

# MAMBA'S DAUGHTERS

by  
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**PORGY**

*A Story of Sacrifice, Romance, Humor and Tragedy*

**SYNOPSIS**

**MAMBA**—Not a full-blooded Negro but whose dark color suggested an admixture of American Indian, is the much beloved employee of the white aristocratic Wentworth family.

**THE WENTWORTH FAMILY**—Consists of Saint Julien de Chastigny Wentworth, Polly Wentworth, and Mrs. Wentworth, their widowed mother. The family is more aristocratic than wealthy.

**MALIN NETTA**—Another colored member of the Wentworth household, who has been with them for many years.

Mamba has an unusual, clever understanding of the ruling white class and also possesses a naturally deep and unusually rich contralto voice.

The Wentworths are unable to pay Mamba, but Mamba is so devoted to the family that she is satisfied with her board and the opportunity of acting as maid to Polly, a young lady of inherited social prominence.

Polly was very apt in school, but Saint was a disappointment to everyone in the Wentworth family except Mamba, whose keen insight into human nature enabled her to see latent ability even though he did not respond creditably to the school system. Mamba alone understood Saint.

**HAGAR**—Mamba's giant, muscular, slow-witted daughter, had an inordinate liking for strong drink, much to Mamba's distress. Two qualities she had in common with Mamba, namely, a fine contralto voice and a large body. Mamba had said Hagar was "born for trouble."

**LISSA**—Hagar's daughter, was the object of Mamba's sacrifice and the cause of Mamba's constant remonstrances against Hagar's habits.

Mamba leaves the Wentworths for the Atkinsons, who are also wealthy, incidentally more wealthy than aristocratic—in order that she may obtain more pay.

In the meantime Saint obtains a five dollar a week job as storekeeper at the mines and begins a business career.

Hagar's last escapade leads her into a brawl with a Negro, whom she belabored with much severity, that she is arraigned in court on the charge of aggravated assault.

Hagar is given a two-year suspended sentence. Mamba sends her to Saint for a job at the mines. Hagar astonishes the miners by performing a man's work. She turns her earnings over to Mamba, who saves them for Lissa.

At a combination church service and "Love Feast" Hagar (whose new name is Hester) befriends Rhison, a very much despised mulatto, by carrying him to a city hospital after he has been seriously "slashed" by one of the troopers. Under Hagar's suspended sentence, she was forbidden to come within the city limits and she barely escapes prison again.

**NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY**

**INSTALLMENT VI  
PART III**

Mrs. George J. Atkinson dropped upon a Chinese Chippendale chair in the drawing room of the big house in Church Street, buried her face to her hands, and burst into tears. Before her, lying open on the Duncan Phyfe table, was a sheet of heavy cream-colored notepaper. In the center of the page a single paragraph had been inscribed in a small, delicate, but positive hand. It was the sixth "regret" for a luncheon party for eight to be given during the succeeding week. The High Gods—or, at least, Goddesses—of the social Olympus had decided that, if she was not impossible, she was at least highly improbable.

Of course it was George's fault. He never had held up her hands in the fight that she had been waging for years for their social recognition. There was nothing worth having that was not worth working for. And, by inverting cause and effect, there was nothing that could not eventually be won if you worked hard enough for it. A simple and pragmatic philosophy, and a proven one, for it had brought her well along toward middle life with an unbroken record of successes. Unfortunately for her, the methods took small account of the personal equation, and she was not attuned to the subtleties or skilled in the tactics of alternate advance and retreat by which conservative and observant strongholds are taken. She had made the fatal mistake in the beginning of assuming that wealth was, as a matter of course, an effective weapon, not realizing that, with a number of the old families in straitened circumstances, simple living had become the criterion for good taste, and the ostentation had become, by contrast, mere vulgarity.

For several years now she had been entertaining with an industry that, taken merely as an example of unflagging effort, was little less than superb. Of course, she had her snubs, but she had blanked her mind to them and concentrated on her more responsive acquaintances. Her parties had for the most part been well attended, and she had had many invitations to teas and large functions, but, as time passed and few acquaintanceships mellowed into friendship she began to have misgivings. She consoled herself, however, with the knowledge that the old city was socially the most conservative in America and consequently, while the most difficult, the most desirable to claim as one's own. She had at last concluded that the time had arrived for the major movement. She knew well that there was no halfway ground in the society of the old town. Membership in the St. Cecilia Society and attendance at its balls was the one criterion. For a hundred and fifty years the managing board of the organization had gathered annually, sipped their port, champagne, or Scotch, with the changing fashion, and decided whether any of the "new people" in town were eligible for recognition by their hereditary aristocracy. Within that charmed circle one belonged, one was a member of the family. Outside of the fatal line, one was always more or less a stranger stopping temporarily in the city. The fact that such a sojourn might be protracted for several generations was powerless to change the transitory nature of the visit or the chill and punctilious politeness with which an aspirant ineligible was received. He was relegated to the class the existence of which is admitted, but not encouraged. Yes, the time had arrived she felt, when her husband might safely put his letter in for the St.

Cecilia Society, and, in preparation for the event, she would put down a barrage that could be counted upon to blast out final obstructions.

Accordingly the misguided tactician had released a scurge of social activity upon the inner circle. It had been bridged, dined, tea'd—at first formally—and later with a certain creaking and ponderous informality that whispered over the teacups,

**THEY DANCED TOGETHER**



"After the first measure the boy was no longer conscious of the floor's solidity beneath his feet."

"just among ourselves—you understand." At first the attack, by reason of its surprise, seemed destined for success. But it had been launched too far in advance. There came a lull, and, as soon as the bewildered dowagers had time to draw sufficient breath, they laughed. Laughter—the most deliberately cruel sound that the human animal can make. Poor Mrs. Atkinson! Thumbs down.

In the meantime Atkinson had fought his way blindly through the turmoil. That fall he christened his evening clothes "the overalls," and he climbed into them obediently every night and went on duty. He had not the vaguest idea what it was all about. At times he would become aware of his wife's eyes fixed stonily

upon him; then he would pull himself together and turn wearily to his dinner partner and the weather. But he had a robust constitution, and the daylight was still kind to him. He manufactured his cotton-seed oil, did a stiff trick or two for the chamber of commerce, dropped into the Yacht Club for a cocktail and a word about nothing in particular with the men, and did not have a single social aspiration upon him.

Now he opened the door and stood gazing at his wife. He rubbed his eyes, blinked, and gazed again, incredulous of the evidence of his senses.

"The children!"

"No. They're all right. Read that." Atkinson picked up the note, glanced at it, and patted his wife's shoulder consolingly.

"There, there!" he said. "I didn't know you were so fond of her. Grippe eh? We'll send over some flowers."

She was always suspicious of George when he was as stupid as that. A man who was that great a fool could never have made such a success of his life. She had concluded once that because he never laughed aloud and had a way of smiling at things that anyone could see were not in the least amusing, he had no sense of humor. Had it not been for this she might have suspected him of the supreme audacity of making fun of her. Now this suspicion fluttered in her mind, and she regarded him with a long, penetrating look. His mouth, which had been twitching at the corners, stiffened under the bristly moustache, and his eyes met hers with candor. While she gazed, they actually mirrored sympathetic distress.

out of the way, jerked up a substantial product of modern America, sat squarely upon it, and said:

"Right. I haven't understood. If there is a forest, I'm glad to hear it. I haven't been able to see it yet for the trees. Now try to tell me in words of not over two syllables exactly what it is you want."

"Very well," she answered. "I will. The point is that you simply have to get into the St. Cecilia Society this year because I have been counting on it; in fact, I was so sure that when I was in New York last summer I invited Valerie down to make her debut with us. Now, if we don't get in, we'll be in the pleasant position of having to tell your sister that she can keep Valerie at home because we are not good enough to be acceptable socially. Now, do you understand?"

He was callous enough to smile. "Good God!" he said, "is it all really as simple as that? My dear, you have married fifteen years. Tell me, please, who are some of the managers of the St. Cecilia Society?"

She mentioned several names of the sort that the tourist might be seen any spring day deciphering from the oldest tombs in St. Michael's churchyard.

"It is sort of hopeless," she concluded, "because I never seem to see them at the teas and things that I go to."

His smile broadened into a laugh. "Those chaps—teas! I fancy not. Why, my dear, you have been tearing me away from them at the Club every evening to doll up and go to your so-called parties."

That night the House of Atkinson recalled invitations for two dinners, a tea, and a luncheon, and the following afternoon George settled his wife comfortably aboard the New York express. His parting words were:

"Better get several ball gowns—quiet ones. Outfit Valerie, too. Bob's usually too strapped to give her nice things, you know."

During the succeeding weeks Atkinson had more time to spend with his friends. Two cocktails of an evening at the Club now, with plenty of time to talk markets and the economic aspect of the new city paving programme. Nice chaps, these, urbane, fastidious about rather unexpected things; not smart dressers; insular, yes—not too greatly concerned with the opinions and behavior of the insignificant residue of the globe lying to the north of Magnolia Cemetery and the south of the Battery. Younger ones, who addressed him as "sir," secure in a breeding that kept the courtesy from appearing servile—older men, who knew a horse, a mint julep, and a gentleman when they met one—men who, like himself were quite content to leave teas, the Sunday concerts, the Poetry Society, and the Episcopal ritual to their wives. Pleasant evenings those, with one's own kind, and no fuss about it. And then, in the third week of his wife's absence, that flying trip to Washington to appear before the Interstate Commerce Commission on a rate hearing of vital importance to the old city. The Committee had asked Atkinson to be a spokesman. The clean, hard drive of his brain against a problem always brought concrete results. He could talk to the Yankees in their own language. Pleasant chats in the smoker. Nice chaps surely. No putrid smoking-room humor. And the homeward trip with the concessions in their pockets, a fight behind them, and a genial comradeship in the air.

It was during the last hour of that railroad journey, while the four of them were enjoying final cigars, that Atkinson spoke his first words bearing on the matter of the coveted membership. One of the men had been saying something to him—the fellow whose name always reminded him of an heroic phrase from early American history—"Damn the torpedoes—go ahead!"—not that—that was Farragut—oh, yes—"Millions for defence, and not one cent for tribute"—that was the chap!

When the man had finished his question, Atkinson smiled and said, "Say, that's awfully hospitable of you fellows. Hadn't given the balls much thought before. Suppose there'll be a quiet corner of refuge for middle-aged knee joints?—Not much of a dancer, you know—Yes? Well, I'll send the letter over by messenger to-morrow."

Mrs. Atkinson returned from the North at an opportune moment. Mamba was receiving a thick, cream-colored envelope from an elderly Negro who had the bearing of an ambassador to the Court of St. James'. She lifted the missive from the tray and, with shaking fingers, removed it from its two envelopes.

"The Managers of the St. Cecilia Society request the pleasure . . ."

And while the social gods had been playing upon the hopes and fears of the Atkinsons, Saint Wentworth, hav-

ing attained his majority, was journeying to Charleston in accordance with the family tradition to attend his first St. Cecilia ball and represent his generation of the line among his social peers.

But the years had wrought a change in the temporal, if not the spiritual, aspect of the pilgrimage. Two generations ago the Wentworth carriage, followed by a wagon for luggage and servants, would have driven down from the plantation and drawn up impressively before the hospitable Planters' Hotel. The tailor and an army of mantua makers would have been awaiting its arrival to put the finishing touches on the broadcloths and brocades for the all-important debut. To-day, Saint, with a week's vacation ahead of him, served his last Negro, turned the store over to the malaria-bitten poor-white who was to take his place, washed up, and caught a lift on a wagon as far as the bridge. Over the ancient wooden planking he footed it to the city, caught a trolley, and finally arrived at the little brick house in Church Street.

The premises were deserted. Doubtless Mrs. Wentworth had gone out with Polly to purchase some consummating touch for the girl's costume. But the magnitude of the impending event had charged the inanimate walls of the building, and, as he let himself in, he caught the contagion of excitement in the air. He took the steps two at a time to his room—what a brick Mother was!—how absolutely invincible! His father's dress suit had been lifted from its long oblivion and made ready. He could see that the old broadcloth lapels had been faced with silk in the prevailing mode. The trousers lay beside the coat, beautifully pressed and folded. A new white vest, a shirt, a tie, and gloves were ranged beside the suit, and, under the edge of the bed, beside his old slippers, stood a pair of new patent-leather pumps with the light flowing and settling over them like some gleaming liquid.

Saint was caught by one of his rare waves of emotion. It choked him up, left him shaken. It meant so much to her—all this. His solitary life had given him leisure for thought, and he had developed a habit of passionate search into causes, a feeling that surfaces didn't matter; that behind every physical expression of a personality there lay the deep, secret impulse. Now he lost sight of the makeshift wardrobe before him and stood abashed before the unswerving purpose of which it was an expression—the determination to hold a place for her children in the class to which they had been born. Out in the country he had not thought much about being a gentleman. It had seemed rather absurd in the only life in which he seemed capable of succeeding—of course, gentility was a state of being; you were born a Wentworth and you refrained from doing certain things because instinctively they put your teeth on edge. There you were—and that was all there was to it. But being a gentleman as a career—that was different. To be done properly it would involve so many things that were utterly beyond him: setting, education, attainments—what was the use! There were still things within reach—books, pictures, out of doors, and—yes—even the Negroes there at the mines with their humour, tragedy, and the flattering respect and frank liking that they gave him. He was finding happiness there. What did clothes matter?—dances, girls, surfaces—what was the use of it all? And God! what a lot of herself his mother had put into it—savings for years, sewing, taking boarders, catering—and his savings, too, for he knew that a part of the money he sent home every week had gone into the bank for the "coming out." She could have taken things easier all of these years; but for her determination to be ready when the time came to give Polly and himself these things—these—and, to her, the intangible but incalculably valued significance that lay behind them.

He had things that he had wanted terribly to do with this week. The fossils that the Negroes were always turning up in the mines had started him off on geology and the director at the Museum had offered to show him books and specimens. Then there was the Art Gallery. A friend there had promised that he should meet some of the painters so that he could see how pictures were made. Now the precious week had to go in a round of entertainments—an ancient fetish. Of course he hadn't hesitated when his mother made the plans. In fact, he knew that he had been predestined from birth for this moment. But he felt that it was something to be done and—God willing—forgotten.

But the clothes, lying mutely before him, pulled against his mood and brought him back to his mother and the vague, intangible thing that

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