

MAMBA'S DAUGHTERS

By Du Bose Heyward

(Continued from Page Three)

Did he ask to drive you home?"

"Yes, he did say something about it."

"Well, I hope you told him no."

After all, Slim's settin' you up to the party to-night, and he's got some rights coming to him."

"All right," Lissa replied obediently. "I'll turn Prince down."

"An' look here," the big girl said seriously, "don't you go losin' your head over that nigger. He's free with his money, and he's always good for a swell time, but the sky's his limit—watch your step. I ain't so sure you're his sort, anyhow. Now, me—that's a different matter."

Lissa gave a confident laugh. "Don't you let that worry you, Sister," she replied. "I'm a pretty good hand at taking care of myself."

Charlie and Slim came up and joined them.

"All right," Gardinia warned, "just watch your step—that's all."

It was well after midnight when the Ford bounced out onto the concrete road and headed south with the four revelers. Slim sat in his corner glum and silent. He evidently felt that he had been rather hardly used. Lissa made several attempts to draw him out and finally yielded to a growing exasperation. If he thought that she was going to apologise and eat humble pie, he had another think coming. Her anger rose. He ought to thank his stars that she had even gone with him, she, a member of the Reformed Church, a friend of the Broadens. She did not need to worry. There was Prince, now, ready to show her a good time. The premonition of danger that she had felt toward him at first had abated until it had left only an exciting element of mystery and adventure. She smiled at the memory of Gardinia's warning. As if she couldn't take care of herself. No. She was cut on her own now, and she didn't have to ask favours of anybody.

When Lissa entered her room she found Mamba sitting just as she had left her: the lamp was turned low, and the old woman was slouched deep in her big chair, her gaze fixed beyond the open window to where the late fragment of a moon was climbing over the housetops. She did not scold as the girl had expected. Instead she turned her eyes, which had a slight film of weariness over them, in mute questioning toward the door.

Lissa exclaimed, "Why, you ought to be ashamed, Grandma, sitting up

at this hour. How come you didn't go to bed?"

The old figure drew itself together in the chair and spoke. "Turn up dat lamp so Ah can see yo' an' come here."

Lissa did as she was bidden, and Mamba took her hand and drew her down upon her lap, then peered searchingly into her face.

She said, "Yo' been drinkin', chile."

"Oh, nothing much, Grandma, just a couple."

"Yo' ain't been bad?"

The girl laughed and patted the old face lightly.

"Not on your life, Grandma. You needn't worry about me. I had a swell time dancin', but I'm nobody's fool."

"Well, go long to bed, an' in de mornin' yo' got to tell me all 'bout it."

"Sure thing," Lissa replied, "but you mustn't wait up for me like this. You need your sleep, you know. I got to take care of this old lady. I can't get along without her."

She caught the old woman for a moment in her strong young arms, then got to her feet and commenced to undress.

"Ain't no use to say dat, chile," Mamba replied. "When you gone out nights Ah all de time gets a feelin' you might need me, an' Ah ain't likes to take off my clo'es till yo' gets back home."

Lissa brought Gardinia to meet Mamba with some trepidation. She feared the impression that her now constant companion would make on the astute old woman. She thought that her grandmother would be easier in her mind if she had only her account of the dances and late motor rides that were becoming more and more frequent as the summer passed.

But one Sunday after morning service the girls were walking together on the Battery and Gardinia came as far as the gate of the Atkinson garden. Suddenly she was seized by one of her characteristic impulses.

"Say," she exclaimed, "I believe I'll go in and meet that old grandma of yours you're always 'talking about. She must be a rare old dame. I want to know her."

There was nothing to be done but to accede, and after an imperceptible moment of hesitation Lissa said, "Sure, come on in. I reckon she's in the room now."

Gardinia's glance was busy as they passed through the well-kept garden

and to the neat two-storied building in the rear, with the garage below, and a glimpse of clean white curtains showing in the windows above.

"Pretty swell 'dumpp," she admired. "Pretty soft thing you've got here. I'll say."

"Grandma," Lissa said on entering the room, "this is my friend Gardinia; she wanted to meet you, so I brought her in."

Mamba came forward and took the younger woman's hand. From their network of wrinkles the old eyes looked searchingly into her face. Then she smiled, showing her big white teeth.

"The kid's been telling me so much about you," Gardinia explained, "that I just wanted to come in and get acquainted. Guess you think I'm a funny sort of friend for that highbrow gal of yours, eh?"

Mamba murmured something about being glad to meet her. But as is so often the case with first remarks, her words meant little or nothing, serving merely as a screen from behind which each of the women was exploring for the real ego that lay secreted behind words, eyes, lips.

Lissa watched closely realised that they liked each other. That in spite of the differences of age and outlook there was a hidden bond of intimacy to which they both responded. It mystified her. She was still too unknowing to recognise it as the sisterhood of the unchaste. It was something that needed no words. There it was in each. In Mamba a thin echo from an incredibly vanished past; in the girl, only yesterday, and perhaps again to-morrow but across

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the years it sent its spark of understanding and was tacitly accepted by each. Strange to say, it was prejudicial. It was a phase of their world, and it was a phase that belonged to

Gardinia burst through the reserve

(Continued on page five)


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