

MAMBA'S DAUGHTERS

A Story of Sacrifice, Romance, Humor and Tragedy

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

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

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

Mamba has an unusual and unusual 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 hard 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 habit.

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.

One of Hagar's escapades leads her into a brawl with a Negro, whom she belabors with so much severity that she is arrested and charged with aggravated assault.

Hagar is given a two-year suspended sentence. Mamba sends her to Saint for a job at the mines. Hagar acquiesces the money 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 Baxter) befriends Bluton, a very much despised mulatto, by carrying him to a city hospital after he has been seriously "slashed" by one of the frolickers. Under Hagar's suspended sentence, she was forbidden to come within the city limits and she barely escapes prison again.

The season's most exclusive social event among the white folk is the ball of the St. Cecilia society. The Atkinsons are elated over their invitation to attend this event, consequently they invite Mr. Atkinson's pretty niece, Valerie, to attend as their guest.

Mamba takes Lissa, who is now about ten years of age, to the Wentworth home to see Polly's evening gown. While there, Lissa is found to be developing into a very beautiful girl.

Reverend St. John becomes a person non grata in the community. However, he succeeds in establishing a lasting friendship with Baxter and leaves his New York address with her. Saint has become a successful business man, while Valerie has been abroad and acquitted herself creditably in the service of her country during the World War.

Lissa, now seventeen, has blossomed into a maiden of exotic beauty. She has become identified with an intellectual group where her voice—the deep contralto, handed down from Mamba through Baxter—has attracted much attention.

Lissa is now a member of Charleston's intelligentsia, where she meets Frank North, a young Negro painter and violinist. He is very talented and worthwhile, and is interested in Lissa.

Lissa is considerably disgusted with her lofty associates. One day she tells Mamba that in spite of the fact that she is told to be proud of her Negro heritage, all her associates are trying their "damndest" to be white.

Gardinia Whitmore, a mulatto beauty and a true rapper type, seeks Lissa's companionship. But Lissa, because of her refined nature, is rather afraid of Gardinia's overtures.

Gardinia has asked Lissa to accompany her on a "wild" party.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

INSTALLMENT XI

"I wonder," she whispered.

"Oh, hell, don't wonder, come along. Nuthin' ain't goin' to happen that you can't get over. Meet us on the corner by the post office at half-past eight, and we'll be ready to pick you up and highball up the road."

"All right, I guess I'll go. What'll I wear?"

"The best you got, kid, and your dancin' shoes. And maybe you better not say anythin' round at the Broadens to-morrow night. It ain't their stuff. But, believe me, it's got class of its own."

At the next corner Gardinia bade Lissa a breezy farewell and left her to continue on her way with a chaos of contending emotions as an accompaniment of her thoughts.

Saturday night found Lissa pacing slowly back and forth before the post office. All day she had vacillated between an overwhelming desire to go and a deep, premonitory fear that prompted her to stay with Mamba. When the late dark finally gathered she had dressed with a desperate speed and without telling her grandmother where she was going had kissed her passionately, then rushed out, leaving the old woman's questions unanswered.

After all, she had arrived at the rendezvous ahead of time for she had been standing several minutes when St. Michael's chimed the half hour. About her the streets were quiet, and high over her head mellow tones of the old bells ran their double trill and left the air singing. Lissa caught the faintly throbbing note and held it until the vast vibrations fluttered out and died. The corner on which the girl was waiting was one of the most beautiful and significant in the old town. Opposite her the church lifted its straight white spire out of the yellow glow of the street lamps into the cool, faint glimmer of the early stars. Diagonally across the way the clusters of lamps were aglow on the City Hall steps, with the building darkling above them like frowning brows over watchful eyes. Behind the City Hall lay the dim quietude of the park, with its stained marble busts and shafts ghost-like under the spreading trees.

Under the spell of the familiar beauty the reckless mood that had finally decided Lissa to come commenced to pass. Her gaze followed the pointing finger of the steeple into the vast serenity of the summer night, and she gave an involuntary start. She was standing out at the pavement's edge, at the intersection of the two broad thoroughfares, and now, as she gazed up, she realized that they marked the sky off above her into a gigantic cross, its head and foot pointing north and south and its arms dipping east and west

into the two rivers.

A fear that was neither superstition nor religion but a little of both assailed her, making her suddenly long to be safely at home with Mamba. What if she cut Gardinia and her crowd now and ran home? They were late, anyway, and that would give her a good excuse.

Then abruptly, the moment of quiet was broken and with it the spell that it had woven upon the girl. Several automobiles approached the corner, sounding their claxons. Down the rails from the north a great double-truck trolley hummed and rattled, then passed with a series of deafening jars over the switch.

Two white men came out of the post office and passed close to her, smoking and talking together. One glanced at her curiously in the half light. They sauntered on, and she heard laughter and, very distinctly, the words "high yellow."

A moment later a dilapidated Ford came to an abrupt and noisy stop before her, and she heard Gardinia's husky, voluptuous voice.

"Here's th' lady friend—all dressed up and bells on, eh, Lissa? Good girl. Meet my friends. This here's Charlie, and that's Slim in the back seat. Boys, this is Lissa. No Miss and Mister in this gang. Hop in there with Slim. He's going to be your feller for to-night. Look him over and see if he ain't got class."

Charlie called "Hello, Lissa," from the driver's seat. Slim jumped out and shook hands. "Glad to know you," he said, and he held the door open for her to get in. Then they were seated. The machine seemed to crouch for a moment, took a spasmodic leap, then settled down into a brisk, steady gait.

The couple on the front seat paid no further attention to their companions but sat close together talking in low voices that were absorbed in the rattle of the vehicle.

At first Lissa could think of nothing to say, and Slim seemed to experience the same difficulty for he sat well over on his side of the car. When they drove under the arc light Lissa took advantage of the transient illumination to appraise her partner. He was dark, a full-blooded Negro, with a receding forehead, a broad, flat nose, and a very large mouth. Once he looked up, met her scrutiny, and broke into a broad, friendly grin. She saw the whiteness of his teeth spring out against the black, and his eyes laughing shyly into her face. She was reassured and began to feel that they would get along together. There was nothing about him to make a girl afraid. Then the lights were behind them, and ahead the road, a broad gray band of concrete, plunged straight out between dense patches of woodland and nebulous distances of open field.

The car, like a wild creature that has broken long captivity, flung the city behind it and leaped for the

open. Gardinia's voice came back with the whistling wind to the silent couple behind her.

"Hey, there, you two—what do you think this is—a funeral? What's the matter with you, Slim, you don't hold that gal in—don't you know she ain't use to country ridin'?"

Thus encouraged, Slim allowed himself to be bounced over to Lissa's side of the car and put his arm around her shoulder. For a moment the girl's body remained rigid. Then, on another bounce, the man's arm fell lower and closed firmly about her waist. A tremor shook the girl. Then suddenly she relaxed into Slim's arms and closed her eyes.

"Don't you worry," he said in a low husky voice. "Ah ain't goin' to let you get thrown out."

For half an hour the car drove steadily northward; then from the dense shadows of massed live oaks a row of lights leaped out. Charlie jerked the machine hard over. It left the concrete for a rough side road, executed a series of jackrabbit bounds, and brought up short before the door of a dance hall. A rush of talk, laughter, song, and instrument-tuning greeted them, shattering the peace of the night and challenging the new arrivals with a mood of wild gaiety. Slim waited with the girls while Charlie parked the car.

The wide doorway was swarming like a hive; couples came and went between the tawdry brilliance of the room and the piled blackness of night under the live oaks. A group of young bucks lounged near the door, smoking and passing a flask from mouth to mouth.

Charlie rejoined the party just as the music flung its unifying rhythm into the discordant battle. They elbowed their way through the press and entered the hall. The room was a-flutter with tissue-paper streamers of every shade that depended from the rafters and responded with an agitated waving to the sound and motion beneath. There were eight men in the orchestra and Lissa noted immediately with the colour snobbery of the Broadens set that they were all full-blooded Negroes. There were two guitars, two banjos, a fiddle, a cornet, and trombone, and a man with drum and traps. The sound was unlike anything that the girl had ever heard. Strive as she might, she could not recognize the tune. As a matter of fact, it was not an orchestra in a strict interpretation of the term, but merely a collection of eight individuals who had taken some simple melody as a theme and were creating rhythm and harmony around it as they played. Her immediate sensation was one of shock at the crude and almost deafening uproar. Then, as she stood listening, a strange excitement commenced to possess her. Music had never moved her like this before. It had made her cry—and it had shaken her with delight, but this seemed to be breaking something loose deep within her—something that seethed hot through her veins and set her muscles jumping.

The crowd came jamming into the room, black girls with short knappy hair, tall, long-limbed Negroes from the wharves, sailors from the Navy Yard, dark and heavy, with here and there the pallor and passivity of a Filipino. There were many couples out from town who, like themselves, had the mark of the city on them in their straightened hair and well-made clothes.

Slim caught Lissa closely to him. His shyness had vanished, but to the girl that did not matter, for she was no longer afraid. The music snatched them up, and they were off into the thick of it. It is unlikely that anywhere else in America at that moment there were more and different steps being trod on a dance floor. The old fundamental rhythm of the turkey trot prevailed, but the more sophisticated were dancing a one-step or fox trot. In a corner out of the jam a group of country Negroes were dancing singly. The dance was a strange, fascinating, and wildly individual affair. They stood two and two, facing each other, as though dancing in competition rather than together, and the basic step consisted of rising on alternate feet while the free leg was hurled outward and backward, knees touching, and toes turned in, parrot fashion.

Lissa made Slim stop with her to watch, and immediately the desire to dance it possessed her. Slim laughed. "Come along," he urged, pulling at her arm. "That's nothin' but a ole country nigger dance."

She would not listen. Presently she had the step and started in at the edge of the circle. When the music stopped she was angry. "Oh, I almost had it, Slim," she exclaimed. "One more try and I'll get it pat."

Why did they have to stop just then?"

Her partner led her out of doors, then slipped his arm around her and guided her toward the automobile. Gardinia and Charlie were there already, and when the four of them were together, Gardinia handed Lissa a flask. "Hit her up, Sister," she invited.

Lissa hesitated. "What's it—whisky?"

"Sure—go ahead, ain't goin' do you no harm."

The girl lifted the flask and took a swallow, with the result that she choked and coughed.

They all burst into laughter.

"My Gawd," Gardinia mocked, "can't you even take a drink o' hooch?"

Lissa snatched the bottle back from Slim. "Can't, eh? I'll show you." She wasn't going to be laughed at by Gardinia, that was certain.

What a night! Life with a red lining. The orchestra was at it again. That new dance, Lissa must master that if she kicked the floor boards loose.

During an intermission, when they crowded to the door for air, a wicked-looking stripped Ford, painted scarlet, jerked itself into the light and stopped. Gardinia grabbed Lissa by the arm. "Here's Prince," she cried. "You got to meet him. Hello, Prince, here's a lady friend I want you to know."

The new arrival was evidently a favourite, especially with women, for a number ran forward and crowded about the car. He got languidly out and, with casual greetings to right and left came forward and joined the girls. They met where the shaft of light from the open door stabbed the darkness and splayed out on the gravel. "Lissa, this is the Prince I been tellin' you about," Gardinia introduced.

"Glad to know you," he said, and took her hand, while he slid his glance over her in deliberate and frank appraisal. Then he raised his eyes to her face, and the grip on her fingers tightened. He gave a low whistle and, still gripping Lissa's hand, addressed Gardinia — "Some class, baby; where'd you find her?"

A shudder of repulsion started under the man's hot, moist clasp, flashed up the girl's arm, and communicated itself to her whole being. The man sensed it with evident satisfaction, his loose, sensuous lips parted, and he gave a low, confident laugh. He bent forward, and Lissa got an impression of a light muddy complexion, heavy-lidded eyes, and a long scar across the forehead close under the hair. The air was heavy with its warning of danger; she felt her skin creep under it. And yet, in spite of the repulsion; that she felt at his touch, there was a compelling power that drew her toward him and made her pulse race. She summoned all her strength and snatched her hand away.

Prince laughed again and turned toward the hall. "Me an' you's goin' to be buddies," he said. "Come on in an' let's have a drink on it."

His glance included Lissa's party in the invitation, and the four of them followed him across the hall to the gaily decorated booth in the corner where soft drinks were being served.

"What'll you take?" he asked largely.

They made it "dopes," and when the glasses stood before them their host produced a silver flask and poured a generous drink in each tumbler. Charlie exclaimed, "Hot damn! None of dat moonshine rotgut for Prince. Nuttin' but de bes'."

Lissa noticed that Slim's bashfulness had descended upon him again and that he accepted the drink from Prince with reluctance.

The music crashed out, smiting the air with the flat impact of a blow, causing the fluid in the tumblers to quiver. They emptied their glasses in gulps.

Prince drew his hand across his mouth and said, "All right, girlie, let's go."

Slim seemed to have suffered a sort of paralysis. When Lissa looked toward him, he said nothing, but stood looking at her with wide, mournful eyes. Prince put his arm around her, and she looked into his face with a shaken, reckless little laugh. "I'm on," she said, and was snatched from the corner into the malestrom of the dance floor.

They danced three dances together. Prince looked older than the boys with whom they had come, but he could dance circles around them. Lissa was delighted to find that he was an expert in the step that she had just discovered, and she made him go to a corner near the band and teach it to her.

It was while they were there that the musicians broke into a medley

of old jazz tunes, launching from their wild, syncopated improvisations into that early ragtime classic of the Johnson brothers "Under the Bamboo Tree." In Lissa the music ceased to be a thing external, apart. It became a fire in her body, taking her suddenly like sheeting flame about a sapling, cutting her off from the others, possessing her, swaying her irresistibly forward toward the players. She did not realize that she was singing until her gaze rested on the face of the leader and over his fiddle she saw the white flash of his grin in invitation and called, "Come up, Sister. Up here's whar yo' b'long." Then she was among the swaying bodies, the smashing harmonies of the band. Her muscles twitched to the rhythm, moving her feet and legs in the intricacies of the new dance, her arms were thrown wide with fingers snapping the time. She forgot that there would be a solo in church to-morrow and that her voice needed saving. She remembered nothing except the words and music that came in a rush out of an old forgotten memory, beating out from lungs and throat in a torrent of song:

"If you lika me lika I lika you,
An' we lika both the same,
I'd lika say this very day
I'd lika change your name . . ."

On the floor couples were still dancing, whirling more wildly under the added excitement of the song. The drive of the music through the girl wrought in her for the first time the almost miraculous duality which is the gift of only the true artist. It seemed mysteriously to divide her into two separate entities, one of which floated over the heads of the dancers through the wide doorway to go blundering inconspicuously about among the soft summer stars. This part of her was concerned only with beauty—with far, thrilling things—Mamba's love—the harbour at dawn—Battery gardens under summer moons—all of these things it must capture and prison in the music that she was making. The quest seemed suddenly more holy than her prayers. It lifted her to the point of exaltation that trembles on the brink of tears. Then there was the other part of her that followed her gaze here and there across the dance floor, cool, deliberate, detached, arresting first one couple, then another, holding them tranced and gaping where they stood. This Lissa was egotistical, supremely self-confident. "I will make them all stop and listen," it boasted. "I shall possess them all before I let them go. I can. I will." It was the personification of this second self that stood there on the dais, clad in close-fitting red silk, her sinuous body a fluid medium through which the maddening reiteration of the rhythm beat out to the listeners and forced them to respond, her voice with its deep contralto beauty the very spirit of youth, yet shading the edges of laughter with a shadow of a sob.

When the song ended the leader merged it without an appreciable break into "Yip I aidy I aidy I aidy." The choice was an inspiration. Lissa had them all now. Out under the fluttering paper streamers the crowd stood motionless except for those who, while they held their eyes fixed upon the singer, swayed their bodies unconsciously in unison with her own. She had made good her boast. She had captured the last one. The new song with its devil-may-care note of triumph lifted over the weaving accompaniment of the band and beat against the flimsy walls like a living thing. It said: "You are all mine—mine." It flung it at them arrogantly with a trace of indolent contempt, then it wavered, softened, and said it again in a torrent of passionate gratitude and love. Her very own—her first audience.

"Sing of joy, sing of bliss
Home was never like this.
Yip I aidy I aidy . . ."

With an intoxicating thunder of applause sounding in her ears, Lissa stepped down from the platform. Charlie was waiting there for her, and before Prince could reach her side he slipped an arm about her and elbowed a way for her through the stamping, shouting crowd. When they were finally out of doors they were joined by Gardinia, who flung her arms about Lissa in a hug that left her breathless. "Where did you get it, kid?" she asked in wonder.

"Heaven knows! I guess I was as surprised as you."

Gardinia gave her a second embrace, then turning to Charlie dismissed him with: "Run along. I got something to say to sister."

When he had passed out of earshot she said to the girl: "Look here, bright eyes, you want to watch your step with that feller they call Prince."

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