

Mamba's Daughters

A Story of Sacrifice, Romance, Humor and Tragedy

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been wrong. Daring and mischief were there now. And beauty. And the swift fluctuations of a colour that could come and go. There was a distinct air of worldliness about her that was new to Saint in the women that he met. Even in that first casual moment of meeting, he knew that she was definitely motivated. That she would know quite well what she wanted. He responded to that with an instinctive masculine withdrawal. Then he met the mischief in her smile again and forgot to be afraid.

"May I see your card?" he asked. "I should like tremendously to have the pleasure."

He found a number of blanks. She had not met anyone. Suddenly behind the smiles of the little group he saw actual distress. They did not know that rescue was sure to come that guests on that ballroom floor were never left to their own resources. They were standing there smiling quite steadily without the least idea of what to do next.

A glance over his shoulder assured him that Polly was labouring amid an embarrassment of riches. He could catch glimpses of her bright young head through the milling circle of evening suits. Rapidly he scribbled his name twice on the card that he held, then asked if he might present some of his friends. His task was not a difficult one. Valerie Land was a light that, under no circumstances, could long have remained obscured. Soon she was having to smile her regrets and exhibit her completed card to new arrivals. The men who had secured dances thanked Saint. The Atkins beamed upon him. He had several dances for himself. Being a gentleman was becoming interesting after all. At least there was something to be said for it.

Behind its banked palms the band crashed into a Sousa march. Saint hastened to his mother and led her into the line that was forming for the cotillon. Everywhere about him couples were meeting, young men with white-haired women on their arms, gay old gentlemen playing the gallant to the debutantes—all of an age tonight, with the first-year boys and girls eying their seasoned partners for fear that they might miss some fine point in the old-world courtesy that still prevailed upon a St. Cecilia floor. There were things that ladies and gentlemen still refrained from doing and saying here that would be both done and said at tomorrow night's informal hop.

The dances—a sadly inhibited fox trot, a flapper dance tucked primly back into petticoats for the night. But the wait! You could give your body to three-quarter time, it would seem, without violating the niceties. Saint took Valeria into the curve of his arm and launched her without a word upon the broad limpid tide of the "Blue Danube." The floor was just crowded enough to require perfect guiding in the man and instinctive

divination of his mood and tempo in his partner. The surge and lift of the peerless old waltz, and the girl in his arms, submissive to his slightest suggestion, yet so separate, so passionately individual, worked on Wentworth like a drug. The small brown head lay against his shoulder and the girl never raised her face to his. Before his eyes colours swam and wave as they drifted between the couples. Colour always moved him deeply, and now the many-tinted dresses whirling and streaming across his vision blurred into one another, creating an effect like a rainbow had fallen about them in a thousand gleaming fragments. They drew apart slowly. The girl pressed Saint's hand, then she raised her face and gave him a long and preternaturally solemn gaze. They did not join the promenade of couples but turned away and found a corner under the palms by the band.

An old bent Negro appeared in the doorway with a tray in his hand. Upon the tray gleamed a row of diminutive wedges of yellow fire. They looked rather like the illustration in Saint's old Bible story book of the coming of the Holy Ghost. He looked up and saw them there. Then he broke a tenet of the society by going and bringing one to a debutante on the ballroom floor. He felt that he must do something spectacular, substitute some memorable symbol for the inadequacy of speech. She took the glass by its slender stem and touched his own gravely with it, then they drained them without a word and put them down.

The touch of glass on wood seemed to break the spell. They laughed into each other's faces, the girl gaily, the boy a little shamefaced. "Silly, aren't we?" he said.

"Divinely." "Well, if it is sentimental and all that, I don't care," he defended. "One does not have to apologize for being sentimental at a St. Cecilia ball. It is a part of the show, like the old silver and the sixteenth dance. By the way, whom did you give the sixteenth to?"

She extended her programme, and her escort frowned heavily over it. "This will never do," he assured her. "Mr. Jervais is one of the managers, and everyone will think that you were stranded and he had to come to your rescue. You must give it to me and let me tell him that there was a mistake."

"No," she told him firmly. "I understand that the sixteenth is saved for wives and sweethearts. I am not going to let you be gallant to a stranger and break some Charleston girl's heart."

Feeling very masterful, Saint wrote his name boldly down for the dance and handed the card back with a bow just as the band crashed into a march.

The couples were forming for the march, and Saint, who was unen-

gaged, picked his way between them and returned to the great doorway the old Negro, and the little lambent flames. "To carry your liquor like a gentleman." The phrase was a commonplace worn thin by long usage. It did not really matter how much one got away with. It was knowing your limit and stopping just on the safe side of it. It meant becoming more and more and more of a gentleman with each drink until one emerged the supreme and effulgent personification of all gentility. But until tonight the question had been entirely a hypothetical one to the boy. In youth, drinking is a habit of the gregarious, and Saint had always been a solitary soul. It had never occurred to him to go to the sideboard in the little Church street house and help himself from the decanter that was always kept there. Now, as he downed his third sherry, he experienced that expansion toward his own kind that comes from sharing a convivial glass. The bent old Negro was an archangel of reverential persuasiveness. Other men were in the group around him. Barriers of reserve and restraint were crumbling. Now the

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