

# Mamba's Daughters

By  
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(Continued from Page Four)

ingly muddy, with bare legs and her skirts tucked up above the knees.

Keen observers all, they were immediately aware of a change in the woman. They had known her as a rather silent person who upon occasions, such as lodge meetings, passed suddenly to the other extreme of temperament and indulged in almost violent bursts of animal spirits. Now, looking into her face, they sensed something new and disturbing. Her heavy features were in repose, but she conveyed an impression of smiling down upon them from a height. Her eyes were wide and unusually bright, and as she crossed the room toward Davy there was immediately evident a new coordination of movement that invested her great bulk with a sort of massive dignity and made her appear almost majestic to the mystified onlookers.

When she reached the high counter, she turned her back to it, rested her elbows on it, and stood looking out over the heads of the Negroes, who had resumed their seats and

were regarding her in watchful silence.

For a long moment she stood so. She did not seem to realize that it was time to shut up the store and go home. She seemed to think that she had all the time in the world. Finally, as though she were not speaking to them at all but to someone who stood at their backs, she put her first, inexplicable question:

"Any ob yo' folks eber hear ob a nigger killin' herself by what de white folks calls committin' suicide?"

Before her, eyes showed white glints here and there. Heads turned as by a common impulse, then faced her quickly again.

A woman's voice said, "Fuh Gawd's sake, Baxter, don't talk dat talk!"

Silence.

"Then a man said, 'Everybody know nigger nebber kill herself.'"

"Why dat is?" Baxter persisted in her strangely impersonal catechism.

"Cause nigger ain't worry herself dat much," came the answer.

"Tain't always goin' be like dat," Baxter said in a slow, musing voice, as though she were thinking aloud.

"Time comin' when nigger goin' worry jes' like white folks, an' den Gawd goin' show 'em what to do when he trouble get too deep fur he to wade t'rough."

The fixed attention of the group broke before a wave of uneasiness. Bodies shifted, and someone started to speak. But now Baxter looked down, and her glance travelled from face to face.

"Anybody seen anyting ob Gilly to-day?" she asked in a matter-of-fact voice.

The tension broke. Several of the Negroes laughed nervously. A number of voices were raised in negative answers. But her next question alarmed them again by its irrelevance.

"Anybody seen any buzzard roun' here to-day?"

Yes, they had all noticed buzzards over the swamp. Somebody had lost a hog, no doubt, or maybe a dead mule had been dragged out there.

Hagar stood apparently debating the matter, her gaze again fixed upon the air over the heads of the Negroes. Then with a faint smile she turned to Davy and motioned to a shelf where several dusty account books lay.

"Get down dat oldes' book, Davy, an' bring um here."

The man obeyed and placed it on the counter before her, studying her the while with his bright, disturbed eyes.

"Now turn back twelve year 'til yo' comes to a man by de name Baxter. Ah gots a promise to keep."

Davy spun the yellow pages, found what he sought, then raised his eyes interrogatively.

"How much he owe when he done get drowned?"

The man peered at the fading pencil scrawl. It was a dollar and a quarter, he informed her.

Hagar drew a ten-dollar bill from her pocket. The yellow-back was an unusual sight in the commissary, and the Negroes, their curiosity getting the better of their alarm, crowded forward to see.

Still holding the money, she indicated the large glass jar of "jaw-breakers" on the counter. "An' how

much for dat bottle ob candy?"

"De whole t'ing?" he asked in amazement.

"Sure, de whole t'ing."

"Well, dere mus be two hundred in dere. Dat'll be two dollar."

With a broad gesture Hagar lifted the jar, withdrew the stopper, and poured the contents in a cataract of red and white out over the counter.

"Help yo'selves," she invited.

"An' now dat keg ob bounce. How much dat?"

Davy, in an incredulous voice, opined that three dollars would pay for it.

"You niggers get to dat keg and fill yo'selves up," she commanded. "Ah all de time been wanting to gib yo' a party, but Ah ain't had no free money till now."

Slowly they withdrew in the direction of the keg, and Hagar stood looking after them with something of her old childlike wonder in her smile.

She turned back toward Davy.

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after an almost imperceptible hesitation, added, "free as Gawd." The amazed youth looked up, but (Continued on page 7)

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