

MAMBA'S DAUGHTERS

by Du Bose Heyward

(Continued from page 2)

phate mines had changed him but little in appearance. As he sat in the half light of the little room between the fading day against the small window and the flickering illumination of the open fire, he showed the same slightly stooping shoulders, the colourless hair with its flaring cowlick, and the old lack of compression about the mouth which is to the conventional mind an infallible symbol of weakness. Only when he finally closed the book, laid the guitar aside, and with hands jammed deep into trousers pockets, commenced to wander about the room, would one have noticed differences. Changes that became evident, not so much in the physical appearance of the man himself as in his interrelation with the room. He was one of those not uncommon people who find expression in the things with which they surround themselves; people for whom no evaluation can serve that does not take the setting into account. There were books on a shelf, plays, biography, poetry, a modern novel or two; the astonishingly varied collection that in age may mean only the dilettante, but in youth the seeker. An etching was given one of the four walls to itself; an extremely well-down piece of work by a young Charleston artist—the gateway of old St. Michael's with its wrought-iron urns and scrolls. A small but fine plaster of the Nike was given the mantel. A couch against one of the walls was covered with brown burlap, and had pillows of orange and lemon upon it. The draperies at the single window were the colour of sunlight. Now day was retreating rapidly behind the panes. The fluctuations of firelight grew more noticeable on walls and furnishings, thrusting mellow shafts under the table and into corners—possessing the room. Saturday night, and the Negroes would soon be coming to do their shopping.

Wentworth cast a long look about him, sighed, and passed through the door into the commissary with its familiar odour—kerosene from the barrel in the corner, cabbages—the smells seeming stronger and more sour in the dusk. Then he caught a clean wholesome whiff from a pile of print cotton goods at his elbow. He threw some wood on the coals in the small open fireplace, lighted the lamps, and stepped through the outer door onto the little piazza. A cold red sunset burned low behind the serried pines, and over the eastern marshes the mists thickened and swirled, bringing night in from the Atlantic wrapped in their folds.

A group of Negroes approached, their resonant voices preceding them. They were in high humour. Tonight they would commence to buy on next week's wages. The exhaustion of credit that invariably pinched them during the latter half of each week was now happily at an end until next Wednesday, or even Thursday if one were careful. Maum Vina, with her kind, peering eyes, and Reverend Quintus Whaley, fat and unctuous, were the first to enter. Behind them groups of twos and threes, gathered before the store, climbed the steps, and entered the building. Loud chaffing and banter filled the air. Most of the women were swinging bottles by strings to be filled with kerosene for their lamps, and some brought jugs for molasses. The men were covered with dust from the mining pits. This was the hour when labour was forgotten, friends met, and gossip was exchanged. The commissary building glowed hospitably. The open fire crackled on the hearth, and several oil lamps flickered in the draught and sent ribbons of smoke up among the rafters. Wentworth waited on Ned first because he knew that he was in trouble and ought to hurry back to

Dolly. His customer was a small black Negro in late middle life, with a grizzled moustache, and large teeth between which was clenched a cheroot that added a smell like burning leather to the other odours in the room. He was pondering over a selection from several bolts of black-and-white cambrics and cotton flannels. He smoked steadily while he held the widths of cloth against a soap box, black for the outside and white for the lining, appraising the effect with his head cocked speculatively on one side. From time to time he would look up and speak to an acquaintance. It seemed to Saint that he was deliberately protracting his errand, enjoying the importance that it gave him. And there was a smugness about him that was annoying. Saint remembered the sounds of weeping that he had heard when he had passed his cabin, and the stricken face of Dolly as she looked from the door. Now he spoke sharply. "If you're sure the box is large enough, say what cloth you want and get through. I haven't all night to give you."

Ned produced a stick about eighteen inches in length and placed it

in the box, where it fitted nicely. "Ain't yo' see, suh, dat he size? He ain't but a six mont' ole baby, an' he always been puny."

"Well, come along, then. Cambric or flannel?"

"Gib me dis"—and the man indicated the cambric—"two yahd black and two yahd white. Dat flannel, coo' too much anyhow." He added a package of tacks to his purchase. His gaze went longingly to a glass jar filled with large candy balls of striped red and white. "An' put in t'ree ob dem candy ball fun sweeten my mou'!" he concluded. He spat the cheroot loudly into the fire and put one of the candies in his cheek, where it looked like the symptom of an acute toothache. Then around the obstruction he said, "Now, suh, please gib me a cherry bounce an' I'll be gone," and he started optimistically toward the keg which contained the sticky sweet drink that the Negroes loved.

"No, I don't," said Wentworth sternly. "Get on back to Dolly. You ought to be ashamed to be banging around the store and your woman alone with your dead baby."

"Dolly tek on too much, Chief. Baby is plentiful. Dey comes an'

dey goes." And with this philosophical comment he took his departure.

A young woman who was passing behind the speaker heard his remark and sucked her teeth loudly at him. "Ole rooster wid young pullet oughtn't to crow so loud, she flung after his retreating figure."

There was some laughter from the group at the fire, but an old woman, Maum Vina, with the bright peering eyes, spoke soberly: "Yo' hadn't ought to laugh at ole Ned like dat. Dat can't do no good. What if Gilly Bluton is run after Dolly, he done de same by plenty odder gal roun' here. When a man know dat anodder man is running after he oman, dat one t'ing. But when he know dat odder people know, den he goin' fight. Yo' mus' want to hab killin' in dis camp, enty?"

"Well, he ain't gots no right to strut so," the young woman said defiantly. "An' Gilly ain't no gawd. He can bleed same as any odder man. What de matter wid dese mens roun' here, anyhow, dey 'frail um so?' She cast a look of scorn around the circle which the men chose to ignore. But old Vina was

undaunted: "Yo' ain't use' to talk like dat 'bout Gilly," she said. "Mus' be he done quit got' to yo' house now."

Saint turned to wait on the next customer, then instinctively followed her gaze toward the door. A stranger had entered. In the small and intimate neighbourhood a new face was sure to claim attention, but this arrival was such a striking figure that her sudden appearance created a minor sensation. The noise around the fire seemed to recoil upon itself, leaving a poised question in the air. All eyes were fixed upon the open door, and the great bulk of the woman who filled it. She stood for a moment blinking in the light, then crossed with a heavy tread and faced Wentworth

(Continued on page 8)

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