

Mamba's Daughters

By

DuBOISE HEYWARD

(Continued from Page Three)

the stars keeping him company at night. She was shed of him at last—free.

She made surprisingly good time, and it was still afternoon when she noticed that the trees before her were no longer a solid wall but showed thin places where the light filtered through from the open fields beyond. She was in splendid trim for the journey, her senses keen, her muscles vigorous. In contrast to the depression of the morning she waited in excited anticipation for the coming of night.

Out beyond the trees, where the sun still lay heavy and warm, an abominable mongrel bound rolled over in a broom-straw field, yawned, lifted a fretful hind leg and scratched his mangy ribs. Twenty feet away a cottontail took alarm, hoisted its white ensign astern, and sailed silently away toward the cover of the swamp. A vagrant air caught the scent of the rabbit and trailed it past the nostrils of the somnolent cur. The animal raised its muzzle and tongued, long and quaveringly. From a neighboring haunt half a dozen answers sounded, bell-like in the heavy silence, and the broom straw commenced to sway to the thrashing of excited tails.

With her confidence at its height, Hagar heard them coming. An icy hand seized her heart, contracted about it, and her blood crawled frozen through her veins. Dogs! A primal terror that was proof against argument and reason silenced both and paralyzed her brain. The clear, high, unceasing rhythm of the tongue shook along her nerves in waves of exquisite terror. A strange guiding force broke the inertia of her body and worked a subtle change in her appearance. Her nostrils quivered. Her hearing became more acute. She faced the sound and commenced to retreat silently, warily. Her back touched the trunk of a great live oak. She spun around. Then she found herself climbing, reaching always for higher limbs, swinging herself up, panting—trembling. When she reached the top branches she crouched in the heavy foliage and peered down through the leaves and moss.

They were nearer now, and the cry had accelerated until it was a taut rope of sound that had one end in her body and that shortened with every second.

The dogs had gotten Ned. He had been loose for two weeks after he had cut Bluton. He would have got clean away but for the dogs.

The pack passed almost directly beneath her perch. She could scarce retain her hold upon the branches as she peered down. Then she saw it for what it was: the flash of a small tawny body with a bobbing white spot, and the parcel of yelping mongrels.

Slowly reason returned. They could not have found Gilly yet. Nobody knew he had been killed. She took herself in hand and fought the weakness of fear. She became conscious of sunlight about her, sky above, and, just below, the plateau of treetops.

A shadow swept over her, and she raised her eyes. Scarcely twenty feet away she saw a buzzard, the rindure of his belly—the blue-black wings—the baleful, questing eyes. He was not sailing idly, but winging

purposefully eastward. Then another and another flashed past with a soft purring sound of wings against air.

A black premonition caused her to turn her head and follow their flight to its destination. She knew in that moment that she had lost. To the eastward, over the spot where the island lay among the trees, the air was black with flying shapes. They sailed in the formation of a water-spout, wide and slow moving at the top but narrowing and whirling faster and faster as it descended until the base disappeared among the treetops like a pointing finger. She looked westward again and saw the air lanes dotted with still other shapes winging steadily down from the rookery at the western extremity of the swamp.

So Gilly had won. He hadn't been afraid of the dark, after all. What he had in his mind was that she must bring him out into the open where the buzzards could find him and tell Proe Baggart.

Now she knew that it was useless to proceed. The strength of her muscles that could carry her through a race with the living would be unavailing against the cunning of the dead. Gilly had proved that Grayson was wrong.

Her gaze was drawn back to the eastern skyline and the whirling column of wings. In the great emptiness of sky it would be visible for miles. Perhaps already Gilly had been missed and searching parties were hurrying along the trail that she had broken that morning.

Suddenly, there, in the moment of acceptance of the inevitable, a miracle occurred. Somewhere in the inner depths of the woman's soul, in some remote and secret abiding place, a bolt snapped back, a door opened, and a new courage flooded her being. This was not merely the old force that had always fortified her against physical suffering. It was something radiant that shook through her body in a swift, clean ecstasy. It made her suddenly and astonishingly glad

to be there; to wait expectant for a supreme moment of revelation that she knew was coming. All feeling of urgency left her. No need for speed now. No need even for Mamba. She herself would be sufficient for the event. A strange and beautiful sanity lay across her mind like a shaft of light. She turned it this way and that, and many dark and obscure things were made plain to her. She knew that Mamba had been right about Lissa all the time, that she did not matter of herself, except that now, at last, she was going to give her child something of value; something that she could always remember.

Squatting on her limb, with only sky above her and treetops below, her mind turned on Mamba's plan for her, and she saw its great flaw. The white men would take her, and they would want to know everything in her mind. She might try to hide Lissa away in some dark corner where they could not find her, but she knew that would not avail. She had seen other Negroes try concealment, but Baggart and the others had so many ways. Their minds could dig and dance and circle until, at last, out it came. Then, suddenly, she was upon the answer. Her mind seized upon the idea, turned it over, discarded nonessentials, built logically, beautifully, completely. The moment had come. She was ready.

It was past ten o'clock, and Davy wanted to shut up shop and go home. He was the commissary manager now and he frequently kept open until late hours, especially in fever season, when there were no white folks around and the Negroes would gather and talk. Wentworth had agreed to the plan, and Davy had showed with pride that, like most of his ideas, it had a sound commercial value, the sales on "bounce" and

candy during the social hour amounted to a tidy sum.

Now the commissary manager commenced to clear his premises by the simple process of moving among the boxes, stools, and barrels upon which his customers were seated and dislodging them forcibly from their perches.

"Git on home, yo' lazy niggers," he ordered. "What yo' link dis is, anyhow—a white gentlemen club?" He called to a Negro who was standing in the doorway: "Hang up dem shutters, Ben, den come an' gib me a han' wid dese no-count niggers." But someone was about to enter, and Ben stepped aside to allow her

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to pass. With one accord the Negroes looked up, and there stood Baxter, very dishevelled and appalling. (Continued on Page Six)

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