

Mamba's Daughters

By
DuBOISE HEYWARD

(Continued from Page Three)

gar—Mamba—all of us—you've got to carry on."

He picked up the little prayer book that he had given Hagar, opened it to the flyleaf, and let his gaze rest upon the inscription. "Strange," he said, "that this should be here with you now. When I gave it to your mother I was face to face with my great disillusionment. I had thought that the light should start at the bottom. I had put everything that I had in me into it, and I had failed. I have learned since that the battle is on here—not in the South. Not that we receive more kindness here. There is a certain kind of cruelty that we meet in New York that is not known in South Carolina. We have been taught to expect things here, and then, and then when we come we find these things denied us. But here we find a market for our own peculiar gifts—talents that are our heritage, and of these yours is the greatest—the gift of song. Nothing can take that from you. You must put the past behind you as I did—as all of our people must do. You must succeed."

Lissa's tears had ceased. She sat with her eyes fixed upon the desk before her. The room bore inward upon her, exerting an invisible force against her body—holding it powerless in the chair. Even Mamba had never been so inplacable as this will that had assumed magistracy over her destinies. She knew that the moment when she met Grayson's eyes would see her complete and ultimate surrender. And yet through sheer weakness she longed to turn to that power for support.

She knew that Grayson had risen. She heard him moving behind her, then softly the door closed, leaving her alone. Through the open window came stray notes from the complicated symphony of human existence—the shrill ecstasy of a child—deep, careless Negro laughter—a piano lingering over a sentimental song in a neighboring apartment—slow, rambling talk in two women's voices on the pavement—Harlem obstinately opposing its lazy

rhythms to the headlong theme of the metropolis—flinging an alien syncopation of laughter and song against the measured reiteration of the Elevated, the sustained monotone of hurrying traffic on the avenues. Her own people about her everywhere. But different. Singing for fun—just cutting loose—crying when they wanted to—living up to the limit and never thinking about it. Why couldn't they let her be like that? Why couldn't they let her alone?

Saint Julien de Chatigny Wentworth, up from Charleston with his wife and his mother for a fortnight of music and the theatre, settled the ladies of his party in the third orchestra row of the new Metropolitan Opera House, and appropriating the vacant seat between them, abandoned himself to the mood of the unique performance. Individual as he appeared in the heterogeneous audience, he yet had upon him the mark of a type. Upon him a dinner jacket seemed a more formal garment than it did when worn by the men who were seated near him, and his tie, too wide for the prevailing mode, had about it the quaint suggestion of a stock. Already, while only in the middle thirties his figure was commencing to show the comfortable outlines of one who appreciates the pleasant things of life at their full value and who has learned to meet the unpleasant ones with an amiable acquiescence. Yet the face, with its high forehead and thoughtful slate-coloured eyes, showed evidences of having passed through some spiritual conflict. The strong line of the chin

indicated sufficient courage for an individual course of action, but the sensitive smooth mouth suggested that when this course violated the standard of good taste of his class its pursuit would be at a cost that would amount to a minor heroism.

It was now seven years since his marriage. Seven years since he had responded to Mamba's summons and had placed Lissa in the care of Thomas Grayson. That this should occur to him, now was natural enough, for the performance, which had already commenced, was the occasion of Lissa Atkinson's debut. Presently, with that faculty of submergence of self in the contemplation of a work

of art, which is in itself an art, he became a disembodied presence moving in a realm of illusion upon the darkened stage, and, by the stage's magical power of projection, beyond that again into a pine barren of the coastal South.

Beyond the pines glimmered a faint red dawn that cast a vague radiance over the bent or recumbent figures of a number of people. From the figures came a chant, hypnotic in its interminable reiteration of a single strongly syncopated phrase. A limpid mezzo-soprano drew upward from the monotonous level of the chant. Instantly Wentworth recognised the voice—Lissa's—Hagar's—Mamba's.

The song lifted and hovered above the shadowed figures in a repressed agony of yearning and supplication.
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