

## *The Errand*

**I**N A HINGED WOODEN BOX UPON THE TOP OF WHICH was carved a winged fish, my mother kept the tools of her trade. Sometimes I touched a sewing needle with my finger and reflected how such a small object, so nearly weightless, could keep our little family from the poorhouse and provide us with enough food to sustain life—although there were times when we were barely sustained.

Our one room was on the first floor of a brick and timber house which must have seen better times. Even on

*The Slave Dancer*

suffer the cruel extremes of temperature that prevailed in the north. And when it rained for days on end, leaving behind when it ceased a green mold which clung to my boots, the walls and even the candlesticks, my mother thanked God that we were spared the terrible blizzards she remembered from her childhood in Massachusetts. As for the fog, she observed how it softened the clamor from the streets and alleyways and kept the drunken riverboat men away from our section of the *Vieux Carré*.

I disliked the fog. It made me a prisoner. I imagined, sitting there on a bench in the shadows of the little room, that the smoky yellow stuff which billowed against our two windows was a kind of sweat thrown off by the Mississippi River as it coiled and twisted toward the sea.

Except for the wooden sewing box, a sea chest which had belonged to my mother's father, and her work table, we owned scarcely anything. One cupboard held the few scraps of our linen, the cooking pots and implements, candle ends and a bottle of burning liquid which my mother rubbed on Betty's chest when she was feverish. There were two chamber pots on the floor, hidden by day in the shadow of the cupboard but clearly visible by candlelight, the white porcelain one chipped and discolored, the other decorated with a painting of an ugly orange flower which my mother said was a lily.

*The Errand*

There was one pretty object in the room, a basket of colored spools of thread which sat on the sill of the window facing Pirate's Alley. By candlelight, the warmth of the colors made me think the thread would throw off a perfume like a garden of flowers.

But these spools were not used for our clothes. They were for the silks and muslins and laces which my mother made into gowns for the rich ladies of New Orleans to wear to their balls and receptions, their weddings and the baptism of their infants, and sometimes to their funerals.

One early evening toward the end of January, I walked slowly home inventing a story that might distract my mother from asking me why I was late and where I had been. I was relieved to find her so preoccupied there was no need to tell her anything. Even if I had blurted out the truth—that I had spent an hour wandering about the slave market at the corner of St. Louis and Chartres Streets, a place as strictly forbidden to me as Congo Square, where slaves were allowed to hold their festivities, I doubt she would have heard me. The whole room was covered with a great swathe of apricot colored brocade supported by chairs to keep it from touching the floor. Betty crouched in a corner, staring at the cloth as though in a daze, while my mother, her back against the wall, gripped an edge of the brocade in her two hands and shook her head

*The Slave Dancer*

from side to side, muttering to herself in words I could not make out.

I had seen damask and gauze and velvet and silk across my mother's knees or falling in cascades from her table, but never such a lavish piece as this, of such a radiant hue. Designs were embroidered upon it showing lords and ladies bowing, and prancing horses no larger than thimbles, their rear hooves buried in flowers, haloes of birds and butterflies circling their caparisoned heads.

Without looking up, my mother said, "We need more candles," in such a fretful and desperate voice, I knew she was pressed for time and had before her a piece of work that would keep her up many nights.

I held out a few coins. I had earned them that afternoon playing my fife for the steamboat crews who came to gorge themselves on the fruit that was sold in the great market near the levee.

She glanced at my hand. "Not enough," she said. "Go and borrow some from Aunt Agatha. I must start work on this nightmare right away."

"It's beautiful!" cried Betty.

"This nightmare . . ." repeated my mother wearily.

I hesitated. I hated to go to Aunt Agatha's neat house on St. Ann Street. No matter how often I went, my Aunt

*The Errand*

would always direct my course like a pilot boat as soon as I opened the door. "Don't walk there!" she would cry. "Take your huge feet off that carpet! Watch the chair—it'll fall! Can't you walk like a gentleman instead of some lout from the bayou?"

To Betty and my mother, I called her a disagreeable and mean old maid. My mother replied that I was a surly boy and would grow up to become an uncharitable man. She was, after all, my mother said, my father's only living relative, and her grief at his death had entirely changed her nature. "We're his relatives," I'd muttered. That was different, she'd said. Still, I had no other memory of Aunt Agatha except as a woman who especially disliked me.

I had been four, and Betty a month from being born, when my father drowned in the Mississippi River. He had been working on a snagboat, helping to clear away the tree stumps and other hidden debris that had made the river so perilous for the passage of steamboats. The snagboat had been caught by a current, my father lost his footing, fell and sank before anyone could help him.

In dreams, sometimes even when I was fully awake, a voice inside my head would cry, "Oh, swim!" as though by such an appeal I could make the river return my father to us. Once my mother had heard this involuntary cry escape my

*The Slave Dancer*

lips, "He was brave," she had said. But I was not comforted. "He is dead," I had said.

My mother had reminded me then that there were souls whose fates were so terrible in comparison to ours, that we should consider ourselves among the fortunate of the earth. I knew she was thinking of the slaves who were sold daily so close to where we lived.

"Jessie! Will you go now, this instant?"

"I've a cramp in my leg," Betty complained.

"Well then, stand up, girl," said my mother crossly.

I went out onto the street wondering what she would have said if she'd known that this very day I'd seen six Africans offered up for sale as cane hands. They had been dressed as if they had been going to a ball, even to the white gloves they were all wearing. "These niggers are matchless!" the auctioneer had cried, at which instant I was picked up bodily by a man as hairy as a dray horse, thrown to the pavement and told to keep away from the slave market until I had something better in mind than nasty peeking.

I knew the way so well, my feet took me to Aunt Agatha's without help from my brain. She received me in her usual fashion, then gave me three candles.

"Why doesn't your mother use her oil lamps?" she asked accusingly.

*The Errand*

"They smoke," I answered.

"They wouldn't if someone knew how to trim them properly."

"They don't give enough light," I said.

"People shouldn't work at night anyhow," she said, then, catching sight of the fife which I always carried, she exclaimed, "What an undignified way to earn your keep! Playing that silly pipe! It's time you were apprenticed and learned a trade. I doubt you'd benefit from schooling."

"My mother has taught me reading and numbers," I answered as sharply as I dared.

"But who is to teach you how to think?" she snapped back.

I could think of no answer to that so I made for the door, remembering to sidestep a small carpet she prized. "Goodnight, Auntie," I said, as though I were about to burst into laughter. I heard her snort as I closed the door.

The night sky was clear. The air was faintly scented with the aroma of flowers which grew in such profusion inside the walled gardens that belonged to the rich families in our neighborhood. Often I had climbed those walls and peered through the black iron grillework into the great rooms of their houses or looked down into the gardens where, among the beds of flowers, a stone hut had been piled up to shelter

*The Slave Dancer*

the house slaves. Once I had seen a lady glide across a floor in a gown I was sure my mother had made, and on another evening I had been startled when, thinking myself unobserved, I had grown aware of a silent watcher, a black woman who stood leaning against the doorless entrance of such a hut. She had been utterly still; her arms hanging straight by her sides, her eyes fixed upon me as I half straddled the wall.

I had been afraid she would suddenly decide to give the alarm, and I was angry she had seen me at all. "Star!" someone had called, and at that, the black woman had placed her hands on her hips and, without a glance in my direction, moved toward the house.

I had never heard anyone called such a name before. When I told my mother about it, omitting the circumstances in which I'd heard it, she said, "Might as well call someone 'shoe'. It's not a human name."

For a while, I didn't climb garden walls. But the memory of the woman standing there in the evening shadows stayed with me. I wondered why her master had called her Star, and what she had thought about her name and if she thought about it at all, and I often recalled how she'd walked so slowly and silently to the big house, her skirt hiding the movement of her feet so that she seemed to float across the ground.

I felt restless, and reluctant to return to the room full

*The Errand*

of brocade, so I took the longest way home, using alleys that kept me off the main streets where sailors and gentlemen and chandlers and cotton merchants and farmers went to make themselves drunk in taverns, and where women gotten up like parrots kept them company.

My mother, repeating the Sunday warnings of the parson about the sinfulness of our quarter, had asked me to promise her I would never enter a tavern or mingle with the nightly throngs on Bourbon and Royal Streets. By keeping to these narrow byways, I avoided breaking the promise but still had the diversion of hearing from over the rooftops the rumble and rise and fall of men's voices, the bird shrieks of women, laughter and the shouts of quarrels and the abrupt iron-like strokes of horses' hooves on cobblestones, as the horsemen set off toward unknown destinations.

Someday, I might become a rich chandler in a fine suit, with a thousand candles to hand if I needed them instead of three grudgingly given stubs. I imagined the splendid house I would live in, my gardens, my carriage and horses. I was so intoxicated by my vision that I rose up on my toes as though to meet the fate I had invented. What I encountered was foul smelling canvas, a sky full of it, covering me entirely, forcing me to the ground.

I heard men's voices. Hands gripped me through the

*The Slave Dancer*

canvas. I was tossed, then trussed, then lifted up and carried like a pig to market.

"Take up that pipe, Claudius," a voice growled near my bound head. "He's worth nothing without his pipe!"

"I don't see it," said another voice in a complaining gurgle.

I was dropped on the ground, and the canvas loosened around my face. I tried to shout but the musty cloth filled my mouth and I could get no air into my lungs. My limbs were twisted like threads; the miserable candles I still gripped in one hand pressed cruelly against my knee. I managed to spit out the canvas and gulped like a fish out of water. An orange moon floated before my eyes, then a hundred little black dots.

"Ah, it's right by your foot, Claudius," said someone.

The canvas tightened. I felt myself being lifted and then I knew nothing—for how long I cannot say. But when I regained consciousness, I was on my feet, my head free, supported by a tall man who was gripping my neck to keep me upright.

"Well now," said the man called Claudius, "he acts dizzy, don't he?"

I twisted my head.

"He wriggles," said Claudius.

"Cast off," said the other. "I'll see to him."

*The Errand*

Claudius pushed me, and I slumped against the other man like a top run down.

"If you promise not to make a sound, I'll set you loose," said he. "Promise now!"

I nodded. I could not have spoken anyhow. My throat was parched with dust and tight with fear.

Suddenly I felt the ground move. At the same moment, I realized the three of us were standing on a small raft and that all about us was the shifting darkness of the river.

I was carelessly unwrapped like a gift no one wanted and forced to sit, my arms clasped about my knees. My captors then ignored me. They hadn't any reason to worry about my escaping. There was no place to go.

Poling the raft to keep it off the bank yet away from the swift uncertain currents, the two figures looked like pieces of the night itself. I couldn't make out their features or how they were dressed. They must be pirates, I thought, out of Baratavia Bay. I had heard tales about pirates all my life but had only half believed them. Yet here I was, soon to be part of their pirate lives and pirate feasts. I shivered, feeling truly alone.

I stared at the black water and thought desperately of my father. I thought of the fate of drowned people and wondered if my father's bones lay somewhere nearby, white as chalk on the river bottom.

*The Slave Dancer*

We were not long on the river but I wish we had been longer. The next part of our journey was on land, and I was made to walk between the two men. The marshy ground gave way beneath my feet and each time my boot sank into it, I waited with horror for a cottonmouth to strike. Sometimes there was a noisy flap of wings when we frightened a heron away from its night roost, sometimes a slither and damp muddy sigh as an otter, belly flat, headed into a pool of fetid water. We marched for several miles and although I was nearly fainting with exhaustion, I dared not ask the men to rest.

The marshy ground changed to sand. Ahead lay a stretch of water and no longer able to keep still, I asked timidly, "Is this Baratavia Bay?"

"Lake Borgne," said Claudius without turning to look at me. I was given a sudden push from behind. "Keep moving," ordered the other man. "We have a long sail before us."

His words filled me with a new fear. I had by then resolved that I would somehow be able to escape from a bayou settlement of pirates, but a long sail? I nearly cried out, nearly begged them to let me go! We came to the edge of the lake and there I saw a small boat, a kind of fishing smack I'd seen on Lake Pontchartrain.

Claudius lit a lantern and held it up over my head. I looked at the two men. I could see their nostrils, their teeth

*The Errand*

like rows on an ear of corn, each hair of Claudius' black beard, pock marks, warts, scars, the very liquid of their eyes. I covered my own face, scattering bits of soft wax over my hair, all that was left of the candles for the sake of which I was surely to be killed.

My hands were snatched away and held tight.

"Don't you remember a man who gave you money?" asked one of the gaping mouths. I stared at his big face. "I'm about to do even more for you," the teeth clacked. "I'm going to take you on a fine sea voyage." He released my hands and placed an orange in them. Then I remembered his voice and his face.

It was a sailor who only that afternoon had given me two pennies to play him a martial tune down near the fruit stalls by the river. As I played, he had stuffed three oranges in his mouth, one by one, spitting out skin and pits and letting the juice run down his huge chin. It was with those pennies I had offered to buy my mother the candles she needed.