

MAMBA'S DAUGHTERS —By Du Bose Heyward

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Bluton slowly turned and met her gaze. Without shifting his eyes he removed the cigar from his mouth and crossed slowly until he stood before her; then he looked her up and down.

"Whar did yo' come from, Big Gal?" he asked at length, his large facile mouth mocking her with its smile.

The woman was standing in the doorway, with the night behind her and the flickering lamps pointing up high lights in her boldly modeled face, bringing out glints of dark amber in her wide eyes. As the man approached, her body tensed defensively, and lifted itself to its full height. There was nothing humorous about the wrapped wool of her head—the shabby clothes. She was invested in a sudden natural dignity.

"Ah come from Sabannah," she told him. "Ah come cause Ah wants to. Ah my name ain't Big Gal. It's Baxter." Her gaze never wavered, the glints of amber giving it a strange lucence as it held Bluton's eyes. For a moment they stood without movement. A sense of impending drama drew wire-tight through the room—twanged the nerves of susceptible onlookers.

Mam Vina's cackle, timid but urgent, jangled across it. "Come on daughter. Time to go home," she said gently. She took Baxter's hand and drew it toward the door.

Bluton laughed shortly, uncomfortably, lowered his eyes, and folded his loose lips tightly over the cigar. The girl by the show case who had been standing with a chocolate in her fingers, ran over and caught her man by the arm, glaring defiance at Baxter. The big woman regarded her with a look of supreme contempt, then turned without a word and went with Mam Vina. Behind her the tense atmosphere went suddenly slack.

Bluton collected his faculties and stressing each word exaggeratedly, called after the disappearing figure: "All right, Sistuh, jus' as you say, ob course."

Saint experienced some difficulty in getting Baxter on the pay roll. No one could look at her and doubt her ability to perform even that gruelling labour. But this was the fatal objection: there was no precedent for it. Women worked in the fields, the home, bore children. But the mines were for the men. Then, too, the mining was done by each, and no man was willing to risk the ridicule of having a feegang composed of two Negroes she said humbly. "Ah heah how male partner. The prospect was becoming dark indeed when Saint discovered that an aged Negro called Drayton was going to be laid off because he was becoming feeble and none of the younger Negroes would take him on as pit partner. He arranged that Baxter should have a tryout with the old man. The woman had no idea what the work would be like, but she had superlative confidence in her muscle. And, too, the open country, the

sense of space, and the cool yielding sand beneath her feet gave her a sense of harmony with her surroundings.

At the field's edge on that first morning she was joined by Drayton, a grizzled little man with a wisp of a moustache and old, stubborn eyes. There was a story that when he was in his prime and a schooner was being loaded with rock against time, he had wheeled and dumped five hundred barrow loads of four hundred pounds each without pausing even for food and had earned the record wage of seven dollars in a single day by his feat. Ever since this achievement he had strutted like a little cockerel, and the story was always on his lips. He would say to the big lazy bucks: "How much barrow can yo' load in a day?" When he got the answer he would always cluck his tongue in scorn and tell of his own record. He knew well that they would be glad to turn upon him when his hand grew feeble and his ultimate hour of humiliation arrived. But his worst fear had never conjured up the idea of having to work with a woman. Today the sweet winter air was as wornwood on his tongue.

They stood in the open looking each other up and down, these strangely mated partners. Then, in a deep, bullying voice that no one had ever heard him use before, the old labourer took the offensive. "Spec' me tuh make mine han' out ob yo', enty? Well, Ah ain't gots no time tuh foolin'. Ah spec' yo' done heah bout dat time Ah done roll fibe hundred barrow in a day, enty? Well, dat de kin' ob a man yo' gots tuh partner. Ei yo' can't keep up wid me, Ah goin' quit, yo' onnerstan'!"

Baxter looked at the agitated little figure and saw the surrender masquerading behind bluster and noise, and her heart went out to

him, but before she could reply the other Negroes caught sight of them and whoops of derision rent the air.

"Do look, Daddy Drayton gots he nurse wid um." "Whar dem fibe hundred barrows now, Daddy?" Hats were hurled into the air, and bodies bent double in spasms of laughter.

Baxter had been missing Lisa terribly, and now a flood of maternal yearning rose and overwhelmed her. She saw the old man turn on his tormentors and grimace fiercely at them, like an old and toothless dog who must seem so much fiercer than a young one because he is so uncertain of himself. She was full of tenderness for him. She would have debased herself if she could have propped up his tottering dignity thereby. She was sorry that her huge body made him seem all the smaller by comparison. She wished that she could shield him, help him over his bitter hour.

"Ah tank yo' tuh take me on," yo' is de bes' man on de field. Ah ain't nuttin' but a 'oman, but Ah is goin' do de bes' Ah can." And so they turned their backs on the jeering crowd, and entered upon their strange partnership.

The field to be mined was a large one. The axe men had gone before them and cleared it of forest, and it waited, clean and bare, for the diggers. Presently the foreman came around and assigned a "task" to each pair of workers, or, if they were industrious, two together, while he was about it. A "task" was a rectangle four by six feet in size. The labour consisted in digging one's way slowly downward, throwing out the earth, which was called the overburden, and uncovering, at a

depth of about six feet, the layer of phosphate rock deposit. Then the real labour commenced, for the rocks, which lay in a stratum of about a foot in thickness, had to be broken into small pieces with a pick and thrown up out of the pit with a shovel by hand.

This work was usually done by one of the partners, while the other had the far easier task of wheeling the rock in a barrow to the little railroad and dumping it in a pile for the cars.

Baxter spat upon her hands and closed them about the pick handle. The first stroke drove the implement into the soil up to the handle socket. Drayton's eyes widened, and he could not restrain a grunt.

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