotic need to hobnob with London's elite — the politicians and opinion makers, the aristocrats, wealthy merchants, and those darlings of society, the dandies, of whom he seemed to change favorites quarterly. Extravagant dinners were his way of competing with London's upper crust. Only through vying with others could he fashion his sorely needed sense of self worth, and distill the elixir of his existence. This, he believed, would keep him safely ahead of that dogging pack of unfortunates who, particularly in these days of bourgeois unrest, would otherwise reverse positions.

Why, even the clergy — caught in the growing grumble over social injustice — were beginning to bestir their complacent selves. *Oh, perhaps not this pontificating bore who dozes before me, but certainly those of the more liberal Protestant churches.* He left the minister snoring in the chair and went upstairs. A multitude of clocks struck one o'clock in the morning as he passed his niece's door.

Fleur lay with her head pillowed in soft down, thinking of Henry Sloane. He had invited her to the Royal Italian Opera in Covent Garden and she was eager to tell Anna come morning. Pulling the quilt close, she thanked God for the sense of belonging and security she was beginning to feel. That which had once been hers in abundance and had been lost, now seemed entirely within her grasp.

GEORGE DIGUIDO

The Tuareg



Chapter 7

The Opera Surprise

Anna accompanied Fleur at Caldwell's insistence. He, having plans for his niece's future, did not want her becoming enamored of Henry Sloane.

"Sorry, Miss," Anna said in the room devoted to powdering noses. "Sorry your uncle foisted me off on you tonight. I wouldn't want to put you off your game. Or Sloane's."

"Oh, there'll be no game to put me off." *At least not tonight!*

"I'm glad I'm here, though," Anna whispered. "The courtesans."

"They're here tonight?"

"Sylvester told me. He knows lots of things you'd think he'd never know."

"How exciting. Will you point one out to me?"

"They own the boxes on either side of Mr. Caldwell's."

Caldwell cited neighbors such as these as reason for his poor attendance. Still, he paid the £1000 subscription cost for seats seldom used; his name on the door as Patron made for a good image.

The women joined Henry Sloane after the Overture began. In his ebony tight coat and pink ruffled shirt Fleur thought him appealing. *He is so cultured, keeping time to the music with his finger.* Fleur found it difficult to picture him as the duel-prone, angry young reporter of Fleet Street.

When the curtain rose for Act One the adjoining boxes were empty. "Ladies must be busy elsewhere tonight," Anna whispered. Onstage, at the entrance of Amor, Goddess of Love, clagues for and against the Polish soprano erupted, causing many in the audience to turn and shush their neighbors. Doing likewise, Fleur noticed a man two rows and a dozen seats away with his eyes steadfastly on her. *Can't be looking at me. Must be a friend of Henry's.*

The audience quieted and the soprano sang *Se il dolce suon*. "What is she singing, Henry?"

"If the sweet sound of your lyre can find its way into Heaven, then the wrath of the gods will be appeased, and her dear body restored."

How romantic, thought Fleur, her gaze sweeping the audience and again seeing the eyes, this time with a smile below them. She returned her attention to the stage, but soon stole a glance at the man. As if on cue he turned and inclined his head slightly toward her. That was it! She would ask Henry.

"No, I don't know him! And he's certainly not looking at Anna. I shall speak to him at intermission."

Fleur knew she had made a mistake.

Toward the act's concluding moments a couple entered the box ahead, chattering and removing their garments conspicuously. Anna said to Fleur, "Are you ready for your courtesan?"

The couple sat, and now in full profile view, Henry Sloane appeared startled. The woman, fortyish, was extremely striking, her bejeweled upswept hair complementing that of her canary-colored gown. The man, also fortyish, was tall and trim. Checking on the occupants of the adjacent box, he saw Sloane and nodded cordially. Sloane ignored it.

"Is anything the matter?" Fleur asked Henry, whose face was ashen. The editor shook his head.

"I think he knows that woman," Anna said.

The tall trim man spoke to his companion, who turned and casually swept the audience, including the Caldwell box, with her gaze. Face impassive, she whispered into her escort's ear and they both chuckled. Though the Act was not over, Henry Sloane hurried from the box, causing Fleur to look questioningly at Anna. Anna wagged her head ruefully; everything she had heard about Sloane and his *amours* was apparently true.

At intermission Fleur remained alone in the box, head buried in a synopsis of Act Two. Henry's conduct puzzled and embarrassed her. Hoping the stranger with the staring eyes had not witnessed her escort's rapid departure, she stole a glance his way and found him conversing with two men flanking him. Anna came in, offering a small tea and petit four.

"Thank you, no. Henry may want it when he comes in."

"I doubt your friend'll want cake when he returns. *If* he returns. He's in the bar."

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The curtain rose with the newspaperman still absent. It bothered Fleur more than she would admit. Act Two began in a cavern bordering the River Styx, the set not helping Fleur's mood.

Shortly afterwards, the door to the courtesan's box opened noisily. The tall thin man rose, but the partition between boxes hid from view what was happening. Fleur and Anna recognized Henry Sloane's voice, thickly slurred.

"You shall not recover, sir, from a second encounter. Next time, I shoot to kill. My colleagues..." A scuffle ended with a slammed door. Many in the audience were now shushing for quiet. The tall trim man hurried back to help his woman with her wrap, and they went quickly out.

Moments later Henry Sloane shuffled into the Caldwell box, thudded into the seat behind Fleur, and, mumbling incoherently, pawed her bared shoulders. Fleur recoiled.

Maternal instinct to the fore, Anna swung her rolled opera program at the editor's head repeatedly. "Go away, you cad! Leave!"

Attempting to escape the blows, Sloane slipped from chair to floor. "Terribly sorry," he mumbled. "Not gentlemanly." Rising, he left quietly, if unsteadily.

Fleur was mortified. Surely the staring stranger had witnessed the sorry spectacle.

"Hurry, Miss!" Anna said. "If we leave now it will be easier to find a cab."

Fleur would not be forced into ignominious retreat. "I'm staying here!" Anna, who cared nothing for opera, resigned herself to an evening more miserable than she had at first imagined.

The Act Two curtain rang down to much applause, with the singers bowing repeatedly. Fleur clapped mechanically. Anna suggested a tour of the halls, but Fleur would not leave. "Then, Miss, would you mind if I go for a coffee and chocolate? I know it should calm me."

With Anna's departure, Fleur replayed the scene. *That boor! How could I've been so taken with him? Anna warned of his problem...why didn't I listen?*

The audience filed back in, and Anna returned, looking glum. "I stepped outside and there's nary a cab to be seen. It's pouring rain."

When the final act began, Fleur resolved not to let Sloane ruin her evening; she would enjoy the music. Twice she glanced the stranger's

way, but his attention was forward both times. She felt neglected. By opera's end, lush Gluckian melodies had driven from her mind every trace of the newspaperman, though not of the stranger. If she hurried she might catch a glimpse of him in the lobby.

"Let's leave, Anna."

"No need. We'd best wait till all carriages are gone. The one remaining will belong to that bounder, Sloane. We'll commandeer it and he can find his own way home. Provided he can find his way out of the bar."

Fleur snatched her wrap and left. Anna guessed why and followed. "I know the evening's a disaster, Miss. Don't make it worse."

"Oh, fiddle, I only want to see the man."

"But your uncle . . ."

"Don't tell him!" Descending the Grand Staircase she noticed a disturbance on the Lobby floor. The crowd ahead made it difficult to see, but she recognized Henry Sloane's voice and could just barely see him, alcoholic drink in hand, standing near the stranger with the eyes, who seemed to be listening with a hint of annoyed amusement.

"Oh, Miss! Let's leave before that madman spots you." Suddenly Sloane dashed his liquor into the stranger's face. Fleur hurried several steps up the staircase for a better view. Anna followed resignedly.

One of the stranger's associates had pinned Sloane's arms and, helped by onlookers, rushed him unceremoniously out of the Opera House. As the stranger doffed his wet suit jacket he spotted Fleur on the stairs and spoke to his associate who then pushed through the crowd toward the two women. Addressing both in French-accented English, he said, "My colleague noticed that bit of nastiness you suffered at the hands of that poor misguided fellow. And though my colleague is temporarily indisposed, he asks if you will accept use of his carriage to take you home. The gentleman you came with is obviously not able to discharge that privilege."

Anna and Fleur accepted the offer gratefully. But before exiting, Fleur took a last look at her benefactor. He was laughing jocularly with the men around him, and was very good-looking — around thirty or so, Fleur guessed — with an arrow-straight nose; wavy, chestnut colored hair; a well-groomed moustache; and a deeply sun-tanned skin. When he again looked her way, Fleur's lips formed the words, "Thank you."

He bowed slightly.



Chapter 8

Hooligans at Abolition Lecture

The women took tea at a shop in Mayfair.

"I heard you tell Mr. Cole you hoped to hear him speak," Anna said, biting into a cheese and leek sandwich. "Would you care to accompany me to a lecture of his?"

"Anna! I only said that to flatter him. I'm in no mood for talk about slavery. But I'll go to another opera."

Anna winked knowingly. "Can it wait? One a week is enough for me."

"Oh, Anna! Now I suppose I *should* go with you to your lecture and hear every argument I've ever heard before. When?"

"Next Saturday evening. You see, Miss, being a new member of THE LONDON WOMEN'S SOCIETY FOR THE FREEDOM OF OUR OPPRESSED BRETHREN, I feel I should support the Cause. I've been to two lectures, and Mr. Cole — though hardly in a class with Wilberforce — does speak to the point. Being American, you should appreciate that." Taking a pamphlet from her purse, she handed it to Fleur. "You should read this . . ." She halted, embarrassed. "Dear me! How rotten, forcing my views on you."

"Oh you haven't! I'll go though I favor neither abolition nor emancipation."

* * * * *

Sylvester had inexplicably taken a series of wrong turns. "Sorry, Mum. Don't know how that happened."

"Sylvester! You know every bloomin' street in London town. Your sympathies are just not with the Cause, that's all."

"Not the reason, Mum. But f'yer own protection, you two lydies ought not t'be goin' to this 'ere meetin' tonight."

"Pray tell, why not?"

"Cuz there's apt to be trouble. Friends at the Black Swan tell me a jolly bad lot o' blokes from Bristol 'n' Liverpool come down special for this meetin', madder than deuce at Cole's new pamphlet. That's why I been drivin' aroun' draggin' my `orses `eels. `Oping y'd miss it, I wuz."

"Oh, bother! A little yelling won't hurt a body. Fleur, do you still want to go?"

"More than ever, now."

Sylvester cracked the whip and turned the horses around.

The facade of Freemason's Hall in Great Queen Street, ablaze with excitement and the light of torches, thrilled Fleur. Entering, the women sat toward the rear of a noisy auditorium decorated with placards identifying Quakers, Wesleyans, and Methodists. Onstage, near a lectern hung with oil lamps, Gardner Cole paced back and forth. Behind him hung a banner, proclaiming: EVERY VALLEY SHALL BE EXALTED. ISAIAH 40:4.

"For every negro landed," he shouted, "two perished in the preceding stages of the slaving process, either in Africa or on the ship."

From Cole's supporters: "Hear! Hear!"

"To arrive at the true number of souls ripped from their homes, we must therefore multiply by three."

To Fleur this was, if true, an astounding statistic. She had not heard its likes before. In attendance merely to please Anna, her attention became suddenly engaged.

"The struggle against this atrocity is old, having its intellectual origins in the writings of Locke, Sharp, and Paley."

"Never heard o' them, bloke!" a detractor yelled.

"Let's move closer, Anna. The noise . . ."

"Miss, no! We shouldn't cut off our exit." Sylvester's warning came to the older woman's mind.

"But its complete eradication," Cole continued, arms aloft, "cannot occur unless Parliament takes further action to emancipate slaves still in bondage to Englishmen everywhere." His fist pounded the lectern.

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Four large men stood and moved into seats in the front row.

"Freedom!" Cole shouted. "A free gift from our Creator."

A man stood. "Then why don't we wait for the Creator to set the buggers free?"

Some laughter. Some shouts of, "Quiet!"

"Better a slave in the West Indies than a slave in Africa, you son-of-a-bitch!"

Cole addressed the heckler. "Sir, do not shout obscenities in this Hall of Great Orators. Come here at a quiet time and listen closely and you will hear the echo of their noble argument yet resounding. For the voices of Wilberforce, Clarkson, Fox, and Buxton are immortal. They shall never die!"

"Stuff your poetry, Cole, and stick it in your pamphlet!"

"Right! Then ram it up your arse."

A piece of fruit hit the lectern. Fearful for her charge, Anna said, "Let's leave!"

"Wait!" Fleur was breathless. "This is fascinating."

One of the four men who earlier moved forward raised his hand and was acknowledged. "I'm a Liverpool merchant, Mr. Cole, and I say you've failed to realize that postwar England, though victorious, is now engaged in a fight greater than before. I refer to competition for world markets. The continuation of the slave system in the Colonies is vital to England's economy. In 1807 you achieved your Abolition. Since then, thousands of Liverpoolers have been thrown out of work — shippers, outfitters, builders, shopkeepers. Therefore we will not now stand for emancipation!"

A thrown egg struck Cole's face and sent his spectacles flying. Two associates rushed from the wings, "Gentlemen, please! Show Christian love."

"Ha! What about love of country? The English Indies needs the niggers."

Again Anna suggested they leave.

Cole's spectacles were found and passed to him. "I've not come here tonight to be insulted by people from a city in which every last brick has been cemented with the blood of our African brothers."

"They may be your brothers, bloke. They ain't mine."

The four men that had moved forward vaulted onto the stage and wrestled Cole aside. One of them addressed the audience. "Before we

took th' devils out o' Africa, th' heathen negro kings used t' murder every prisoner of war. Now they sell 'em. If that ain't progress, what is?"

"Nay! Better dead than sold into slavery!"

Arguments broke out around the hall, with Fleur turning this way and that, trying to follow what was being said. Anna tugged at Fleur's arm, fearful for her charge. Sylvester was right. There was more opposition here tonight than she had seen before.

A thrown cabbage toppled an oil lamp, setting the stage afire. Everyone scrambled for the aisles as those onstage — irrespective of politics — cooperated to beat the flames with their jackets. Two men stood on chairs, ripped down the banner and threw it over the blaze. This brought it under control but created a cloud of smoke.

Several rows from Fleur and Anna a sixtyish black man was being shoved by a number of men. "I will not leave! I'm a freed slave. I purchased my freedom for fifty pounds."

Anna again pulled Fleur toward the aisle. "Anna! I must hear this!"

"Leave this country, nigger!"

"No! It's my country now. My other one you took away." He reached into his pocket. "See? My free paper."

The crowd jeered as the man was pummeled to the floor.

Fleur was appalled. The old man reminded her of a gentle servant who groomed horses in Rollingwood's barns. "Stop, bullies! Cowards! The man is defenseless. Stop!"

An organ began to play "Onward Christian Soldiers," and a few souls started to sing. The din and scuffling quickly discouraged this, and soon only the organist — safe in her lofty retreat — was left to pump the sound of Christian love into the boisterous atmosphere.

Scrambling under the seats the black man surfaced in the row occupied by the two women. Immediately caught, he was again beaten to the floor. Fleur broke from Anna's hold and delivered a sharp kick to the rump of one of the man's oppressors. That was enough for Anna. Without further word she yanked her charge through the aisle and out the door.

Outside the Hall, smoke pouring from the windows added to the confusion of people searching for and scrambling into their carriages. "We'd best find Sylvester quickly, Miss. His size and red coat shouldn't make that too difficult."

The Tuareg

Suddenly, two beer wagons, each drawn by four horses, approached the Hall from opposite ends of Queen Street. "Ooooh, Miss!" Anna quickly grasped the situation. "The Liverpoolers! They're not through with us yet."

The wagons turned crossways, blocking exit from the street. In the confusion of tangled coaches and neighing horses both women searched for Sylvester. *Dear Lord*, thought Anna, *Mr. Caldwell will have my hide if anything happens to Fleur*. "Oooh, miss, what to do?"

Fleur pushed her way through the crowd, leaped onto a lamppost, shinnied to the top — a trick learned in Virginia's woods — and waved her free arm wildly.

Anna was astonished at the unlady-like behavior, but Sylvester spotted Fleur, and with a whip and a holler headed his coach for the sidewalk, ignoring the protests of other drivers. Shouting encouragement to his horses, he jounced his coach onto the sidewalk as outraged pedestrians flattened themselves against the building.

"Goin' me way, lydies?"

The women scrambled into the carriage. Sylvester's whip cracked and the horses began their flight. Anna collapsed into her seat, but Fleur's head was out the window, eyes flashing.

At the end of the block as the carriage returned to the street, Fleur shouted, "Sylvester! Stop!" The black man was running toward them with two men chasing him. The carriage skidded to a halt and Fleur leaped to the ground. "Free slave, here! Get in!" Favoring an obviously injured leg, the man hopped over, but having no strength to climb aboard, Fleur grabbed his feet and shoved him halfway inside. "Anna, take the seat of his pants and pull him in."

"Miss! I can't touch him near . . . near his . . ."

Fleur mumbled an oath. Scurrying to the opposite door, she climbed in, grabbed the man's trousers, and with Anna pulling on his arms, dragged him inside and slammed the door shut.

The man's pursuers halted, nonplussed at the improbability of the rescue. Sylvester again whipped his horses to a run, but a third beer truck now blocked his path. Cursing roundly, the coachman reined sharply left, though not in time to avoid hooking his carriage's wheel on the truck and parting it from its axle. Swaying crazily, the coach tipped on its side and skidded to a halt, its two free wheels spinning merrily in the air.

Both horses screamed in pain and fright, the animal on top kicking and thrashing, the bottom horse in agony with a broken leg. The black man, uttering no word of thanks, wriggled out of a window and ran into the welcome of a dark alley. The collision snapped the ropes on the beer truck and caused the barrels to roll onto the street, where they exploded in showers of foaming liquid.

Sylvester, lying on his considerable belly in a malodorous pool of beer and manure, screamed at the driver who was trying to coerce his frightened horses to turn his vehicle around. "Yer bloody damn fool! I'll blow yer rotten `ead clean off!" Running to the carriage seat box he snatched a pistol and long-bladed knife. The beer wagon clattered swiftly away, losing its remaining barrels. Near to tears and fearful of what his employer would say, the coachman placed his pistol next to the injured horse's head and discharged a bullet into the animal's brain. Then he cut the kicking horse free of its straps.

Several men approached from the direction of the Hall, but Sylvester, unsure of their affiliation, yelled, "Away, 'fore I use these!" Brandishing his weapons, he muttered several profanities and the men retreated.

Inside the coach, Anna shouted, "Quit that cursing, you vile oaf! We have a woman of refinement here. And come help me. My leg's caught under the seat."

"Is it broke?"

"I don't think so."

"Then I can't, Mum. Gotta tyke care o' the `orse." Sylvester had the animal under a blanket, walking it slowly, inspecting for damage. "There'll be `ell to pay when the master `ears about `is `orses."

Fleur pushed open the upper door and climbed through it, tearing her garment while jumping to the ground. Running toward the Hall, she halted a group of men who were leaving. "Are you Abolitionists?"

"Aye."

"So am I," she lied. "There's a woman trapped in that overturned phaeton down the street. Please help get her out."

"Yes, we saw."

"Did you see me help the negro?"

"We did."

"Then why didn't you intercede to help?"

The Tuareg

"We're not violent men, Miss. Liverpoolers are here in force tonight. We must think of our families."

"Fiddlesticks!" Fleur wheeled sharply away. Nevertheless, the men followed, one mounting and entering the carriage to hold Anna as others turned it upright, rolling it against a building to prevent its toppling. Helping Anna to alight, they left quickly when they spotted Sylvester returning.

Great Queen Street was dark. Torches had been extinguished and the Hall shuttered. Having accomplished their purpose, the beer truck drivers left, as did all other coaches. Gas lamps shone as yellow bubbles through a fog which already obscured the far end of the street.

Fleur was comforting Anna when Sylvester appeared. "Ere, lydies, tyke the dead `orse's blanket and make y'selves comfy while I tyke this one to the stable at the Inn. Got friends there, an' I'll get another carriage." Slipping something to Anna so Fleur could not see it, he assisted the older woman into the carriage. "You'll be safe here. Bloody contraption can't fall propped this way." He led his horse away.

The women — clothing torn and stained with blood — huddled under the smelly blanket against the midnight damp.

"All right, Anna. The pistol please?"

"Pistol?"

"The thing that shoots. Sylvester gave it to you." Fleur's eyes danced. "Thrilling isn't it?"

Anna trembled. "Lord, I can hardly touch it. How can I protect you?"

"Give me the gun. I'll protect you. I know how to shoot."

"You can't!"

"Anna! I grew up in woods and fields. When I was ten, my father taught me how to hunt squirrels and rabbits. And not with a bow and arrow."

Anna, more sleepy than impressed, said, "In my bag."

The older woman slept. Fleur remained alert, gun in hand.

Steeple sounded a single chime. Then two. London's gay social set had left their parties; the rakes had located their evening's pleasure; the sober citizenry had not yet risen to trudge reluctantly to work.

Fog shrouded all, and Fleur struggled with sleepiness. Then, the faintest of footfalls. Her hand slipped comfortably around the gun's handle. It

could not be Sylvester; he would be returning with a carriage. Steadying the weapon on the door's windowsill, she waited. An image began to show through the fog. Huge. Red.

"It's me, Mum, don't fear," Sylvester called, waking Anna. "Sorry it took so long, lydies. Couldn't get me any carriage. But the `orse is tyken care of, an' that's important to the master."

"The horse! The horse!" Anna fairly shrieked. "What of us?"

"Now see `ere, Mum. Don't go givin' me no `ard time. I said y'shouldn't been `ere in the first plyce." His next words were softer. "Look, lydies, it's too damp t' stay `ere. Let's go t' the Inn. I'll carry you, Anna."

"How decent of you, Sylvester. But I should be able to walk with a little support."

Sylvester helped Anna from the coach, locked her arm in his, and the three began their trudge. Fleur's mind dwelt on Cole's disturbing account of how negroes were taken from Africa; Anna thought of her bed; Sylvester worried about Caldwell's reaction to the loss of horse and carriage. No one spoke, and the monotonous cadence of six shoes on cobblestones sounded so forlorn that even the occasional hiss of cruising cat or yelp of distant dog seemed friendly. In the foggy intersection ahead, the ghost of a horse and wagon materialized, crossed the street and disappeared. Sylvester hollered to it, but Fleur took after it on the run.

"Fleur!" Anna shrieked. "Sylvester, quickly! Go after her. What if the driver makes off with her?"

"Oh, let 'er be. Yer Miss is resourceful, she is."

Moments later the wagon turned into the street where Anna and Sylvester waited. Its side panel displayed this: CRUIKSHANK & SON, PURVEYORS OF FINE FRESH FISH SINCE 1800. An ancient driver held the reins of a tired horse, and both appeared sound asleep. On the seat beside the driver Fleur grinned triumphantly. "This gentleman," (Fleur nudged him awake), "agreed to take us home for half a crown."

The coachman looked at Anna, who said, "Give him some money, Sylvester."

Financial transaction completed, the three trudged to the back of the wagon only to find it filled with fish and ice. Sylvester cleared a space with the wagon's shovel and helped the women aboard. Complaining he could not afford to soil his greatcoat, he said he would walk.

The Tuareg

"Oh, you big oaf," blurted Anna. "You've already rolled it in beer, blood, and manure. Get in!" Sylvester got in. Anna turned to Fleur. "I'm sorry, Miss, that the meeting turned out a bummer. It must have been frightening to you, you poor dear."

"No, not really! More like exhilarating."

"My poor coat . . ."

"Oh, just lie down and be quiet. Fleur and I want to sleep."

A pile of flounder made not too bad a pillow.