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#### CHAPTER 4. ON FATHERS AND SONS, GAMBLING AND ROMANCE, NEW PLEDGES AND OLD ACCOUNTS.

He was born in Louisiana, raised on the banks of the Mississippi, and educated in New York.

He went to an ordinary public school until his father suddenly made a fortune in something he refused openly to discuss and became a planter. Tutors were hired for his son and heir, and later on, receiving a hearty hug from his father and a sobbing kiss from his mother, off went young Sutton to Columbia College.

Accompanied by parental instructions, his allowance was sent to him

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on a monthly basis. He purchased a number of excellent suits. Other students attempted to teach him card tricks before discovering he was an accomplished player. They did not think he was too bright. The feeling was mutual.

Most people, in Sutton's view, had a problem understanding even the simplest things because they never paid any serious attention to anything, and had concentration problems. In order to explain something to a person, one had to speak slowly, as if to a child, sticking to the basics and using pauses to give the interlocutor enough time to process each point. Otherwise they just ignored what you told them.

\*\*\*

Annie ran into Sutton at a soirée in one of the newer fashionable houses owned by her married sister's husband, just south of Fourteenth Street, in New York City. She was merely visiting her sister. She expected to meet no one of any importance to her. Unlike her sister, she did not think she owed it to herself to be married to a wealthy New Yorker – she was well above such sentimental rubbish.

At first, the soirée promised to be a total bust – not enough guests showed up, and of those who did not enough were witty, shocking, or comical to create an atmosphere. At ten o'clock, however, the operatic performance at the Irving Place Theatre ended, and the rooms filled with sophisticated youth – energetic, humorous, and decadent. The musicians remembered their duties. A very mediocre dancer, Annie stood in a corner, watching. Her sister was very busy, moving from one group of guests to another, reveling in what she imagined was social success, and had no more time for relatives. Annie asked for her coat.

The host, a dull-looking man with a formal droopy mustache, offered her an escort. She declined.

Walking down the marble stairway, she brushed elbows with a young man. Apologizing absentmindedly to each other, the two of them continued on – he, to join the party, she, to turn in for the day after writing some letters.

Upon reaching the ballroom, the young man suddenly spun around and froze, gazing blankly at the large buttocks of one of the female guests. He had no idea why, but for a moment it seemed to him that the young lady he had encountered earlier might be the woman of his life. What a silly idea. Still, the least he could do was get another look, if only to prove to himself he was mistaken. He hurried back.

Annie, too, had second thoughts as soon as she found herself outside. Turning the corner, she stopped – and reflected. The man she had encountered earlier had struck her as, well, unusual-looking in a way that makes a person special in a woman's eyes.

Was he wealthy? Was he a lot of fun? Would she have married him had he asked her?

Few people, no matter how gullible, will hire an employee without a thorough background check, or engage the services of a lawyer without at least a brief interview with him. Selecting a life-long partner

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is a much simpler process.

Goodness. What was she doing, walking away from a possible lifetime of happiness?

She turned back. Unfortunately for everyone, Sutton had already left the building, running swiftly in the wrong direction and turning the wrong corner. After inspecting every room in the mansion, Annie told her sister she seemed to have left her shawl somewhere.

The sister, whom one of her husband's cronies had just treated with thinly disguised contempt, used the opportunity to vent her anger on Annie, as sisters will, becoming obnoxious and pointing out that she wasn't responsible for other people's stuff and did not even remember Annie bringing along a shawl to begin with.

Acrid words were exchanged.

The following day, it dawned on Sutton it might be a good idea to go back to the house to make some inquiries.

The hostess, Aurora Gladstone, née McCulloch, explained to him after some hesitation that her little sister Annie must have left town by now.

Left town?

She had gone home.

Home, where?

She resided with her parents in Springfield, Michigan.

Michigan?

Yes.

Not Springfield, Illinois, perchance?

What?

Illinois. Springfield, Illinois.

Ah, yes. Silly me, Aurora said, laughing vaguely. She was thinking of something else. Illinois, of course.

Definitely not Springfield, Kentucky, or Springfield, Ohio? And not, for that matter, Tampa Bay, Florida?

No. Springfield, Illinois, definitely.

Sutton paused to give the hostess' perceptive powers time to rest a little before asking whether she was absolutely sure.

About what?

About Springfield, Illinois.

What about Springfield, Illinois?

Was she absolutely certain that was where her parents and sister

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resided?

What? Oh. Yes, pal, reasonably certain.

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Well, why not? Hop on the train, get off at Springfield, and find her – just to make sure. He couldn't. Not yet. He was due for the annual trip to New Orleans, where he would have to explain to his big bushy-eyebrowed tyrannical father where all the money had gone. His heartless father insisted on these annual personal meetings. The explanation Sutton provided usually resulted in his allowance being discontinued for about three months, "to teach the young rascal a valuable lesson." Sutton's bills were hardly a burden on the planter's considerable income. The report and the lesson occurred purely for form's sake and had nothing to do with budget considerations.

Not this time, though. Certain rumors had reached the planter. Scolding his son half-heartedly for squandering his father's hard-earned plantation ducats at seedy gambling houses, the master of the house suddenly asked why Sutton used an assumed name – in New York and other places. Merde! Was he ashamed of his own family?

No, of course not.

Was he absolutely sure he was not at all ashamed of his father? Not even a tiny little bit?

Well, he was not ashamed per se, only you see, his father was a planter, and up North being the son of a planter did not exactly endear you to folks of good social standing. It did not dispose them favorably towards you, so to speak.

"So you are ashamed of me."

"No, Papa. You're not listening."

"I knew it."

"You're not listening! Pay attention. Up north, planters are not as well respected as perhaps they should be," Sutton said diplomatically.

"Why not?"

"Because a lot of them are slave owners."

"A lot of whom?"

"A lot of planters. A lot of planters are slave owners. You're not listening at all. Most planters are slave owners. Up north, being a slave owner is considered uncouth."

"Oh, really."

"Yes, imagine."

"Let me get this straight. The damn Yankees now think that being a slave owner makes you a second-class citizen?"

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"Well, in a nutshell – yes."

Sutton's father became furious at that point.

Did the planter's precious son know and appreciate how many slaves his father had bought from the damn Yankees lately? Did he even know the damn Yankees traded in slaves here, in the South? Thunder and lightning! Did he know about the Fugitive Act, thanks to which some of them damn Yankees were making so much money it was ridiculous? Now here was the deal ...

"Here's the deal, son," the planter said gravely. "If you don't mend your ways ... if you don't stop visiting disreputable holes, if you continue to associate with your despicable friends up North ... I mean, the way I see it, you've already learned about enough at that infernal school of yours ... what's it called?"

"What's what called?"

"The damn Yankee school you went to, for which I paid. What's it called?"

"Columbia College. You're not paying attention to what I'm saying, Papa."

"Don't you tell me what I should do, young man! Attention, my ass. Merde! Since you already have your education, and it hasn't done you any good, either, there isn't anything left for you to do up there ... If you don't do as I say, I'll disown you. That'll teach you."

"Teach me what?"

"Huh?"

"What will it teach me?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Listen carefully, Papa," Sutton explained patiently. "You said you'd disown me ..."

"Upon my word, I will!"

"That's not what we were talking about, though."

"What?"

"You keep throwing me off," young Sutton complained. "I'm trying to follow your logic as best I can, but you keep throwing me off. I'm still at sea here. I have no idea what it is you want from me. You keep jumping from one thing to another."

"Merde! Now you listen to me, mon amis. I want to see you out there on the field tomorrow, side by side with the overseer. I want you to learn some stuff that's actually useful, for a change."

"Huh ... what?"

"You're going to become a planter, like your old man."

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"I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you, Papa," Sutton said, getting really angry now.

"What! You defy your own father, then?"

"No."

"Yes!"

"Listen carefully, Papa ... "

"I have been listening! I've heard enough!"

"You could have fooled me. What did I just say?"

"I said ... "

"No, I. What did I just say? There you go. You haven't been listening."

"You're defying me, sir!"

"Not at all. I just don't want to be a planter. That's not defiance. I have my preferences ... "

"Fine. Have it your way," the planter said furiously. "From now on, you're not going to get a penny from me. And I'm taking you out of my will, too."

The following day, a lawyer from New Orleans arrived to make it official.

\*\*\*

Opera was one of the most popular pastimes in New Orleans in those days. Because there is only a handful good operas, and even fewer existed back in the year of Our Lord's Grace One Thousand Eight Hundred and Fifty Six, Louisiana opera buffs were familiar with all of them. Mediocre pieces were not performed for lack of subsidies. Four theatres dedicated from two to five nights each week to operatic productions.

During a performance at one such theatre, the planter quarreled very badly with someone over the soprano's high note in Act Two of the new production of the Elixir of Love. (As a matter of fact, everyone in the city was irritable that week. A yellow fever epidemic had just subsided. Some prices had gone up. The mayor was a fool. There were other reasons as well). A challenge was issued. The usual spot, i.e. the shadow of the Dueling Oaks, was agreed upon. The planter's adversary reappeared in society three days later, pale yet composed. The planter's body was never recovered, even though the search party fired their cannon repeatedly over the surface of the Mississippi.

Dropping by the plantation house once again, the attorney unsealed the new will. The late lamented bequeathed a pension of six hundred dollars per annum to his slender widow, and freedom certificates, with a lump sum of two hundred attached to each, to some of the better behaved slaves. The rest of the assets, including the remaining slaves, went to charities and churches. There was no mention of the

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planter's son in the document.

Sutton was too overwhelmed by his father's passing to pay attention to detail. Once the initial shock had worn off, his first thought was whether he had to shoulder more responsibility now. He resented the idea.

He was glad the plantation belonged to the parish of St. Louis Cathedral now. He could never get the hang of treating slaves the way one was expected to treat them. Thinking about his mother, he reckoned that, though not exactly comfortable on six hundred a year, she was not going to starve either. He was going to be free again once he had taken care of her immediate needs, which included listening to her rants about the lifelong cruelty of the late lamented.

"Look," his mother said after one of those rants. "I don't know what your plans are, my dear child, but you are going to help me move. I'm a lady, you know. I can't very well go around searching for a new place myself. I can't stay at the house either, now that it belongs to whatever that infernal charity's name is. Do you know any good houses down in New Orleans?"

Sutton's sense of filial duty suggested he should delegate. Running through the short list of candidates, he zeroed in on just the man he wanted. He told his mother to stop hurling and smashing things and wait one day.

Saddling one of his father's excellent horses, he journeyed to New Orleans and knocked on the door of the shabbiest house on the Rue North Rampart. A thin-limbed middle-aged mulatto woman let him in.

"Yes, how can I help you, sir?" she asked, not even bothering to make the obligatory hospitable note in her voice sound less fake.

"Is Manny home?"

"Manny? Yes. Do you want me to get him for you, sir?"

"It's me," Sutton said. "Hello? What's the matter with you, Sarah? It's me, Kenneth."

"Oh!" She squinted at him myopically. She refused to wear eyeglasses. She claimed they made her dizzy. "Oh. Well, come on in, then, Masta Kenneth. Manny! Hey, Manny! Masta Kenneth here to see you."

Manny came down, looking glum.

"Oh," he said. "It's you."

The two men faced each other across the room.

Manny's hair was dark-brown and curly, and his skin a shade darker than Sutton's. His lips were, in fact, thinner than his half-brother's.

The two were about the same height. Both were powerfully built. Both had blue eyes.

"I need you to do something for me," Sutton said. "I'll pay you whatever you think is fair."

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"You do know I'm no longer a slave, right?"

"So I hear."

"But you still want me to run errands for you."

This took Sutton aback a little. Furrowing his brow, he tried to rationalize what he had just been told. "What?" he said. "Errands? What errands?"

"Errands. You know. Errands."

Sutton gave the matter some more thought. "Did I ever make you run errands?" he asked, not very confidently.

"No," Manny replied upon some reflection.

"Well, then."

Both were silent for a while.

"Well, what is it, then?" Manny asked, annoyed.

"Oh," Sutton said. "Wait. Ah, yes. About my mother."

"I have nothing against her."

"Good. That's why I'd like you to help her move."

"Move?"

"To a new place."

"Oh. I see ..." Manny eyed Sutton suspiciously. "Why don't you help her? You're her son."

Sutton had expected the question.

"I have to leave," he explained. "It's very urgent. I'll be away for a while."

"You know your father left me two hundred dollars."

Sutton was not sure why this had to be brought up now. "I think so. I remember. I was there when they opened the will. So?"

"I'm just saying."

"I see. Well. That's two hundred dollars more than he left me."

"He left you a complete education and the appearance of a white man."

Where do they get these ideas, Sutton wondered vaguely. The fellow must have been attending some meetings in town. What did any of it have to do with the matter at hand, though? He decided to ignore it. "Look," he said. "Manny, I'm going to pay you ... uh ... a hundred and fifty. All right?"

"A hundred and fifty dollars? For helping your mother move?"

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"That's right."

"You're very generous. As befits an educated person."

"Look," Sutton said angrily. "You're not paying attention! When my education has earned me enough money to pay for your education, and suddenly you find that I'm not paying for it, you may complain, but not till then. As for appearances, you could pass for a white man anywhere, anytime."

Manny did not like any of this, but the possibility of gaining a hundred and fifty dollars could not be easily dismissed, either.

"Come, let's have tea," he said at last. "Ma, make us some tea, will you."

Grudgingly, Ma complied. Had she been a shade more observant, she would have been struck, and not for the first time either, by the astonishing resemblance between the two half-brothers, obvious despite the differences we mentioned earlier.

"All right," Manny said. "You want me to find a place, arrange the purchase, and move her junk over to her new dwellings, and you'll pay me a hundred fifty for my pains. Is that right?"

"Yes," Sutton said, much relieved.

Manny pondered for quite some time before asking, "Do I get an advance?"

"No."

"No?"

"You get all of it, right now."

Sutton placed a leather purse on the table. After a moment's hesitation, Manny picked it up. Weighing it in his hand, he looked sharply at his half-brother.

"What makes you think I won't just keep the money and do nothing? You're going away, aren't you?"

"I trust you," Sutton said simply.

Though unexpected, the statement sounded quite reasonable. The two half-brothers had known each other for two decades. Each was aware of the other's reputation. Manny was well-known in some circles as a man of integrity. (Sutton was not, which did not matter, since the purse was already in Manny's hand).

"All right," Manny said. "I'll do it."

"Good."

They sipped their tea simultaneously. The resemblance would have once again been obvious to anyone except Manny's mother. The peculiar manner of holding one's elbow slightly higher than was customary, the slow motion of one's train of thought making unexpected stops on its way from premise to conclusion, each stop

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punctuated by a blink and a raised eyebrow – there were many more similarities.

"Oh, and another thing," Sutton said suddenly. "I almost forgot. I don't know how long I'm going to be away, but if you ever need my help, just drop me a note, care of Giovanni Florentino, New York City. Here's the card."

He placed the card on the table. Picking it up, Manny examined it closely.

"You aren't exactly bright, are you?" he asked glumly.

Sutton frowned. He had been told he was not bright many times, but never by a *gen de couleur*. Manny's remark surprised him unpleasantly. A clever retort was already forming slowly in his mind when suddenly he blurted out, "So what, you aren't exactly bright either."

The tension lifted. Both men chuckled simultaneously. Hearing each other's chuckling made them laugh.

"Aw, all right," Sutton said. "You'll take care of it, then. Thanks, Manny."

Sutton's casual use of his Christian name jarred Manny. Whatever rapport may have been established earlier was gone. Even so, Manny extended his hand across the table. This was a perfectly natural thing to do for a *gen de couleur* in New Orleans. Up north, things were different. Sutton had been raised not too far from here, though, and was familiar with the local ways. He shook his half-brother's hand without hesitation.

Emptying his bank account, he demanded that all of the seven hundred and fifty dollars in it be given to him in gold. The clerk attempted to coax him into taking a few treasury notes, but Sutton remained adamant, bidding the clerk to pay attention to what he was saying.

His monthly allowance gone, Sutton figured he had no choice but to turn his hobby into a source of income. Certain habits had to be adjusted. Earlier, he had had no reason to care whether he won or lost, deriving aesthetic joy from his methods and oftentimes allowing the losers to restore their fortunes – mostly in order to continue on friendly terms with them.

Dropping by his father's club one night, he played poker with some of the acquaintances. It went well. In less than two hours, he won two thousand. To the other players' surprise, he suddenly rose from his seat, looking at his watch and scooping up the winnings. "I'm terribly sorry, gentlemen," he said. "I have an appointment. I'll be back."

After giving it some thought, they reckoned it was just a variation on the usual theme. The planter's boy, roguish but amiable, would soon return and allow them to win it all back, as was his custom.

Sutton left New Orleans on the next boat traveling up river.

Venturing into this or that town on foot, or in a buggy where buggies were available, playing cards in various establishments, losing

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occasionally, winning most of the time, and gaining valuable experience, he continued traveling north. Twice he was accused of cheating, barely managing to escape both times. After that, each time he reckoned he had outstayed his welcome, he returned to the great river immediately, boarding the next available steamer. In this fashion, he arrived in Illinois.

He reached Springfield by rail. Magnolias were in bloom. He hired rooms at the best hotel (boasting uniformed bellhops, important-looking mustached clerks, and lodgers with necks that could only be seen from the back, the flesh separating chin from chest resembling a smooth tube positioned at a forty-five degree angle to the ground). Visiting two tailors and a shoemaker, he ordered the best clothes they could put together for him using the latest London designs. One of the two tailors, bogged down by a clientele favoring unassuming attire, pounced on his chance. London quality it was not, but Springfield's twilight concealed effectively some of the more obvious incongruences of Sutton's new suit.

He made some cautious inquires, drawing people into conversations clumsily, his openings never deviating much from the "Hello, do you live around here?" variety, soon followed by a point-blank question regarding a certain person's address. Each time, he added "My father and he used to be very good friends." For style, no doubt.

Springfield is hardly a large city now and was even smaller then. Soon it occurred to Sutton he might as well ask a priest.

"Ah, yes," said the good-natured Presbyterian. "They're a very good family. Not exactly pious, but quite solid. They never talk during sermons and ..."

"You're not paying attention," Sutton said. "I wouldn't care if they were highway robbers or Canaanites. Where do they live? I need the address. Like, you know, the house number, the name of the street, that kind of thing."

"They're just down the block, my good fellow. Only the other day ..."

"I see a dozen houses down the block. Now concentrate, Father. In order to call on them, I need to know exactly which house you mean."

"It's the third one on the left."

"Thank you. Goodness."

Sutton bumped into Annie in the street before he could devise an intricate plan for arranging an incidental encounter. There she was, slightly taller than he remembered, though just as lovely, he thought. Yes. Definitely.

"Hello," he said. "Do you live around here?"

The question seemed to startle her. Her mind had to go through a series of adjustments. He understood – and waited patiently.

"Yes," she said, smiling and averting her eyes, as any other well-mannered maiden would have done. Setting them on Sutton

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again, she asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm ... " he was barely able to keep himself from blurting out, "My father used to be friends with your father." He hesitated. "I'm here on business," he said at last, adding in a sudden access of inspiration, "I'm waiting for my partner. Just got a telegram from him. He says he might be a week late. ... I know nothing about this place. Is there ... a theatre in this city, maybe?"

As it happened, a touring company was in town performing some trendy British nonsense.

"May I ... Would you like to join me tonight?" he asked. "I'll get the tickets."

"Yes," she replied simply.

"Well, that's just marvelous," he said.

"What's your name?"

"Oh," he said. "Yes. My name?"

"You do have a name, I take it?"

"It's Sutton. Kenneth Sutton." Suddenly he had no idea how to continue this conversation.

"Well, Mr. Sutton?"

"Well ... what?"

"Aren't you going to ask me what my name is?"

He was going to say he already knew it. He checked himself.

"I'm sorry. Oh. I'm awfully, awfully sorry. I'm such a dolt sometimes. What's your name, uh ... Miss ..."

"It's Ann."

"Ann?"

"Ann McCulloch. You may call me Annie, though. Everyone else does."

"Nice to meet you, Ms. McCulloch. I'll come over around seven, then, to ... uh ... pick you up Would that be all right with you?"

"Perfect, Mr. Sutton."

"Is that your house? The third one on the left? The one with the stucco walls?"

"How did you know?"

"Oh. I didn't. I just thought, well, what other house can it possibly be?"

Her laugh was melodious. He laughed too.

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"Seven o'clock, then, Mr. Sutton. Don't be late."

After getting tipsy at one of the pubs, he took a long walk and sobered up again. At seven he knocked at the front door of the house.

A servant let him in. The head of the family shook Sutton's hand warmly before offering him a drink. This was odd. After all, he was a prospective suitor visiting the house for the first time, expecting to be treated with some suspicion, or coldness. Instead, they were giving him a hearty welcome. The lady of the house smiled warmly and took his coat herself. Upon reflection, Sutton ascribed the slight insincerity he detected in her smile to the residual subservience characteristic of many Mexican women regardless of their social standing.

The interior of the house was, well, sumptuous, he thought. The quartered oak ceilings, mosaics, carved oak furniture – one did not expect to encounter tasteful luxury so far from the East Coast. All right, so the woman of his life was somewhat wealthy. Nothing wrong with that. In fact, a plausible dowry might be the answer to many of his problems right now. The father assured Sutton that his daughter was almost ready. She would be down presently. What a splendid idea – taking her to a performance.

Entering the room, she glided across, offering him her opalescent hand. He bent down and kissed it.

At the performance, Annie attempted to follow the plot and failed. Sutton never even tried to keep up with the story. Casting slanting glances at each other, touching hands as if by accident, smiling, blushing – the sweet torture went on until the intermission. After some refreshments, they returned to the auditorium, eager to continue.

He walked her home.

They saw five more performances that week, although how many different plays were actually presented neither of them knew for certain. It may have been the same play every night.

After an especially intoxicating evening, Sutton returned to his hotel room – brimming with happiness and burning with desire. Ordering up a tub – ah, there was an idea. He had to lie down first, though. He entered. He locked the door.

The sight of the three men he did not remember inviting to his suite made him stop in his tracks. He reflected. Unannounced arrivals can be awkward. One does not know what to do with one's hands. He made a slight movement – he was going to get out his handkerchief. The gesture was misconstrued as hostile. The next moment, two pistols were pointing at him.

"I wouldn't move an inch if I were you, partner." The man who was obviously in charge smiled darkly. "And don't make any noise, either."

Suddenly pouncing on Sutton, he punched him in the face. Sutton reckoned his refusal to fall down might be misconstrued as defiance. He obliged the visitors by falling on his back. The blow was, in fact, pretty hard. His jaw smarted.

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"Do you remember us?" the leader asked.

"Yes," said Sutton from the floor.

"Good. You realize it's our money you've spending in this backwards Yankee town. You do realize that, right?"

"Not quite," Sutton said, reflecting. "Not all of it is yours. I do remember playing cards with some other folks as well."

"That's not our concern, partner. We don't want other people's money. We do want ours, though. And we intend to get it."

"I won it from you," Sutton reminded him. "Fair and square."

The man towering over him chuckled grimly. "No, no, partner. That's where you're wrong. You don't actually win at my gambling house. You don't actually saunter into my establishment and start taking away my bread, fella. It's my livelihood we're talking about. See? You can break even now and then, maybe. Big casinos can afford winners. They even offer them free booze. I can't. Are you kidding? I'd be out of business in a week, partner."

"What's the point, then?"

"Just making a living, partner."

"No. What's the point for the customer?"

"Oh, that. Beats me. It's got to be the thrill, I guess. You folks really enjoy it. You get to gamble, I get the money. Fair's fair."

Sutton touched his jaw. His teeth seemed to be intact. The bruise, if there was one, could not be very large or, at any rate, very noticeable, he hoped.

"I see your point," he said from the floor.

"You do? Good. Now. I realize part of the money's gone. Well, whatever you still have, give it up, kid. Cough it all up right now. It better be a good round sum, partner, or I'll have no choice but to cripple you for life."

Sutton had an idea.

"Wait," he said. "You're not doing it right."

"Huh?"

"Let me get up. I'll explain."

Scoffing, the leader stepped aside, gazing at Sutton disdainfully.

"I mean," Sutton said, rising, "you must have ... uh ... incurred ... uh ... expenses ... coming here. I mean, you had to eat, you must have hired lodgings, wined your horses, and so forth. In the meantime, with no one to oversee it in your absence, your enterprise has been losing money all along."

"That's true," the leader said.

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"Even if I paid you in full, it wouldn't be enough to restore all of your losses."

"I'm a reasonable person," the leader said. "I never ask for more than I know I can get, partner. See what I mean? I mean, if I actually allowed every dickhead in the area to come in and take away my bread ..."

"Yes, we've already covered that," Sutton said impatiently. "Yours is the only logical approach, I grant you. Only, you see, you just might be able to get back more than you expected. That's all I'm saying. That's the point I'm trying to make. All you have to do is listen to me. Pay attention. I'm going to make you an offer."

The racketeer paused before replying, "I'm going to let you talk for a while, just to see where this is going. If you try any tricks, I'll kill you. Is that clear?"

"Is what clear?"

"If you try any tricks, I'll just kill you. I just want you to know that. Some folks don't tell you these things in advance. I do. I'm pretty honest, and I earn ..."

"Oh, yes, yes, sure. I understand. Now ..."

"You see my point, then."

"Yes! I see it clearly. Listen."

"Go ahead."

"Right. Where was I?" Sutton furrowed his brow.

"You were about to make me an offer."

"Right." Sutton scratched his head. "Ah, yes. I didn't select this town at random. When I came here, I had a purpose. The woman I love lives here." The leader and his assistants grinned. Now at last there was some sympathy for the victim, however superficial. Sutton felt he was on the right track. "I came here in order to get married," he went on. "Her father is a wealthy man. If I make a good impression, there'll be a dowry. I'll be able to pay you twice the sum you seek. How does that sound to you?"

"Sounds good so far. Keep talking."

"There's just one problem, though."

"Oh," said the leader.

"Yes. I really have to make a good impression. It's imperative that I do. There's no way around it. I must. I have to show myself as ... Let's just say, I have to come across as a man of means. If I presented myself to the father of my bride as a penniless vagabond, I'd be given a vagabond's dowry. If, on the other hand, I could pass myself off as a man of worth and value, the father would not want to ... uh ... diminish himself in my eyes, never mind his own, by giving me too little. In order to accomplish this, though ... " Sutton stopped.

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"Yes?" the leader prompted. "I'm not sure I know ... "

"Hold it. You're not paying attention to what I'm trying to tell you here. Where was I? Oh!" It came to him. "In order to accomplish this, I need a bankroll. I don't know anyone in this city. I was going to make some money at the gambling house, but that might take some time. It would be in everyone's best interests if you lent me some. And you are going to lend it to me because ... because ... "

They were ominously silent. Sutton sensed the momentum slipping away. Making a Herculean mental effort, he found the conclusion, "... because that's your only chance to recover everything you've lost and maybe gain a few dollars on top of it."

"How much?" the leader asked.

"What?"

"How much do you need?"

"Oh ... " Sutton bit his lip. He rolled his eyes. He inclined his head. He rolled his eyes again. "I can guarantee you four thousand in two weeks. The bankroll I can do it with is one thousand dollars, payable right now."

The leader chuckled.

"Promise you're going to share it with other patients at the asylum you escaped from, partner."

"Take it or leave it."

"A thousand dollars!"

Sutton shrugged. The leader pondered, frowning. Sutton shook his head in wonderment at folks' inability, including his own, to think quickly. The gambling house owner continued pondering.

After all, why not? Sutton had been spotted strolling with a well-bred wench earlier. Sutton was well-bred himself. Why not? Sutton was not a professional gambler. Folks who gamble for a living do not ply their trade at shabby disreputable joints. They seek out large, brightly lit casinos, featuring rapidly served drinks, well-mannered staff, and well-groomed regular customers. Sutton was a man in a fix who sought to extricate himself through marriage. Again, why not? The offer was too tempting to walk away from.

"Since you're not getting away ... " the leader said. "Let's get one thing clear. You can't get away. If you try, we'll catch and kill you."

"What are you talking about?" Sutton demanded. "I'm not sure I follow."

"If your plan includes giving us the slip, partner ... "

"Have you been listening to me?" Sutton asked angrily. "I'm not getting away. Look, I'm not a swindler. I value my word."

"Yeah. All right, then. Still ... "

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"Pay attention!" Sutton urged him. "I get it. If I try to get away, you'll catch and kill me. Understood. Now get to the point."

"How about three hundred?"

"Will you please try to concentrate!" Sutton said. "Didn't I just explain it all to you? This is outrageous."

"All right, all right. Boys? Are we going to lend this blockhead a thousand?"

The boys shrugged noncommittally.

"All right," the leader scratched his head. "Uh ... Treasury notes?"

"Treasury notes!" Sutton gave them an unhappy chuckle. "No, you weren't listening at all. Too many important things on your mind, I take it."

"What's wrong with treasury notes?"

"We're not going to go into that, I hope," Sutton said. "Gold. It has to be in gold."

Still the leader hesitated. Sutton poured a glassful of water from a decanter and seated himself in a chair.

"Well ... " the leader said.

"I'm not going to explain it again," Sutton told him. "Forget it. I don't want to waste anymore time on you."

Greed won out.

\*\*\*

Flower baskets were sent, jewelry purchased and delivered, and the ultimate formal visit soon followed. Annie's father made every effort to please the bridegroom. The lady of the house fawned on Sutton unceasingly. A dowry was tactfully hinted at and just as tactfully promised. Assurances were extended from both sides, honeymoon plans put together, the date appointed. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry.

The somewhat unnatural urgency of the events was making Sutton uncomfortable. It occurred to him that gambling, once merely a hobby, now dominated every aspect of his life. Everything was a gamble – his arrival in Springfield, his proposal, and now his hope that the dowry the woman he was marrying brought into the bargain was large enough, and he would have immediate unlimited access to it – on this, his well-being now seemed precariously to depend.

On the day before the wedding, he mentioned the dowry again, very much in passing, three or four times, over lunch. They were in the family's charming backyard garden. The father made a reassuring reply, also in passing, to the effect that of course the dowry was going to be considerable. He loved his youngest daughter to destruction and was going to see to it that everything was in order.

The following day, just before the ceremony, Sutton began to have

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doubts regarding the solvency of his father-in-law. He decided he would take his chances.

A humorous ruddy-cheeked priest married them at the picturesque colonial church just up the block. It was shortly before the organ started playing the appropriate excerpt from Wagner's recently composed opera that Sutton realized there was going to be no dowry. The father of the bride muttered something about important business transactions being postponed, couriers delayed, business slowing down, and so forth. More promises were made, and this time they were truly extravagant.

It was time to beat a retreat. Sutton made an excuse, promising to be right back.

Those waiting for him at the suite – he owed them an explanation. Stopping at the lobby, he used the hotel's stationary to draw up a list of points he was going to make – a splendid idea when you're dealing with folks who insist on throwing you off all the time.

No longer hindered by matrimonial concerns that so limit a man's honorable options, he ascended the hotel stairway confidently. Opening the door, he entered with a swagger. His confidence was misconstrued as a sign of success. The three men waiting inside regarded him as their dearest friend. They might have had some differences with him in the past. Let bygones be bygones! If he thought they had treated him roughly, they were ready to apologize and make amends. He had promised them profits, and, lo and behold, he had ... doubled? ... no ... quadrupled! ... their investment. They were rich now! A hearty drink was certainly in order.

"Gentlemen," Sutton said, facing them. "I'm a gambler." He glanced at his list. "I made an honest mistake by trying to win money from you earlier."

"Let bygones be bygones, my friend," the leader said joyously.

"Let me finish," Sutton told him. "Let me get that pencil. Great. Now. I made an honest mistake ... I already said that. All right, I can strike it out now ... To resume. You made a mistake as well. You allowed yourselves to be led astray by avarice."

They gave him an odd look.

"You engaged in something that was not your line of business, namely, gambling." He looked up at them sternly. "Are you paying attention to what I'm saying?" He glanced at his list. "... Gambling ... Strike it out ... Next point. By your own admission, you're not gamblers, gentlemen, since you leave nothing to chance at that establishment of yours."

"What are you getting at?" the leader asked suspiciously.

"Wait! Damn it, don't throw me off now. Where was I? Strike this out ... And this ... All right, here we go. You're probably too stupid to realize that there's nothing more to be done here, and too degenerate to ... uh ... perceive ... while it still matters ... to perceive ... goodness, I can't read my own handwriting ... to perceive that venting your anger on me will not make you richer, more intelligent, less miserable, nor indeed improve your ... uh ... human condition, in any

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manner or form." He looked up at them again. "I mean, damn it, I should have brought a shotgun and blown your ignorant heads off before you knew what was what, but that would have been against my ... uh ... principles, such as they are. I always give folks a second chance. Yes. A second chance. Where was I?" He consulted the list again. "Ah, yes. I'm offering it to you sincerely and without reservation. Your second chance, I mean. I'm offering it. To you. Please leave quietly. Should you turn down my offer, I must warn you that this time I'm fully prepared to fight."

Satisfied, he set the list down on the desk.

"What are you talking about?" the leader asked.

"Goodness!" Sutton said, revolted. "Pay attention, you imbecile! I'm telling you we've lost. There's no money. Get it?"

The three goons were genuinely shocked. The fellow had managed to disappoint them in their happiest expectations. Here they were, eagerly awaiting the arrival of their rightful riches, and now this ... pipsqueak ... whom they had trusted so chivalrously and unreservedly ... this worthless thief ... had the nerve to come in and disappoint them!

The leader rose to his feet slowly. The two others exchanged indignant glances. There was no mistaking it. They were determined to seek their customary retribution.

Sutton threw the entire weight of his body into the punch. Not an expert blow by any means, too crude, and not aimed at any organ or nerve ending in particular, it nonetheless made the leader of the goons stagger backward and fall tumbling over a chair. One of the assistants reached inside his coat for the pistol. Sutton pounced on him. They fell to wrestling, each trying hard to twist and damage each other's limbs and break each other's skulls. At that moment, the second assistant got out his revolver and with its butt delivered a blow to the back of Sutton's head. The revolver went off, shattering a lamp.

\*\*\*

Annie, sweet Annie, gentle and vulnerable, poor credulous Annie abandoned by her young husband on the wedding day, was astonished at first. Clearly, a mistake must have taken place. Her dear handsome Kenneth (Mr. Sutton to everyone else) must have gone someplace briefly – the post office, perhaps – and was going to be back soon. An hour passed. Two hours. Three. She asked her father what, in his opinion, was going on. Tormented by guilt – Annie was his favorite daughter, he loved her so – he prevaricated, flinched, and even wrung his hands a little before blurting out the truth. Kenneth Sutton was a miserable swindler and a rogue. He had expected a dowry. Seeing that there would be none, he fled. He was no good. A wealthy businessman? Not likely. Just a journeyman swindler.

\*\*\*

Sweet vulnerable Annie attempted to shed some self-pitying tears in her old room – for about ten minutes. She had no luck with men. She

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had loved twice, and had been abandoned twice. Perhaps it was time she did something about it.

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Getting out of her wedding dress, she donned her ordinary clothes. Without saying a word to her parents, she walked the five blocks separating her father's house from Sutton's hotel. She was going to make a scene. Just when she was about to knock on the suite's door, though, she heard a series of loud grunts coming from inside. Someone was upstaging her. She realized that the single-shot pistol nestling cozily in her purse – the last-resort tool – might come in handy, but not in the manner she had thought earlier.

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She took off her shoes and set them, and the purse, down on the floor beside the door. She took out the pistol and straightened. She listened. Bending down again, she corrected the position of her shoes on the floor. Turning the knob slowly, she nudged the door open. Absorbed in their gruesome business, the three goons never noticed her entrance. This gave Annie time to get her bearings.

The two assistants were holding Sutton in an upright position while the leader delivered punishment, pausing to allow the meaning of each blow to sink in and to explain the reason for it.

"Hold it," Annie said, aiming her pistol at the picturesque group. "Don't move. Let him go."

The group froze, coming to resemble for a moment Michelangelo's fourth Pieta. They released Sutton. Scanning the room, Annie noticed a pistol on the desk. The goon on Sutton's left passed his hand inside his coat.

"Stop right there," she said. "Put your hands up. Both of them. Kenneth, take his gun."

Sutton did.

"You shouldn't have come," he told her. "What's the matter with you! Barging in like that ... interfering ... uh ... "

"Don't tell me what to do, we've only been married three hours," Annie countered. "Where do you get off abandoning me like that, in the middle of the wedding? Do you have any idea how embarrassing it was? Do you?"

"That's your own fault, lass," the goon who seemed to be in charge said. "You shouldn't have lied about that dowry. Now put that gun down."

"I didn't lie. Kenneth, this whole thing about the dowry is news to me. Don't you have money of your own?"

The one in charge laughed openly. The other two scoffed.

"He only wanted to marry you because he thought you had money," the one in charge explained. "He's a very greedy man, lass. Put that gun down before someone gets hurt, there's a good girl."

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"Was that why you were beating him up earlier?" she asked.  
"Because he's greedy?"

"Yeah. He won't give us the money he owes us."

"Kenneth, is that true?"

"Is what true?" Sutton asked.

"You owe them?"

"They think I do," he said. "Listen, Annie, you're a very sweet girl, but, really, you should go home now. Run along. Go on."

"The hell I will. How much does he owe you?" she asked.

"Well, lass, he agrees we've run up some expenses while chasing after him. And then we lent him a fortune."

"Just give me the sum total."

"Three thousand. That's just a rough figure, you understand. It's probably a lot more than that. We'd appreciate it if you stopped pointing that gun at us. Put it down."

"Will this do?" she asked, unbuttoning the collar of her dress and with one abrupt movement ripping the necklace off her neck. She held the necklace up for everyone to observe before placing it on the desk.

Reaching over, the leader picked up and inspected the necklace.

"Are you sure it's real?" he asked.

One of the assistants drew closer, eyes fixed on the necklace.

"Looks real enough to me," he said.

"My father paid seven thousand for it," Annie said.

"Are you sure?"

"Take it or leave it."

In fact, Sutton (and not Annie's father) had only paid two hundred of the goons' money for it two days previously. He reckoned it might be wise not to bring that up now. He was in the stage of his life when a man begins to realize that certain problems might just go away if only one can stop talking about them.

"Fair's fair," the leader said. "Well, unless you've got anything else to say to us, lass, we should probably just go now. Can we have our weapons back?"

"No," Annie said sternly. "And don't touch those shoes outside, either. They're mine."

"Oh, come on, lass," the leader said. "Who do you take us for? We aren't thieves. Sutton knows. Sutton, my friend, I reckon she's as good a wife as any. Such spirit ... "

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Sutton pointed the pistol at him.

"All right, all right," the leader said. "No need to be hostile. I was just saying."

"So what's it going to be, Kenneth?" Annie asked, facing him, when the goons were gone. "Are we married or not?"

"You shouldn't have come here," he said, not very confidently. "Maybe you should just leave. Go home, Annie."

She did not seem to understand. He had already told her earlier, and yet she was still here.

"Stop ordering me around," she said. "What kind of person are you, anyway? Is your word worth anything?"

"My word?"

"When we met, I didn't know it was about the dowry."

"It wasn't. Not really."

"Could have fooled me."

"Well," he said judiciously. "The important part is you can go down to the city hall tomorrow and get the thing annulled. I'm sorry. I led you on. Please go home now."

"I just saved your life."

"You're not paying attention ... What? My life? When?"

"Five minutes ago."

"Naw. Saved my life? Let's not exaggerate here. Three obese ruffians with an attitude – it was nothing. Things were under control."

"That's a very original way of looking at it. Two gorillas gripping your arms and a third smashing your ribs and jaw, you call that keeping things under control? Look at that shiner."

He touched it. He winced.

"I've seen worse," he said. "Anyway, I've got to go now."

"You're not leaving."

"Of course I am."

"Well, at least you're not leaving without me."

"Annie, I ... "

"Did you hear what I just said?"

"Annie! Why doesn't anybody listen anymore? Where was I? Oh. Yes. You don't even know who I am. You know nothing about me."

"Really."

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"Yes."

"Well, you might as well tell me now. Are you a bigamist?"

"Bigamist? No. Look, I'm a gambler."

She shrugged.

"I figured as much," she said.

"No, you don't understand. I'm a professional gambler. That's what I do for a living. It's really very simple. I ride into town, I find a game, I take as much money as I can, and then I run."

"No!" she said, pulling a straight face.

"Yes," he said, annoyed. "That's what I do. That's me. I'm a gambler."

"You weren't always a gambler."

He raised an eyebrow. "No. I guess not. I was the son of a wealthy planter once."

"Now I understand. Well. You don't know much about me either. And I daresay you may not like me at all when you get to know who and what I really am."

He pondered. Suddenly he laughed, falling into a chair and tossing the pistol on the table. Annie took umbrage.

"What's so funny? You don't believe me?"

"Of course I believe you," he said. "Did you cut classes? Did you tie your aunt's shoe laces together? No, don't tell me. Wait. I got it! You falsely accused your governess of stealing your mother's earrings."

"You aren't very bright," she said. "Anyway, I was an accomplice in my sister's murder."

"Huh?" Sutton stopped laughing. "Whoa. Wait a minute ... "

"Definitely not very bright," she said. "No, I'm not just saying it. I had a crash on her husband. I imagined she took him away from me. I was sixteen. I met a man who loathed them both. I arranged it so he could surprise them. They're both dead. It happened ten years ago. Somehow I've been able to live with it."

She did not mention falling in love with her sister's murderer. Neither Annie nor Rory knew that the eldest sister was still alive.

"That's pretty strong stuff," Sutton said, not very confidently. "I don't know what to say. I'm sorry. What does one say to something like that? I was going to ask you ... "

"Yes?"

"Wait, hold it. I'm trying to think ... Ah, yes. Why are you still here?"

"Because I love you."

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"Oh. Hmm. I don't know what to say to that either. Would you like a drink?"

"Yes."

They had one, and then another. They sat beside each other on the bed. She stroked his hair.

Both were nervous at first. Not quite trusting each other, they couldn't help making some false moves. The night was young, though.

The night was very young, and neither of them was shy. Cautious, maybe, but hardly shy.

A prolonged stretch of sensual exploration ensued. Ostensibly willowy and fragile, Annie turned out to be a well-shaped woman underneath the clothes that, in concert with the epoch's mores, tended to conceal shapes. Sutton, who appeared to be slender in a suit, was a powerfully built man, muscular, yet not without some residual adolescent traits that positively enchanted Annie. She felt like a primeval woman cuddling in her protector's embrace. He derived superhuman joy from comforting her fragile forms, passing his arm along her supple back, planting soft kisses on her dark eyes, girlish nose, trusting tiny mouth, thin neck, small firm breasts. The back of his hand ran from her elusive sensitive toes up her leg, stopping briefly to caress the chiseled knee.

The scent of her joyous perspiration drove him to the brink of insanity.

By dawn, they knew each other well. Annie wept for the first time in many years, pressing her cheek against Sutton's chest. Burying his face in her damp hair, he encircled her waist with his thumbs and middle fingers.

"I don't want to stop at my folks' place," she said. "I'll just write them a note."

"Whatever you say."

"Some clothes, perhaps ... "

"Clothes? Oh. No, it's all right. We'll buy all you need later. Come as you are. Your shoes must be very uncomfortable, though."

"They're from the best shoemaker in town."

"What? No. You're not listening, darling. I wasn't discussing shoemakers. I was referring to your shoes. They're abominable. Just look at them. I wouldn't even call them shoes. They're more like shackles. Uh ... " He added shyly, "Your gentle feet deserve better."

He smiled. She smiled back.

There was nothing particularly endearing about her oblong Aztec feet. Somewhat bottom-heavy as many women of partly Mexican decent tend to be, she would probably grow even more pear-shaped with age – or not. Sutton could not care less. She was his Annie, his own dark-haired, bright-eyed, courageous, sarcastic Annie, with her perfect indifference to social standards, a girl with a tainted past. Life

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was going to be one long honeymoon.

Boarding an early train, they fell asleep in their seats, holding hands. Sutton was going to cuddle a little. Annie stopped him. Two outcasts, they were still subject to protocol. Overt signs of erotic affection were hardly permissible in that era.

Boarding a steamer, they traveled north for two days. Annie wished to avoid the East Coast as much as possible. Sutton had little passion for the South – ever since his Columbia College days he thought of himself as a Northerner at heart. Out west, there wasn't enough gambling to make a decent living. This limited their options. Sutton hoped he could eventually save up enough money to go into business, possibly in Europe. What kind of business? Oh, just any old business, so long as it generated a steady income and did not require heavy involvement on the investor's part. He was genuinely happy. He could not believe his good fortune. Luck smiled on him – a little bashfully, perhaps. Back in Springfield, Annie could have just said no, I'm sorry, you aren't my type. Or she could have been only interested in his income. Or she could have insisted on his taking her into society. Instead, she quickly became what he wanted her to be – his faithful companion and soul mate – practically overnight.

Like many others, she too had a problem paying attention to anything she was told or shown. It did not matter. Their love transcended mere communication.

Every day she managed to surprise him with some new enchanting trait of hers. In a ship's cabin, at an inn, taking a stroll in the fields, naked or dressed, refreshed or fatigued, theirs was continuous bliss.

Sutton's income-generating strategy worked like this. Arriving in a town or city, he enjoyed himself and pampered Annie until there was a hole in the budget the size of the territories annexed as a result of the Mexican Campaign. He would then drop by the nearest gambling place and ruin the folks' fun by cleaning them out. After that, he usually executed what he conceitedly called his "famous vanishing act."

This went on for five months. After an especially successful night, Sutton decided to deposit a good round sum in a bank for safekeeping. Not quite trusting small-town banks, he selected St. Louis as their next destination. He and Annie hired rooms in a reputable hotel. At the bank, he managed to strike a very good deal (this was before the proverbial financial panic of the late 1850's). He should have gone back to the hotel immediately. Alas. The casino he spotted as he walked down the avenue proved irresistible – a brightly lit, posh, elegantly furnished hall filled with polite-looking customers.

He had no idea that certain folks had been watching him and Annie ever since they got off the steamer.

Shortly after he left the bank, three men entered the suite he and Annie had hired. They stepped aside. A fourth man entered in style.

"Hello, Annie," Vargas said quietly. "Gentlemen, please make sure we are not disturbed."

Annie froze. Vargas' associates got out, closing the door behind

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them.

"We haven't seen each other in some time," Vargas said. "I promised you I would come for you as soon as I reached certain goals. Today, I'm secure enough to take a wife without fearing she might get in the way of my projects. I spent some time looking for you before finally lighting on your folks' house in Springfield. They mentioned some crook taking you away. I have nothing against crooks per se. I can tolerate them – up to the point when they take away something that belongs to me. I suggest we get married without delay. Tomorrow's Sunday. There's a church nearby."

End of the line. Places not visited, moments not shared, children never to be born.

"I'm already married," she said, very quietly.

"Indeed," Vargas said. "Not to Kenneth Sutton, perchance?"

"That's right. What ... " She attempted to compose herself. This was no time to be weak. Her destiny and Sutton's were at stake. There was still hope. "What makes you think," she said in a firm voice, "you can just barge in here after all these years ... "

"No, no, sweetheart, that tone won't do at all."

The words – cold, almost indifferent – had a paralyzing effect on Annie. Her own situation was hopeless. Her thoughts turned to Sutton. Whatever Vargas' plans were for her husband, if she could still save him, it was her duty to do so.

"I'm not the reckless adventurer of yesteryear," Vargas went on. "You're looking at a man vested with so much power, the entire continent listens attentively when he chooses to speak. As my wife, you'll be allowed to take liberties with me, but never outside the bedroom."

"I'm not ... "

"Be quiet, Annie. First things first. Kenneth Sutton is not a real person. He doesn't exist. To be sure, there is a Kenneth Devereaux of Baton Rouge, the son of a late planter. The planter died leaving his only child and heir exactly nothing. Kenneth Devereaux went to Columbia College once and was on friendly terms with many prominent folks. Since then, he has abandoned society altogether. Shortly after his father's death, he became a journeyman gambler."

"I'm still his wife," she said.

"Wrong again, Annie." Unfolding a sheet of paper, he showed it to her. "Your marriage has been annulled."

"By whom?"

"By me. I had a word with the officials in Springfield who soon had to admit they had allowed a slew of legal errors in joining you and Kenneth Devereaux in matrimony. Corrections have been made and, as a result, your marriage is now null and void."

Was Sutton still alive? If so, what could she do to help him stay alive?

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"I'm going to take care of Kenneth Devereaux. I only mention this because you seem to be concerned about him. There are two options. I can make him leave quietly ... "

"He wouldn't," Annie said, desperate. "He's not the type. Please don't hurt him. Let me talk to him."

She realized she had nothing to offer in exchange for Sutton's life. Everything she had was already at Vargas' disposal.

"That's out of the question. And he will leave quietly, I assure you. Alternatively, I could dispose of him in a more customary manner – in such a way as to make sure he'll never bother anyone on this earth again. Well. Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to let you choose one of those two options. You've got five minutes to make up your mind. I'm going to sit in this chair and smoke my cigar in the meantime."

One of Vargas' methods was to create for the ones he controlled an illusion of choice. This method has since been adopted by many governments.

Never before had Annie thought of herself as a self-sacrificing type.

The man of her life had found her, lost her, and found her again. She wished the string of miracles had stopped there.

A large paperweight sat on the desk, within reach. Vargas was looking the other way. She could grab the paperweight and crack his skull with it. The three warriors were waiting outside, but there was the window. She could climb out. She could intercept Sutton on his way back from the bank, and together they would make their escape.

She had had no problem aiming the pistol at the three goons who had wanted Sutton's winnings back. If necessary, she would have shot one of them without batting an eye.

Not Vargas, though. She could not imagine lifting her hand against him. The man was difficult to resist. Annie remembered being spellbound by his voice in the past. The feeling was even stronger now.

"Well?" Vargas said. "Time's up."

"Don't hurt him," Annie pleaded.

"I won't. Promise. Thank you, Annie."

Vargas smiled. It was not a happy smile, but there it was. She realized she was smiling back. She could not help it. She had loved him once – a potent, confused adolescent passion. She loathed and dreaded him now – and still she smiled. Going over to the door, he opened it and said a few words to one of the goons.

"Now," he said, closing the door again, "I suggest you come over here and kiss me very gently."

\*\*\*

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Unaware of Annie's predicament, Sutton had a drink at the casino's elegant bar, paid the bill, and proceeded towards one of the card tables. In this upscale establishment, he reckoned he could easily win a few hundred without drawing anyone's attention. The owners obviously did not mind losing a bit of money now and then – a winner was a magnet that attracted new customers.

The faro game looked very promising. Adjusting his jacket, smiling haughtily, Sutton asked, "May I?" and joined the others.

A short while later, when, after winning two hundred dollars, he was about to take his leave of them, a new player arrived, insisting he must test his luck against Sutton's.

"I like playing someone who's on a roll," he explained. "They say it rubs off on you. A fresh deck, please."

They broke the deck, and the match commenced. In less than an hour, Sutton lost all his winnings and about three hundred dollars more.

"I apologize. I have to go," he said. "I don't have that much cash on me. Here, let me write you a marker."

The player insisted it was all right, he trusted Sutton, he just wanted to play a few more hands.

A very large man suddenly planted himself behind Sutton's opponent, looking calmly on. Another fellow approached, with his hands in his pockets, whose countenance, adorned by a droopy mustache, did not appeal to Sutton at all.

"Hey, Rafter," he said, addressing the large man. "How about a hand or two?"

"Not now," Rafter replied without taking his eyes off Sutton.

Sutton knew he was in trouble now. Very soon, he lost another two hundred. He could not force himself to cheat without knowing for sure which of the cards, exactly, were marked. And marked they were: that much was obvious.

"This is it, I'm afraid," Sutton said. "Yeah. I can't go on like this. Please, let me write that marker for you."

"Look," the opponent said, "I'd be happy to oblige you, sir, only, you see, there's a problem. I don't accept markers. It's a rule I have. I'm sorry. Either you pay up, or ..." he shrugged.

Rafter pulled up a chair and sat down beside Sutton.

"Look, you don't understand. I have money in the bank," Sutton said.

"I must say you disappoint me, sir," the opponent replied in a bored voice. "Should I explain it again? I'm not interested. I only care about the kind of gold I can see and touch." Glancing sharply at Sutton, he added, "So, unless you'd be willing to hear my offer ..."

He continued looking directly at Sutton.

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"Offer? What offer? I just told you I have money in the bank," Sutton said, now seriously alarmed.

"I'm going to make you an offer. Just bear with me for a second."

A heavy silence ensued.

"All right," Sutton said at last.

"My superior is a very scrupulous person," the opponent said. "He would not think of taking anything away from you by force. It wouldn't be lawful. Gambling is not against the law, though, is it? You seem to have something my superior wants. Something that used to belong to him. He wants it back."

"Oh, I see," Sutton said, relieved. "You're taking me for someone else. That must be it. I don't even know who your superior is."

"You seem to have a woman on your hands who just happens to be my superior's fiancée."

"What woman? I tell you I'm not ... "

"Shh. Let me finish. Their engagement was still in effect when you barged in and took her away. All right, you didn't know. You made a mistake. Folks make mistakes on account of their ignorance as much as anything else. No one's blaming you. You had no idea. We've been watching you since you got off the boat. The woman is at the hotel right now."

Pale and furious, Sutton said, "Uh ... "

"Mistakes can be big, or they can be ... "

"You're not paying attention," Sutton said. "I was going to say something just then."

"Oh." The opponent rolled his eyes. "I apologize. Go ahead."

"Your superior is a dead man," Sutton announced. "You have my permission to tell him that."

He felt the muzzle of a pistol touch his ribs.

"You must never say such things, fellow," Rafter admonished. "Never."

"You don't know whom you're dealing with," the opponent said, smiling coldly.

"You're right, I don't," Sutton said. "Although how that's related to the fact that I'm going to kill him is bound to remain a mystery forever."

"Please read this note, sir," the opponent said in an icy tone, handing Sutton a piece of paper.

"Darling, you are reading this because, through no fault of mine, they have captured you. Whatever happens, do not blame yourself. We must never see each other again. Do not worry about me. Unless you want them to hurt me, please do as they say. Love. Farewell. Annie."

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Sutton looked up. It was Annie's hand, all right. A gambler's eye is infallible when it comes to handwriting. In his state of extreme agitation, he overlooked the fact that the paper had a yellowish tint, and the ink had faded.

"What's the game?" he asked quietly through his teeth.

"Like I said, my superior is a fair man. I'm going to forfeit the money you already owe me. I'm going to bet ten dollars. You're going to bet the woman."

Sutton thought rapidly, which was not his custom. "All right," he said. "You're on. On one condition, though."

"Indeed."

"Yes. I really want to make it interesting this time," Sutton said, taking the ace out of his sleeve. "Here." Glancing at his opponent, he reached behind his collar and produced the other ace. "And here. Now, a new deck, please, and honest cards this time, if you don't mind. He who wins seven hands, wins it all. We're both gamblers, and there are times in a gambler's life when he just has to play fair, especially when the opponent is a colleague. Yes. Where was I? Oh. Now, if you turn me down ... " he stopped, frowning his brow. "If you refuse ... Where was I? Yes! If you refuse to indulge me, you might as well kill me, or her, or both of us. Either way, the show's over, uh ... sir. Do I make myself clear?"

The opponent seemed to be considering the offer. Suddenly he smiled – warmly this time. "You're on," he said. "As a matter of fact, that's exactly what my superior instructed me to do. Well, no. He suggested a dozen hands, not seven – a minor difference. I'm glad you and he are of the same mind. It makes my job that much easier."

"Easier?"

"I hate it when my partner knows I'm using special skills but goes on playing anyway, just because he's too frightened to speak up. Here's a new deck. Why don't you inspect it."

Sutton did. The cards were good.

"Get the Cro-Magnon out of my face," he said.

Rafter did not realize he was being referred to until Sutton's opponent motioned him to move away.

Everyone watched as Sutton shuffled the cards. Folks started to come over from all sides, attracted by the tension around the table.

"A card?"

"Please."

Sutton lost the first hand and won the next three. The tension increased. All play within thirty feet of the table was suspended. The two players watched each other intently, always on the lookout for telltale signs. The opponent evened the score. Sutton won the next hand. The opponent evened the score again. Sutton asked for a drink. The fellow with the droopy mustache brought him a whiskey,

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taking some bets in the process. Sutton's opponent won the next three hands.

Sutton wiped his forehead with his sleeve. Getting out his handkerchief, he looked at it dully, not quite certain what he should do with it. He found he was unable to speak. His mind went blank.

"Fair and square," the opponent said. "Now please write the word agreed on this and sign it."

He pushed the scrap of paper back towards Sutton. An inkwell and a pen were furnished promptly. Picking up the pen, Sutton dipped it reluctantly in the ink.

"Bastards," he said.

"Sign it, sir."

Sutton did.

"A word of advice, young man," his opponent said, looking kindly at Sutton. "You're a much better card player than you give yourself credit for. A little calm now and then, and you'll be able to pull it off. You don't seem to have any control over your facial muscles. Your bluffs are too easy to call. Another thing. Unless you're absolutely sure you can sustain the arrogant act for two hours, you'd be better off playing it soft. Be polite. Smile. Just pretend you have a secret that has nothing to do with cards – perfectly innocent, but you're dying to share it with someone. That always gets everyone favorably disposed towards you."

"I'll bear that in mind," Sutton said tonelessly.

Escorting him to the docks, they made sure he got on board the ship bound for New Orleans. After paying his fare, they gave him five dollars. The following morning, one of Vargas' men dropped by the bank with the receipt they had found in Sutton's suite and transferred the money to a different account to which Vargas had access and Sutton did not.

\*\*\*

Leaving Annie in bed, Vargas went to answer the door. Returning quickly, he lowered himself on the edge of the bed, looking at her. Annie's expression was blank.

"Here," he said, handing her a scrap of paper.

She read. She recognized her own handwriting and Sutton's. She wept silently.

\*\*\*

On board the steamer, Sutton opened his cabin porthole and looked out. The vessel was chugging along merrily. The side wheel was immediately behind the porthole.

Everything in the cabin was nailed to the floor. Ripping the sheet off the bed and tying one end of it to the door handle, Sutton and fastened the other to the bedpost. After midnight, when most of the

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passengers had retired to their cabins, he heard someone insert a key into the lock.

No more doubts.

Slipping through the porthole feet first, he held onto the frame for some time, watching the wheel's blades. He let himself drop. The ship passed over him. Surfacing, he swam towards the bank, quartering against the current.

He returned to St. Louis on foot, traveling as quickly as he could, arriving the following afternoon. After making some inquiries at the casino, he bought a pistol, loaded it, and dropped by the hotel. It was no use. Annie was gone. He confronted the people at the bank. They explained that the money was no longer available to him.

A week later, he left the city on foot, lacking sufficient funds to pay the fare. Later on, he remembered the subsequent two months as a continuous drunken blur.

#### CHAPTER 5. VICTORIA'S GARDEN.

The quadron balls given at the specially erected luxurious colonial building on the Rue Orleans were all the rage. The furniture was pleasant, the chandeliers bright, the green marble of the pillars reassuring. The events featured tasteful music, good snacks, and a generous assortment of refreshments.

The one ball we are concerned with took place in June.

The woman who would soon wield a great deal of power in the city was one quarter black and three quarters white, thin, impetuous, energetic, and strikingly tall, taller than an average man. Her name was Victoria.

One could not honestly call her charming. Her smile was not radiant, only condescending; her movements not graceful, only swift and precise; her carriage hardly elegant, only confident; her features merely regular, and not fine, much less exquisite. Even though her limbs were quite long, one did not have to be a connoisseur to point out that large feet and small breasts are hardly a happy combination. She had dark-brown hair which on especially solemn occasions she put up in a bun, securing it with pins and attaching a dark-blue ribbon for style. She had no use for fancy garments and generally preferred to have as few clothing items about her as was possible without scandalizing one's peers. She had an air of calm authority, the kind that sets natural leaders apart from their flock.

It was her mother who brought her to the ball, the idea being to seek out a suitable benefactor for her daughter.

To black folks and immigrants, entrance was denied. Free girls of color danced with wealthy white men looking for a concubine. Some of the suitors wanted a safe affair on the side, others sought to engage a young woman on a permanent basis – when they did, protocol required them to provide housing and slaves. Such suitors often took up residence with the girls they chose, living in pseudo-matrimonial comfort for a while until, some years and four or five children later, they married white women from their own milieu. Custom decreed that the man should provide the abandoned

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mistress with enough means to maintain the lifestyle she had gotten accustomed to in the course of their cohabitation. Only free women of color benefited from this part of the tradition. It did not apply to slaves, no matter how many children they bore their masters, nor to white courtesans, for that matter.

There she was in the middle of the festive crowd, the tallest girl there, and all around her white men ogled, lent an ear, engaged in conversation – with other girls. The band struck up a Schubert waltz.

One, two, three, no one wanted to talk to Victoria. She realized that if her purpose here was, in fact, to obtain a protector (one, two, three) who would enable her to cut loose from her mother's annoying control (one, two, three), she had better take the initiative instead of just standing in a corner, waiting for some kind of Creole miracle to occur.

She scanned the room. She told her mother to let go of her sleeve. Scanning the room again, she spotted just the man she wanted.

The smallish, goofy-looking youngster, blond, balding, with a compact protruding belly, wearing the most ridiculous pair of spectacles ever seen, was terribly shy. He would not have come here at all had not his mother dragged him over more or less by force, concerned with what she called his flippancy and lack of perspective. In her opinion, he spent too much time reading books with unpronounceable titles, fumbling with odd-looking machinery in the cellar, and disconcerting guests with insane remarks, instead of following in his father's footsteps and becoming a respectable sugar planter. Getting a woman might do him good.

"I'm Victoria," the tall girl said. "What's your name?"

"Did they name you after the Queen?" he asked, smiling sheepishly and averting his eyes. He giggled. He looked at her again. "I'm Timothy. Timothy McLeod. Timothy Roger McLeod. Doesn't this place strike you as utterly ridiculous?"

"I daresay you don't like dancing," she observed.

"That's right. I don't mind a little dancing now and then, I just don't like doing it in public. Not because it makes me look foolish, I wouldn't mind that, I just don't like the idea of embarrassing my dancing partner. Yeah. My father's awfully, awfully rich. He's like Rothschild, only richer. I've got nothing against him. He's a fine fellow in his own right. My mother, on the other hand – she's the one who always makes things difficult for everybody. She isn't merely a meddler; she's the goddess of meddling. There's just no escaping her. Dad bought me a house, hoping I'd be able to get away from her and be happy for both of us. Guess what. She's never out of that house now. She brought some slaves over from home. One couldn't possibly remember all their names! She expects them to clean and cook and do laundry for me and what not. All they do when she's not around is sit on the porch and tell ridiculous stories about demons and witches. I offered to teach them the alphabet, just to give them something to do. They turned me down. They said they had no use for white man's amusements. I understand – they want to be left alone. I leave them alone. If you think they ever get a chance to enjoy it, think again, because, like I said, my mother's always there. She lectures them on

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how sinful sloth is and how they should learn the lesson Adam once learned, and eat their bread in the sweat of their brow, and all the rest of it. And I have my work, but I hardly ever get a chance to do any, because she's always there, meddling."

"What kind of work do you do?" Victoria asked.

He stared at her. "Wait a minute. You mean, you were actually listening to me?" he asked in childlike amazement.

"Yes," she said patiently. "What kind of work?"

"I'm an inventor," he informed her. "Do you know what an inventor is?"

"Yes, unkempt folks fumbling with queer-looking devices," she said matter-of-factly.

"That's it!" he confirmed joyously. "That's what I am, and that's what I do. Wow. You're intelligent, aren't you?"

"There's nothing wrong with being an inventor."

"Try telling my mother that. She says one should be responsible, which in her opinion means doing exactly what she wants you to do."

"Yes," tall Victoria agreed. "My mother is the same way. Let's make a deal."

"What? A deal?"

"Yes. I don't think you're particularly eager to have a woman in your life."

"I wouldn't mind."

"Not minding is not the same as being eager."

"Mercury's gravity!" he exclaimed delightedly. "You're logical! Well, this is my lucky day, I guess. Really. I'm not joking. Only an hour ago I thought the world had gone irrevocably insane. Do finish your most interesting thought. I think I can detect a touch of promise in it."

"I don't need a man in my life either," she said calmly. "I wouldn't mind getting one, as you put it, but there's no rush."

"I see. Go on."

"Your father's wealthy. If he bought us a house ... in the usual neighborhood ... a large house ... with maybe two or three slaves into the bargain ... it might be just the thing for both of us. It would get my mother off my back. And if you stayed at the house with me, it would probably get your mother off your back. I have my methods of keeping unwanted folks out. We'd divide the place. You'd have your rooms where you'd be able to fumble with crazy gadgets to your heart's content; and I'd have mine, where I'd finally get my chance to think in peace and maybe invite some friends over without being lectured on what kind of company I should keep. What do you say?"

"You know," he said, pulling a serious face, "I do believe you're in

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earnest."

"You know," she said, also pulling a serious face, "I think I am."

\*\*\*

Three days later, Timothy Roger McLeod got his father to purchase a midsize dwelling place on North Rampart. The previous owner, who had had no intention of selling, had no choice but to give up the property when the buyer doubled the price. The planter adored his son.

Timothy took over most of the cellar, one of the smaller bedrooms upstairs, and the cozy little enclosure behind the house. With the help of five able-bodied slaves and two grim-looking Irish immigrants with liquor-ridden breaths, he moved most of his laboratory and workshop into his new digs. He would have moved all of it had not the cottage in which he had kept it burned to ashes in the fire caused by a spark from his father's cigar. One of the slaves, who occasionally sneaked into the cottage to smoke in peace, used a jar containing a highly flammable acid as an ashtray. He escaped uninjured.

As an inventor, Timothy was only slightly ahead of his time. His inventions were numerous and, for the most part, non-operational. His attempt to combine the piano and the telegraph in order to transmit music over great distances, for instance, looked very promising and would have attracted sponsors had it worked at all. His Universal Calculator, based on Leonardo's principles, weighed well over two hundred pounds and worked slower than an average abacus. His two submarines languished on the Mississippi bottom, agitating the fish and providing final resting places for, respectively, a cat and a rat. His very advanced outdoor gas lantern got banned officially by the Mayor after illuminating a small section of Jackson Square for three hours and setting two trees on fire. The train car sitting inside Timothy's Rapid Hydraulic Transit Tube (for which his father's slaves dug a sixty-foot tunnel underneath an open grassy expanse east of Esplanade) failed to move at all, rapidly or otherwise. His latest pet project, the Ultimate Flying Machine, did not fly despite the continual improvements. Timothy McLeod remained optimistic. He never let any of the setbacks disappoint him. He soldiered on. He had no use for progress and cared very little for the popular idea that advanced technology was going to liberate all of mankind one day. He invented for the sake of invention, having lots of mischievous fun along the way and never heeding possible consequences.

Moving in with Victoria was a boon. He had his meals at the laboratory, wore whatever clothes were at hand, and soon grew thinner and healthier. He endeared Victoria by playing the piano for her every other day.

\*\*\*

Instead of dismissing the girls employed by the previous owner, Victoria gave them a raise and paid a tailor, with Timothy's father's money, to put together new gowns for them. Though younger than any of them, her inherent wisdom, and maybe her superior height too, helped her establish herself as the one in charge. She dismissed the man who, under the old regime, used to extort money and sexual services from the girls in exchange for keeping the house peaceful.

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To replace him, she hired two burly men with criminal pasts and paid them well. They made excellent guards.

After considering a number of ways in which the already thriving enterprise could be further improved, young Victoria engaged a quartet of Austrian musicians and a cook. Excellent appetizers of combined Cajun and French origin were served every night. Hunter's grandfather's favorite beverage, Bordeaux flowed freely. The quartet played. The two large living rooms on the ground level got repainted and re-furnished.

In three months, the warehouse transformed itself into an unofficial salon for sophisticated gens de couleur libre. Two years later, Victoria was a wealthy woman whom neighbors treated with great respect.

Upon her request, her eccentric morganatic husband tutored her every afternoon. Educated at one of the prestigious schools up North, he was full of systematic knowledge he regarded as useless. It did not seem so to Victoria. History she found fascinating, and philosophy intriguing. Astronomy, on the other hand, failed to captivate her. Greek and Latin literature struck her as tedious. She had her preferences. Of all the authors in history, she was really only fond of two, the Ultimate One and Shakespeare. She had known most of the Bible by heart since she was a child. The Bard, introduced to her by the flippant and irresponsible Timothy (who preferred Moliere) awed her. She maintained that the great dramatist's style was somehow congenial to her. She may have been more responsive to a repertoire that included some Italian works, but the Austrians had no use for "dago rubbish."

She relied on Timothy for the salon's music repertoire. Although quite fond of music, she had no ear for it. Mozart, Schumann, Wagner, Offenbach – it was all the same to her.

Her leadership qualities manifested themselves early. Offering the guests drinks, asking them whether they were comfortable, she would venture a remark now and then, noticing by and by that no matter what she said, everyone suddenly stopped talking and paid attention. This was fun.

Once in a while, a white man disoriented by drink would drop by the house – and all animated talk would cease at once. This did not happen too often. There were two other warehouses on the block. White folks favored those. As for negro freemen, they were simply not allowed inside. Victoria's establishment served the gens de couleur libre contingent exclusively.

The regulars (some of them affluent, including three sugar planters) came to know one another well, and continued to drop by for the sake of the company and conversation as much as anything else.

The authorities put in an appearance periodically to make sure nothing was amiss. Tensions during that turbulent decade ran high even in fun-loving New Orleans.

Shopping for fresh fruit one day, Victoria ran into a well-dressed mulatto woman crying disconsolately into her drink at one of the outdoor tables of The Pale Flower Café. Never overtly sentimental, Victoria went on with her shopping. Returning an hour later, she

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found the same woman crying into a fresh drink at the same table.

"What's the matter, dear?" Victoria asked, seating herself beside her.

"Nothing," the woman replied dramatically.

Once she was through demanding that people leave her the fuck alone, the woman told Victoria her life's story, which was a tad more than Victoria had bargained for. As it turned out, the disconsolate lass had recently been abandoned by a wealthy lover. She was in debt, and desperate, and no one wanted her anymore – she was going to end up in the street for sure, becoming a prostitute or thief or beggar or tax collector or some such.

On an impulse, Victoria invited the woman over to her house. She made no attempt to include her in the Garden's company of joy providers. Instead, she gave her a bed, a washroom, and some money, and ordered a number of new dresses for her. She told her she could stay as long as she liked.

Within a week, the woman recovered her composure enough to be admitted to an informal mixed party. No longer desperate, in good spirits, and once again enticing, she found a new wealthy lover that night. He did not have to pay off his debts, either. Victoria had taken care of everything.

There were many kept women of mixed origin in the city. A week did not go by without one or two finding themselves cast out. News spread, and many of them began to flock to Victoria who invariably gave them a place to live, wholesome food, bathing facilities, and money for a fresh start. Some of them were grateful and called on Victoria often even after re-establishing themselves in society. Some attempted to pay her back. Because there was no milieu in New Orleans that could escape their allure entirely, kept women were always full of news and gossip. Wise Victoria valued information.

\*\*\*

One day, Timothy the mad scientist decided to wait until after sundown to conduct his bi-weekly levitation experiment. His flying machine was a combination of scientific genius and misguided romance. A medium-sized balloon for providing lift, a miniature steam for propulsion, two flappable wood-and-canvas wings for navigation, two seats serving as evidence that the invention did, in fact, feature a practical purpose, and a Jolly Roger for style – the machine was quite a sight. Fire crackled jauntily in the two miniature fireboxes, the wind was fair and the night young. The flight plan included a brief tour of the city, a triumphant glide over the Mint, and then on along the Mississippi towards Baton Rouge. Timothy had been working on the machine for some time, leaving off some of his other projects – the ultimate remedy for the common cold among them. Seating himself comfortably in the pilot's seat, he waited. The copy of the Delta News he had purchased earlier lay across his knees, the idea being that the flight was going to be smooth enough for him to read the front page.

Nothing happened for a while. He wondered whether an error had crept into his calculations. He was about to get off when suddenly he felt the machine rising into the air just a little. He looked down. Yes. An entire foot of nothing but air now separated the four spider-like

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supports from the ground. He quickly untied the anchor. Very gradually the machine rose to about ten feet. With an intrepid hand the inventor widened the furnace's gap. The machine began to rise quicker. Soon it was level with the second floor of the house, which proved that the balloon was in good working condition. Balloons, however, had been invented in the previous century. It was time to test the part that made his invention unique. Very gently, Timothy pulled a lever, activating the wings.

They moved a little, and then flapped just once. Nothing happened. Still hovering at twenty feet above ground, the machine was otherwise stationary. Timothy pulled the lever further. The wings flapped again. And again. At that moment, Timothy realized the machine was moving very slowly sideways. Then, suddenly, describing a wide arc around the house, it hovered over the street. Rising even higher into the night air, it encountered a powerful gust. Gaining speed, the machine lost a wing and both furnaces, banked sharply, performed an erratic tight turn, and went into an abrupt slanting decent towards the house. It sailed through the ground floor window, disintegrating the glass, frame, and itself in the process, and depositing Timothy, still in his pilot seat, on the large carved-oak table in the main living room – to the considerable surprise of the guests.

"Gentlemen, permit me to introduce Timothy McLeod. He's an inventor," Victoria, who hardly ever lost her presence of mind, announced.

The gens de couleur gathered around Timothy, who was badly bruised and cut in a number of places. Someone suggested fetching a doctor. Timothy assured everyone he was in splendid condition, wanting only a chair and a drink, after which he would retire peacefully to his laboratory. The drink and the chair were supplied. Someone pointed out that it might not be very wise to walk the streets after such a shock. Well, he did not have to, the laboratory was in the house. Ah, indeed? Yes. Would anyone like to see the laboratory? Some did. They could bring their drinks along. He begged them not to be shy. They said they were not shy, only concerned. Proprieties, and so forth. Proprieties be damned! Emboldened by everyone's seemingly sincere interest, Timothy led the way.

Some twenty people packed into the laboratory. It was a quaint place, resembling a ship's hull designed by a theatre manager. Lots of wood and brass, maps, gadgets, tables, desks, and a live tomcat. Charts. Pencils. Cups of coffee, unfinished; a couch cushion, finished. Victoria was not happy about the cushion. She had been wondering for days what had happened to it. As it turned out, it had been put through an experiment involving a number of potent liquids and a gas, and was now completely deformed and burned through and through. Timothy had a drink and then another. His eyes sparkled.

Had he been sober, he would have behaved differently. He was no fool, and an excellent judge of character, despite his foibles.

The buzz in his head skewed his judgment that night. Eagerly mistaking his guests' polite curiosity for perceptive genius, he jumped to conclusions. The same buzz precluded sober assessment of those.

It wasn't entirely his fault. No one had ever been interested in his

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work before. Most inventors were either born up North or moved there at the first opportunity. It was usually too hot in New Orleans to indulge in scientific thought, and when it was not too hot, there were always more captivating things to occupy one's time with. No peer group or fan base existed that could acknowledge, or even properly dispute, the validity of Timothy's ideas.

Now he suddenly saw interest in his guests' eyes. Finally, there was appreciation. A warm wave of gratitude passed through him. He should have thought of the gens de couleur earlier. Of course! Deprivation sharpens one's mental faculties; isolation affords one plenty of time in which to think; social inadequacy is conducive to intellectual development!

Striking a pose, Timothy addressed his audience with so much pathos they had no choice but to pay attention.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Thank you for your interest. With your permission I'm going to tell you what most of you already know deep down in your hearts. You are the salt of the earth!"

The difference between an opportunistic preacher's adapted version of the Sermon on the Mount and the original is the latter does not discriminate based on any trait other than the listeners' outlook and mode of action. Timothy, one of Spencer's early followers and an ardent atheist (as a great many scientists were in those days), made the same mistake most materialist philosophers were guilty of before and after him: while making lavish use of biblical references, he left out God.

"The white race," Timothy pontificated, "is pretty much done. That's right. Done. It has had its heyday. The black race, in this Republic at least, does not stand a chance. Through the process of natural selection, the blacks with the freedom-loving streak have been weaned out. They no longer exist, and what's left is a population of incorrigible slaves. The Abolitionists have got it all wrong. You can't free a slave by ratifying a new bill. Slavery does not live on the printed page; it takes root in people's bone marrow, or psyche, if you will. The same principle applies to the master mentality. In other words, a slave can easily put himself in his master's position, and vice versa. Both master and slave are in a sense slaves to their own outlook. Only, you see, there is an exception to that rule. You are the exception. Your racial makeup is new. You belong to neither race. Consequently, you are the freest group of people in this country, or maybe in the entire world. Yes. Les gens de couleur libre are the next phase of Evolution! You are our natural superiors. You will inherit the earth. You will one day run tout le monde. You are passionate, compassionate, and generally brilliant. I'm not saying this just because you've been able to appreciate what you've seen in this laboratory. Far from it. My conclusion is based on many years of careful observation." He hiccupped. He took a swig from the bottle. He hiccupped again. "Already your kind is leaving an unprecedented trace in history. To wit, the famous French novelist Alexandre Dumas is a gen de couleur, as was the famous Russian poet Alexandre Pouchkine before him. The world is yours, gentlemen. It awaits your brilliant philosophers, writers, composers, painters, politicians, warriors, and scientists. I demand, though ... " he hiccupped again. "I demand ... I, the first white man to acknowledge your superiority ... I demand ... that when you've attained power ... when you've assumed

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your rightful place at the helm of civilization ... I demand that you give me a cozy niche in it. You folks owe me that much. My needs are modest. All I require is a lab and a bed, and maybe some clean linen. I insist on the linen. I do not believe in God, but I bless you from my heart, gentlemen."

\*\*\*

The word Evolution had first been used only a year previously – by Herbert Spencer in his treatise titled The Development Hypothesis.

\*\*\*

O vanity! O human folly! No one would have taken drunken Timothy seriously had it not been for his mention of natural superiority. The timing was perfect, too. In Jefferson's day, God's presence in folks' daily thoughts imparted to the word equality some significance. Now, half a century later, the global advent of atheism had already convinced many that Man, and not God, was in charge. Viewed from that angle, the disparities between one person and the next were too numerous and too self-evident for anyone to take the idea of equality very seriously.

They were the salt of the earth! They had just been told so openly by a man belonging to the other camp. All right, so he did look a bit ridiculous, and was quite drunk when he said it, but what did it matter? Wasn't it obvious anyway? Some blacks revered them, and others envied them. Envy is a form of reverence. White folks resented them, and what is resentment but a form of acknowledgement?

Cautiously at first, and more pointedly later, some aspects of the superiority theory were discussed.

Beginning that night, Victoria's house acquired a third function. In addition to being a brothel and a salon, it now served as People's Headquarters. A movement was born, sprung to life by Timothy's sentimental oration. A gens de couleur Committee was created, convening on a weekly basis. Its purpose was to advance gens de couleur interests in the city. The mixed population now exceeded thirty thousand souls. Even though most of the men were employed in trades, a very real, very genuine upper class was emerging as well.

The Committee had no official chairman, no president, and no treasurer. Instead, each time a decision was made, everyone looked to Victoria for approval. At first, this was because she was the mistress of the house. Later, her undeniable wisdom became the main factor. She never failed to come up with just the right words. Being insightful, she manipulated her flock easily, never pestering them with things they did not wish to hear, and surprising them constantly with her keen observations.

In her desk she kept a map of the city dissected into zones. Whenever a Committee member (and later on any freeman of mixed racial origin) purchased or sold a house, Victoria made certain the deal was advantageous to the gens de couleur, the idea being that before anyone knew, there were going to be vast areas everywhere controlled exclusively by colored folk.

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\*\*\*

"Get me a drink, Adeline," Roger Doyle said quietly, stretching on the bed.

Long-legged and lithe, Adeline rose gracefully from the bed. "Whiskey and soda?" she asked.

"Please."

She soon returned, still naked, carrying the glass.

"Thank you." Doyle sipped. "It's ironic," he said, "how harrowing things can get at home sometimes. My wife is a conceited slut if there ever was one. I mean, where does she get off insisting I take her to New York for the season? As for the boys ... they always take the old broad's side. They all hate me. You have no idea."

"No," Adeline said. "I'm sure they don't hate you. How could anyone hate you?"

"You're the only one who understands me, Adeline," he said jauntily. "I've been neglecting you. I'm going to make it up to you." He sipped his drink. Adeline sat on the edge of the bed tactfully, not wishing to interrupt his train of thought. "The old warehouse is falling apart," he went on. "There's no point repairing it anymore. Building a new one would cost a lot less. I've been looking for a good spot down in New Orleans. It might be a good idea to move everything closer to the Gulf. The only decent location I've been able to find so far is on the Rue Cartier. Do you know New Orleans at all? I found two old buildings owned by a gang of colored clowns."

"You're going to buy it from them?"

"I'd like to. In the old days, I would have offered them, oh, just any old price. They would have been happy to have a white man do business with them. Now I hear one has to go down and meet with their Committee, imagine. A Committee set up in a brothel. And they have this ... woman ... a colored broad running things for them. I mean, what's this world coming to. It's all a big joke, of course, they're going to have to take whatever I offer them."

"The colored folks, they do seem to be different these days."

"Yes. That's exactly what I'm talking about. Well. I'm not stingy. You know what? If I can get that so-called property for under six hundred, I'll get you a new pair of earrings."

"Thank you, Mr. Doyle. Although ... "

"Maybe I could get them to agree to five hundred."

"Yes. I'm very fond of earrings, but even so ... "

"What?"

"Cash is handier, Mr. Doyle, especially for someone in my situation."

"You get enough cash from me. You have nothing to complain about."

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"I could use a maid."

"Adeline, Adeline, Adeline," Doyle said. "You're getting greedy. Avarice is sinful, you know. What happened to modesty? You know what? You're lucky you were born here, and not up North. Up North, a moll like you wouldn't even get her own house from her lover. Now stop pouting and come over here."

The French windows were open. The wind from the Mississippi neutralized the unpleasant odors the air of Baton Rouge was permeated with in those days. Adeline was very young, much younger than Doyle had thought when he first met her at a theatre and reckoned it might be a good idea to engage her services on a permanent basis. She was not beautiful. The perpetual sulky expression imparted to her a kind of whorish look – a woman with a past whose welfare and morals a man of good taste and considerable means wanted to look after. She claimed to be part-Mexican.

#### CHAPTER 6. MANNY'S VOYAGE.

One of the wealthiest Louisiana planters, Guillome Devereaux (whom the reader will remember as Bison) died by a sword thrust in the dark romantic shadow of the Dueling Oaks. The man who delivered the thrust was none other than the illustrious fencing instructor Pablo Vasquez. He had never killed anyone up to that point, and would never kill again. After dedicating three days to the search of the body, the police decided to move on to other matters. The Mayor ordered to open the prominent citizen's will. The latter decreed, among other things, that all of Guillome's children born into slavery were to be freed on the day of their father's funeral – and that the children's mothers, too, were to enjoy liberty, such as it was. The sum of two hundred dollars was bequeathed to each freed slave as start-up money.

Manny, Sutton's half-brother, was a free man now, and his dear old mother a free woman.

Another hundred and fifty came from the deal with Sutton, increasing Manny's fortune. Quickly finding a cozy townhouse for old Mrs. Sutton, Manny hired three sour-faced Germans and with their help moved the widow's possessions to the new place in the course of just two days.

Manny's mother, who refused to wear glasses, a peevish, stubborn, pettily vindictive woman, insisted she still wished, after thirty years of absence, to return to her native African village where, according to her, she had once been conceived by a Danish adventurer and the daughter of the local chief, and of which she retained vivid memories, or so she claimed. Manny (who, incidentally, looked a great deal like his father in that he was tall, broad, and blue-eyed, and like his mother as well in that he had a chiseled flat nose and stubborn thin lips) wished to go into business for himself as a shoemaker and resented the idea of traveling. Eventually he gave in and agreed to make the trip. It seemed easier than listening to his mother's whining about it, and nagging him, every day. She assured him that once she

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was among the people she loved – who would certainly love her back – Manny would be free to do as he pleased, jump out of a tree and break his stupid neck, or whatever. In the meantime, it was his filial duty to take her wherever the hell she wanted to be taken.

They got lucky – paying an impoverished Dutch traveler a sum of money, they functioned as his servants for the duration of the ocean phase of their journey and did not have to worry about a thing.

Once in Africa, Manny, who spoke none of the local dialects, managed to engage a guide. His mother, who claimed she knew most of the dialects, turned out to be annoyingly helpless. The guide, a lean, very dark-skinned fellow who would have been shunned by Manny's peers back in New Orleans, flirted for a while with the idea of selling the two wayfarers to a New Englander he knew. Manny, wiser than his mother in matters involving human nature, thwarted disaster by offering to take the guide apart limb by shaking limb. The guide agreed there were going to be no further stupid fucking tricks.

They headed east. Manny had a pistol, a very good hunting knife, some spare clothes, and a volume of stories by Alexandre Dumas, among other things, in his backpack. His mother carried some stones and shells in hers, which she claimed came from her native village, even though Manny could clearly see that the shells, at least, traced their origin to one of the Gulf of Mexico beaches.

The part of Central Africa they had to traverse no longer seethed with danger and death as it had only a few years earlier. Many poisonous reptiles and toothy predators had become extinct; dangerous plants were on the decline. Even so, inhaling the air and listening intently to the neighborhood's sounds, Manny realized that danger was still in excellent supply here. One had to stay alert at all times.

Each night, he tied the guide to a tree, securing his hands behind the trunk. His mother protested feebly, claiming that a wayward snake might come calling against which the poor tied-up native would be defenseless. She knew from snakes, she had seen plenty of them back in Louisiana. Manny, who also knew a thing or two, said that all one had to do to avoid getting bitten by a snake was to remain perfectly still. He also offered to tie her up if she didn't stop pestering him.

Making steady progress for two weeks, advancing farther into the continent, they arrived at last in a village that seemed to resemble the one in which Manny's mother had spent her childhood years. At first, she claimed it was the wrong village. Later, she met a woman she thought she used to know once. Silly and essentially good-natured, Manny's mother soon made a lot of friends. They found her clothes curious. Also curious was her reluctance to remove the skirt and blouse, and maybe let some others try them on. The little silver brooch she wore fascinated them.

Manny liked none of the villagers. Even though he appreciated his mother's excitement, he was eager to go back. He wondered how much longer they would have to stay in a place where a shoemaker could not practice his trade simply because the locals had no use for shoes.

One afternoon, he decided to spend some time sitting up in a tree,

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observing and keeping out of everyone's way, just to see whether the locals behaved differently in his absence. He had his backpack slung over his shoulder for fear it might get stolen by one of the kids. (He viewed everyone in the village as children, including the tall lean leader who ruled by slapping the hell out of everyone on a daily basis. The leader had once toyed with the idea of slapping Manny's mother once, and maybe moving on to punishing her son for having the audacity to have such a silly mother. Catching the leader alone, Manny roughed him up a little).

Soon most of the villagers went away for a swim in a nearby lake. Still sitting in the tree, Manny heard, or rather sensed, some sort of movement he did not remember hearing or sensing before.

The sounds reaching his ear were certainly human, and purposeful. Manny looked this way and that until he noticed a shadow pass in front of one of the straw huts.

Cannibalism. Back in New Orleans, he had heard all sorts of sinister yarns about certain parts of Africa. Back then, he had found them difficult to take seriously. Now those yarns suddenly surfaced in his mind. He felt a chill creeping up his back.

Another shadow passed – into a hut, Manny thought. He nudged the backpack off his shoulder.

Loading a pistol while sitting in a tree presented some difficulties. He persevered. Feeling more comfortable now that he was armed, he waited. Another shadow passed into the same hut. Manny expected to see some struggling next. None occurred. Soon, two shortish men he had never seen before popped out, dragging between them ... At first, Manny figured it was a child. No. It was a very young woman. Though quite docile, it was clear she was not coming along of her own volition. Horrified, Manny sat very still, watching. The group disappeared into the forest. Another shadow passed – a third man followed the others.

All was quiet again.

Suddenly Manny felt a pang of shame.

He tried reasoning with himself. He did not belong here, he owed these clowns no loyalty, he regarded them as infantile savages. Whatever happened to their young was their business and not his. A backwoods continent! Who gives a damn!

Merely sitting in a tree with a loaded pistol, though, watching them ... whatever they were ... go off with that girl ... There was something not quite right about it.

What he decided to do was totally absurd. He knew it was absurd, and yet he was already on the ground and running, and cursing himself for being an absurd human being in an absurd place. The son of a master and a slave ... in a savage land ... with a loaded pistol ... chasing savages rumored to feed on human flesh ...

There were no paths per se, just a lot of weird-looking trees and plants and grass, and everything was poisonous and reeked of danger and death, but one could sort of make out one's route. Let a hundred people wonder though a forest for a month, and something

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resembling a footpath is bound to appear here and there ...  
something like a footpath ...

Soon he caught up with them. They had not expected to be pursued. They stopped and listened. People here always listened, mainly because they had nothing much else to do.

The abductors listened for animal sounds, predators, and snakes. They were not for the moment concerned with humans. Humans they did not expect, least of all this human – although no taller than the other villagers they had encountered previously, he was far broader than any of them, and his skin was only a shade darker than a white worm's, and his hair the color of baby shit, and his eyes the color of the morning sky. A perfect monster! He shouted words at them they had never heard before. Slung over his shoulder was a something, and another something was in his hand. They let go of the girl who immediately sat down on the ground – her legs would not support her. They goggled at the monster. Their leader, too frightened to do anything at first, soon realized he had to do something, if only to save face. Stepping forward cautiously, he shouted at the monster, waving a reluctant hand not quite in the direction of the monster's face.

The monster just stood there, pointing the something in his hand at the leader. Seeing that he was not advancing or making threatening gestures, and taking it as a sign of fear, the emboldened leader drew closer. Now his hand almost touched the monster, but he removed it swiftly.

The monster blinked.

Manny had no idea what to do next. This emboldened the leader further. He raised his hand again, and this time it did come into contact with Manny's face.

This solved the problem for Manny. The leader was now clearly in breach of protocol. You didn't touch a person's face unless you had a right to do so. Savages had no rights. Manny kicked the assailant in the groin.

The man doubled over and squealed piercingly. The other two hesitated. Collecting their nerve, they were about to pounce on Manny when he pulled the trigger. The echo reverberated through the entire jungle, frightening the two abductors something awful. They took off, clutching their ears and shrieking pitifully. The leader, doubled over on the ground, was petrified. Reaching down, Manny grabbed him by the thick curls. Forcing the man into an upright position, he looked him in the face calmly. As soon as he released him, the man turned and sprang off, sideways at first, and then at full speed. He fell down. He got up again and resumed running.

Manny went over to the girl. She had made no attempt to escape in all this time. Indeed, she had not moved at all. She was sitting on the ground, staring in front of herself.

"Get up," Manny said in French. "Let's go." He repeated the words in English, hoping against his better judgment that she might be more familiar with that language. He had to take her by the arm and force her to her feet. As soon as he let go of her, she sank to the ground again. Lifting her again, Manny slung her over his shoulder.

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He carried her back to the village. Not quite sure which hut she had been abducted from (all huts looked alike to him), he left her under the banyan tree in the middle of the village, reckoning that maybe her parents would claim her by and by.

The place was still deserted.

He did not see the girl the following day. He had another row with his mother. In the morning, the girl found him herself, sneaking up shyly from behind and tapping his back with her wrist. He was sitting on the river bank waiting for an African crocodile, of legendary ill repute, to pop up just once (there were none in that area). He turned, and she smiled bashfully. She was very shy.

He smiled back, also bashfully. He had no idea what to say or do. She handed him a coconut to commemorate the occasion. She was about thirteen, he thought. The villagers viewed her as ugly. She seemed all right to Manny – she wasn't much different from any other village girl. Her legs were proportionally shorter than one familiar with the region would expect, and her eyes wide-set. Perhaps because women were in plentiful supply here, the locals reckoned they could be picky.

Eventually Manny learned that her name was Wana, which he changed to Wanda. He had known a Wanda once.

She taught him some words and picked up easily a number of English and French phrases.

Soon he found out, from his mother of all people, that the villagers, more observant than he deigned to give them credit for, had noticed all and were making preparations for his and Wana's wedding.

"She's only a child!" Manny shouted, scandalized. "You and these ... people ... are completely without morals!"

"She's a grownup woman. She would be considered a grownup anywhere," his mother said peevishly. "Stop making such a fuss. People get married. Why shouldn't you?"

"That's it," he said. "Fuck it. I'm leaving now. I can't stand this place anymore. Coming?"

"You're not leaving," his mother said. "You're staying right here, in the land of your ancestors."

"Hey!" Manny the freethinker said. "I have two sets of ancestors, and ..."

"Manfred," his mother said sternly. "I told you many times. There's no such thing as a half-white. If anyone in your family is black, you're black too, baby, and that's that."

That particular idea never made much sense to Manny. Back in his childhood, it had always struck him as incongruent. As a grown up, he had come to ignore it altogether. He did not associate much with either whites or blacks, among whom it was popular. His peer group had different ideas.

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"Mother," he said. "I don't like it here. Living in the jungle doesn't suit me. As for you, you look ridiculous, with your matronly Bourbon Street roll, trying to follow everybody to the river and back. You got upset the other night because you couldn't find your stove. You've never been much of a cook. The stove is a symbol. You miss sitting near it at night, mumbling nonsensical curses and complaining about all those dreadful folks at the French Market. You don't belong here either. The food turns your stomach, and you've got no one to play cards with."

"You could play cards with your old mother," she said peevishly, though not very confidently.

"It wouldn't be the same. You want Lizzy and Maude and Betsy to play cards with you. You want to hear gossip. Remember Betsy? The Gladstones' servant? There's no proper gossip here. You can't even understand what the cretins say."

He had a point, but his mother was as determined as President Buchanan should have been. Yes, she missed her old friends. They had been so adamant about not coming here, though. They were conceited snobs. They were vain. They liked fashionable dresses and the French Market and the theatre. Manny's mother was anything but vain, if she herself said so, and performances always gave her a headache.

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It may have been the language barrier or the local isolationist policy, but none of the villagers seemed to be capable or willing to give Manny a plausible explanation as to who the failed abductors might have been.

\*\*\*

Everyone in the village thought Manny was a freak. They accepted his mother. They refused to accept him. They were not quite sure he was human, not with the kind of hair and skin he had. He was obviously no deity either, as he ate, slept, pissed, and took a shit daily like everyone else, and was a very poor runner, often stumbling against the kind of roots and bumps a three-year-old would have had enough sense to notice and avoid.

Wana proved loyal enough to annoy him with her constant presence.

Some days passed.

One day, Manny realized his mother was here to stay. He told her he would leave without her, and she just shrugged the way women shrugged on Decatur when someone told them there had been ghost activity at the haunted house on St. Peter (a charming hospitable lady had once resided there after whose death the bones of her tortured slaves, in chains, were discovered in one of the rooms), and only said reproachfully, "Well, if that's what you want ... " and left it at that.

The following day, a horrible thing happened. The village suffered a locust attack. It was frightening, ugly, and cruel. Folks ran, horrified, in every direction. Some died.

The day after that, the elders held a secret conference at which they

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established that Manny had been sent to the village by an unknown evil force, and that the attack was only the first one in the long sequence of disasters that would befall the villagers if they continued to tolerate the stranger's presence. A young boy, proud of the elders' trust, related the news to Manny, using Manny's mother as an interpreter. Getting the gist of the message before his mother did, Manny nodded several times. The implication was that if Manny did not leave, they would have to kill him. For a moment, Manny flirted with the idea of blackmailing the bastards. Since they thought he was an evil spirit, he might as well use it to his advantage by telling them he could arrange an uninterrupted locust onslaught lasting the next five years if they didn't get off his back.

His mother's reaction made up his mind for him.

"Maybe you are evil," she said with such astonishing levity that Manny, who had known her all his life, was shocked. "After all, even your father thought ... and the incident you had in school ... and when you got drunk that night ... " She shrugged.

She must have been absurdly beautiful in the past.

No guide was available. Slinging his backpack over his shoulder, Manny struck out on his own, heading west. He advanced through the woods cautiously, wary of snakes. It took him an hour to realize he had company.

Thin and awkward like many teenagers, though already full-breasted, little Wana smiled joyfully at him.

"Me go," he explained, pointing. Glancing in the indicated direction, she nodded, and smiled at him again. "Me go, Wanda stay. Wanda stay with Wanda's folks. Me go to the great water."

"Wana go," she replied. "Manny go, Wana go. Great water, cold, cold."

He tried to reason with her. He attempted to insult her. He was going to beat her up. Eventually he felt sorry for her. Saving someone's life nearly always entails some further responsibility.

They spent eight horrible days and nights together in the jungle, feeding on whatever they could find and going hungry when they couldn't. By the time they reached the coast, Manny was a nervous wreck, constantly looking over his shoulder. False or not, the cannibalism stories were unnerving.

Moving along the shore, they encountered what seemed to be a hub of some sort, a small coastal town with a large port. Manny had never seen a slave-trading center in his life and would have blundered tragically sooner or later had it not been for a well-dressed, tall and lean black man with noble features, advanced in years, who, placing a hand on Manny's shoulder, invited him, in English, to have a drink at a nearby tavern, and to bring his little female companion along.

Manny described his situation to the hospitable man as best he could over a mug of rum. Nodding matter-of-factly, the man promised to arrange something as soon as one of his contacts arrived – two or three hours from now.

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"You seem like a good sort," he said. "I'd hate to see something unsightly happen to you here."

Manny asked him who he was. The man had another drink before giving Manny the highlights of his biography. Turned out, he was the ruler of a very large tribe. As a young man, he had gone to war often and gladly, conquering nearby tribes and selling some of the prisoners to the Europeans and Yankees. One day, his tribe suffered a terrible defeat. Nearly all of the captives, including the young prince, got shipped off to America.

The planter who bought the prince turned out to be intelligent. He quickly realized that the new slave was no ordinary man. Within a year the prince became an overseer and was allowed to study in his spare time. The owner paid for the lessons. After a while, the former prince became a serious scholar and published a number of essays on various subjects.

Twenty years later, the owner died. The will made the former prince a free man. After ten years of working various jobs and writing articles up North, the scholar returned to Africa to rejoin his tribe, whereupon he became their prince once again. Nowadays, he donned his European suit once in a while in order to visit this town and see what the civilized part of the world was up to. Manny suspected there was more to it but did not wish to press the point. When the contact, who turned out to be a rough, taciturn French captain, arrived, the prince paid him to take Manny and his female companion to Marseilles.

"I know that's where he'll take you," the prince said. "I don't know any Yankees or Brits whom I'd trust – who would not, just for fun, take you to one of the islands and ... never mind. Once in Marseilles, it'll be up to you. Fashions are changing constantly. There's plenty of work for shoemakers."

After spending some time mollifying and persuading Wana, Manny boarded the ship with her.