

been through mutinies before. He never lost a hair! But Caw-thorne knew the black would recover—they can survive floggings that would kill a white man a hundred times over—and Spark killed him. Don't you see? *There went the profit!*"

I heard a strange sound in our seabound cave, a sound like wind rustling dead leaves. It was Ned, laughing.

The Spaniard

"HAVE YOU EVER WATCHED A COCKFIGHT, JESSIE? You'd never guess a fowl had so much life in it till you saw one with murder in its eye. It moves so fast you can only tell where the beak struck when the blood spurts! It's the finest sight in the world! I'd like to have my own fighting cocks someday. I've devised a plan to make the viewing better. There's always some who can't see the pit over the heads of the others, but here's how I would do it—"

"Cooley, leave off with your birds!" Sam Wick interrupted. "It's only savages who'd take pleasure in such a spectacle. We've outlawed it in Massachusetts. As for owning anything, you'll be fortunate if you end your days with something over your head to keep off the rain."

"They've outlawed everything in Massachusetts," retorted Cooley without much fire. The two sailors fell silent. Both

stared at the horizon which appeared to rise and sink as the ship rolled. I looked at their eyes, so wide, so empty, like the sea itself in that moment when the last colors of sunset have faded and darkness begins. So had they witnessed—if it can be called that—the casting overboard of Ned Grime's body that morning, and later, when the holds had been emptied, the discovery of eight of the blacks dead, five men, one woman and two children who had followed Ned into the waves. There was no one to say what anyone died from now.

That Sam Wick was from Massachusetts, my mother's birthplace, held my attention only a second. They had all come from somewhere, after all. It made no difference to me. I didn't care if in New York or Rhode Island or Georgia, the crew had wives and children, or parents, or brothers and sisters. We were all locked into *The Moonlight* as the ship herself was locked into the sea. Everything was wrong.

The slaves were nearer death than the crew, although what they ate was not much worse than what we ate, and none of us, except the Captain and Stout, who had now assumed the duties of Mate, was ever free from thirst except when it rained. But we could walk the deck. I wondered if, in this circumstance, that was not the difference between life and death. And although Ben Stout could and did increase our misery with his capitious orders, there was a limit. There

were courts of inquiry to which the Captain would have to answer for unusual cruelty toward his crew—if a sailor had the endurance to pursue justice. If any of us ever saw the shore again . . .

Our northwestward course was steady except during one violent downpour. Though we were out of the doldrums, Purvis never left off exclaiming at our luck in not having been becalmed for weeks. His voice was fevered; his eyes bulged as he tried to convince me—perhaps, only himself—that it would be clear sailing ahead, only a brief passage now until he collected his wages and his share of the profit from the sale of the slaves.

"I'll never ship on a slaver again," he would say, over and over again. "Never, Jessie! You see if I don't keep my word!"

I danced the slaves under Stout's watchful eyes. He always found time to observe me at my task. I was determined to show no emotion in front of him. I gazed blankly at the rigging as though I was alone with a thought. But in truth I was so agitated I could hardly make my fingers work on the fife. Despite my intention, I could not help but see the wretched shambling men and women whose shoulders sank and rose in exhausted imitation of movement. They were all sick. I could count the ribs of the boy to whom I had once whispered my name.

It had been some time since the little children had played on the deck. I think they were too weak to crawl or run about. God knows how the slaves slept. I wondered if they hastened toward sleep as I did, for it was only then the hours passed without reckoning.

Once, on a night when Sharkey was making a commotion because of cramps in his belly, I went on deck and looked down into the forehold. I thought they'd all died. I heard not a sound. *The Moonlight* herself was bathed in moonlight. Sam Wick, on watch, passed me without a word. A small pool of yellow light shone near the Captain's quarters. I supposed he and Stout were in there, drinking brandy and eating decent grub. The dark water was streaked with the pale light of the moon. I thought that now I understood the phrase, "lost at sea."

I had, until that moment, been racing ahead of the ship to the door of our room, to the welcoming cries of my mother and Betty, when all this would lie behind me as unsubstantial as the moonlight. But now I felt no such certainty. A great timidity possessed my thoughts. There was nothing sure on earth except the rising and setting of the sun—and, when the sky was quilted over with black storm clouds and there was no line between earth and heaven, who could tell what the sun was doing?

Did the black people have any idea of what was ahead for them? If the ship made Cuban waters—if we were not overtaken by French pirates out of Martinique—if we escaped the British patrol and the United States cruisers—if they survived fever and flux and starvation and thirst?

"Stay away from the holds, lad," said the poisonous sweet voice of Ben Stout. "It disturbs them to be watched. You can understand that, can't you?"

As though he cared for what disturbed them! I slunk away toward our quarters, hoping Sharkey had quieted down by now, that Purvis had found something in Ned's old medicine case that had eased him. But I did not get far.

"Wait!" Stout commanded in his official voice. I stood, my back to him.

"I'd like a word with you," he said, wheedling now. I turned slowly. "I'm concerned about the crew," he said. "I want them in good spirits. We're well out of the Gulf of Guinea. It won't be long till we reach the trades. There's reason for good cheer."

"Not for some of us," I replied.

"There's always loss," said Stout. "It's taken into account by any sensible officer. But you'll be fine, Jessie. You're young and strong."

"So was Gardere. So were all the black people who died."

"Gardere!" he exclaimed and laughed loudly. "Gardere had eaten himself out with rum before you was born. As for the niggers, lad, they're actually better off drowned, if you think about it. Nothing more to worry them. You *could* look at it that way."

"I'll look at it the way I choose."

"I like your honesty," he said softly. "There's no one else I'd trust on this ship. That's why I asked you about the crew's spirits."

But he hadn't asked me.

"You want me to spy for you?" I asked. Ben Stout looked forgivingly up at heaven. What was he up to? Did he want to discover what Curry mixed with the cabbage to make it taste like swamp grass? Would he like to know that Cooley's ambition concerned fighting cocks? Or that Isaac Porter bit his nails like a man playing a mouth organ? Or that Purvis snored and mumbled in his sleep? Or did he want to know what I thought of him? Was I to spy on myself?

"Take you," he said. "How are your spirits?"

"I can't answer that," I said.

"But you must know how you feel!" he exclaimed, a touch of heat in his voice. I was surprised.

"I feel this way and that way," I said, "but never the way I once did when I lived at home in New Orleans."

"I want a plain answer."

"*I hate this ship!*" I said with all the force I could, with what little courage I had in the face of Stout's menace.

"Ah!" he sighed. A second later, I saw his teeth gleam. "That must mean you hate me too."

"I didn't say so," I said.

"Hatred poisons the soul," he observed. "It is an incurable ailment."

"I would like to go below."

"I've been so good to you," he continued. "I don't understand your ingratitude. They've all talked against me. I suppose that accounts for it."

I would say nothing further to him. He stood silently looking at me. I grew uneasy. Something weakened in me. There was a quality about his stillness, his silence, that was like a huge weight pressing against me. I took one step away. He held out his hand toward me. I remembered the slave woman he'd tormented, and I scrambled down the ladder. Sharkey was hunched over himself, rubbing his belly. Purvis shot a glance at me.

"You're as white as salt, Jessie! What is it?"

"I wish Stout was dead!" I cried.

"But he is dead," said Purvis. "He's been dead for years. And there's one of him on every ship that sails!

There's someone makes little dolls of him and sprinkles them with gunpowder and steals along the docks and places a doll in each ship—and when it's out at sea, the doll grows and grows till it looks just like a sailor man, and it takes its place among the crew and no one's the wiser until two weeks at sea when one of the crew says to another, 'Ain't he dead? That one over there by the helm?' and the other says, 'Just what I was thinking—we've got a dead man on the ship—'”

Sharkey gave out a dog's yelp of laughter and at that, Purvis grinned broadly.

Whenever I saw a sail on the horizon—which was not often—I would pretend it was a British cruiser not afraid to displease the United States Government by boarding us. I imagined the slaves set free, the rest of us taken to England where Stout would be hanged, and Purvis and I sent by fast ship to Boston. From there, I would make my way home, and one day, in the freshness of a morning, I would open the door and step inside, and my mother would look up from her work, and—

But we were not pursued. And if we had been, it is unlikely *The Moonlight*, with all her sails stretched, could have been captured. Only pirates might take us, French pirates undeterred by any flag, eager to pounce on a tattered dirty little ship with a cargo of half-dead blacks, and a bunch of

ailing seamen as hard and dry and moldy as the ship's biscuits they gnawed on.

When, one morning, I could not find my fife, I thought Cooley or Wick, longing for distraction, had hidden it from me. They swore they had not touched it. And no one else had either, said Purvis, because he would have heard anyone sneaking about and reaching into my hammock where I always kept it. But Purvis had been on watch the night before.

I searched frantically throughout the ship. Porter came looking for me and told me I was wanted on deck. I found Stout waiting aft, the Captain standing a few feet away looking through his spyglass at the horizon. There had not been a word between Stout and me since the night I'd run away from him.

“We're going to bring up the niggers, Jessie,” he said.

“Where's your music maker?”

The instant he spoke, I knew Stout had made off with the fife.

I was dumb with fear; it rushed through me like heat from a fire.

“He's not got his pipe, Captain,” Stout said gravely.

Cawthorne turned to look at me.

“What now?” he asked impatiently.

"I say, the boy is refusing to play—"

"I'm not!" I cried to Cawthorne. "It was beside me in my hammock last night! It's been *taken* from me!"

"Taken?" repeated the Captain. He scowled. "What are you bothering me with such foolishness for, Stout? And what is this creature howling about? Take care of it yourself, man!" With that, he went back to his spyglass.

"Come along," Stout said to me. "We'll look for it together."

I caught sight of Purvis watching us from across the deck. He'd been mixing up a batch of vinegar and salt water with which we sometimes cleaned out the holds. But he'd stopped his work to keep an eye on me. Without even looking in his direction, Stout called out, "Get on with it, Purvis!" "I've already looked everywhere," I mumbled without hope.

"I can't hear you, lad," said Stout.

"I've looked everywhere!" I shouted.

"Well . . . I think it's in one of the holds," he said.

"Yes. That's what I think. Someone has taken it and dropped it down to the niggers so's they can play their own tunes." As he spoke, his thick fingers circled my throat. He pushed me to the forehold.

"You go down there and fetch it up," he said softly.

"You're sure to find it there. Purvis likes such tricks, you know. It would be just like Purvis, wouldn't it? To have dropped it down there? Say you agree with me?"

He gave me a mighty shove and I fell to the deck.

"Hurry, Jessiel! It's no good, your resting like that!"

I clung to the hatch coaming. Stout bent down and loosened my fingers. "Just drop down," he whispered. "They won't hurt you, lad." He swung me to my feet and pushed me so far I could not but look down. A patch of daylight washed across the twisted limbs of the slaves. I saw nothing that was not flesh.

"Hurry, now!" said Stout. Suddenly, Purvis was at his side.

"I'll look for it," he said.

"No. No you won't. He must take care of his responsibilities, Purvis. And what do you mean, neglecting your own, and listening in on what doesn't concern you?"

The hope that Purvis would save me had made me go slack. Then Stout lifted me up in the air the way a heron grips a fish, and suspended me over the hold.

"Oh, Lord! Don't drop me!" I screamed.

"You'll climb down as I want you to," he said. "And you'll look here and there until you find your pipe. After that, we can get on with things." As he spoke, he slowly brought me back to the deck. I caught sight of a black face turned up

toward the light. The man blinked his eyes, but there was no surprise written on his face. He had only looked up to see what was to befall him next. I went down the rope knowing my boots would strike living bodies. There was not an inch of space for them to move to.

I sank down among them as though I had been dropped into the sea. I heard groans, the shifting of shackles, the damp sliding whisper of sweating arms and legs as the slaves tried desperately to curl themselves even tighter. I did not know my eyes were shut until fingers brushed my cheeks. I saw a man's face not a foot from my own. I saw every line, every ridge, a small scar next to one eyebrow, the inflamed lids of his eyes. He was trying to force his knees closer to his chin, to gather himself up like a ball on top of the cask upon which he lived. I saw how ash-colored his knees were, how his swollen calves narrowed nearly to bone down where the shackles had cut his ankles, how the metal had cut red trails into his flesh.

All around me, bodies shifted in exhausted movement. I was a stone cast into a stream, making circles that widened all the way to the limits of the space that contained nearly forty people.

Suddenly I felt myself dropping, and I heard the wooden thunk of the two casks which I had, somehow, been straddling. Now I was wedged between them, my chin pressed

against my chest. I could barely draw breath, and what breath I drew was horrible, like a solid substance, like snot, that did not free my lungs but drowned them in the taste of rancid rot. I tried to bend back my head, and I caught a blurred glimpse of Stour's face in the white sunlight above. With what I was sure was the last effort of my life, I heaved up the upper part of my body, but my legs had no leverage. I sank down. I began to choke.

Then arms took hold of me, lifting and pushing until I was sitting on a cask. I couldn't tell who'd helped me. There were too many entangled bodies, too many faces upon which not even an acknowledgment of my presence was written. I peered into the dark.

"You'll find it, boy!" Stour's voice floated down.

I sat without moving. To search the hold meant that I would have to walk upon the blacks. My eyes were growing accustomed to the shadowed corners not reached by the light from above. But my brain slept, my will died. I could do nothing. I felt a soft surge of nausea. I clapped my hand over my mouth as I tried to keep in whatever it was that so violently wanted to come out. Then, through my wet eyes, I made out a figure rising from the throng. It sank, then rose again. In its hand, it held aloft my life. In the streaming murk, I recognized the boy. He pointed the life at me. Another

hand took hold of it, then another, until a third passed it to the man on the cask who managed to free one hand, take the fife and drop it on me. Someone groaned; someone sighed. I looked up to Stout.

"I was sure you'd find it, Jessie," he said.

I stood on the cask and flung out the fife. Stout reached down and took hold of my shoulders and dragged me up until I lay upon the deck.

"Now that you've found your instrument, we'll get on with the dancing," he said. "They must have their exercise."

I danced the slaves, aware that the shrill broken notes which issued from my pipe were no more music than were the movements of the slaves dancing.

Later, too weak and miserable to climb into my hammock, I sat on Purvis' sea chest, my head cradled in my arms. I heard the men moving around me but I did not look up. When someone touched me, I cried out.

"It's me, Jessie, it's me!" said Purvis.

I raised my head.

"Look here," he said.

Every finger of his hands was stretched. String was looped around each finger and it formed a design in the space between his hands. I think, for a second, I did not know where I was, remembering Betty holding out a cat's cradle

to me in the candlelight. It was me who had taught her to take the strings from my hands, so forming a new cradle. Together, we'd invented a few, then I'd grown too old for such games. She would sit sadly by herself, the string ready to be transformed, waiting, until my mother, setting aside her work with a sigh, would go and turn the cradle inside out and Betty would smile.

"Take your thumbs and the first finger of each hand, see, and pinch these strings," Purvis said, wriggling his thumbs, "and pull them up and over. You'll see something startling!"

I stared up at him dumbly.

"Jessie! Do as I say!"

I took the string on my fingers. He rubbed his hands together and grinned, then delicately took hold of the string and brought it back to his own fingers.

"I see you know how," he said. "Again."

So we played cat's cradle until I lost one end off my little finger and the cradle snarled.

"I've brought you tea," he said. "Although it's cold as rain, drink it anyhow. It'll be sweet to your throat."

I drank it down.

"Listen, Jessie. We've hit the northeast trades now. It won't be long . . . three weeks, maybe. I wouldn't lie to you, would I? Only three weeks."

"I'm afraid of him," I said. I found no comfort in Purvis's news. The worst was always about to happen on *The Moonlight*. What would it matter if it was only three days? Misery hasn't got to do with clocks.

"I won't let him bear you," Purvis said fiercely.

"It's the other things he can do," I muttered.

"Sharkey's warned him," Purvis whispered. I thought it a measure of Stour's power to dismay that though he wasn't around, the very idea of him subdued Purvis, made him whisper, made him glance over his shoulder uneasily. "Sharkey's told him what we'll do to him when we get ashore. He's told him we'll track him down to wherever he goes if he harms you."

I felt a deep thrust of fear, although I couldn't tell if it was for Sharkey or myself.

"I saw you flinch," Purvis said. "You musn't let *him* see that! He sups on the fear he rouses up. Don't give him that! Go about your tasks. I'll see to it myself you get home. My word on that. You'll have land beneath your feet, Jessie, and no one to stop you from what you want to do. You go up on deck now and get the fresh air and make yourself strong again."

He swayed a little with the movement of the ship. I saw how thin he had grown, how his trousers hung shapelessly

on him like that blanker Ned Grime used to keep about his shoulders. He scowled with concentration as he wrapped the bit of string around his fingers, then slid it off so it was like a little spool.

"You're a tidy man," I said suddenly.

"I am that," he replied.

I often recalled how Purvis had wrapped that string around his finger. It calmed my spirit and made me smile. It was comic, I told myself, to be so careful with a few inches of string on a voyage like this one.

Claudius Sharkey did not truly recover from his cramps. He bore the pained expectant expression of a man preoccupied with a sickness which he suspects will finish him off. It meant more work for the rest of the crew. Sharkey faltered on the rigging, cursing himself as he went aloft so slowly that he drew Stour's harsh attentions. But Sharkey bore jeers and threats with eerie patience.

"Is it always like this?" I asked Purvis.

"Worse," he said. "I sailed on a ship with 500 slaves in the hold and 30 crew. At the end, there was 183 slaves alive and 11 crew. The boatswain killed the cook with his own carving knife a foot from a water cask. The rest died of disease. The Captain took his Bible and left that ship—and the sea. I've heard tales that he's a walking preacher now, goes to

towns and villages and gets up on a box and tells people the world is going to end any day, and if there ain't no people, he tells the trees and the stones."

We ran steadily through the days. I remembered as if it was another life the first weeks I had spent on *The Moonlight*, how sunlight and waves and wind had held me fast during my waking hours in a kind of spell, how I had felt that I, too, was dashing forward, feeling the strength of my own body as though I'd never known before what it meant to rise in the morning like an arrow shot from a bow. But not now. There was only labor and thirst. Sometimes I leaned against Ned's bench and wondered why that old man had let his life run out into the sea, when he might as well have done his work on land and had a little house for his trouble, with a church nearby where he could've gone and comforted himself. There must have been something mad in him. It seemed to me that men who went to sea were all mad, pitting themselves against such hazards to win out against dying when death would take them anyhow.

From that bench one afternoon, I caught sight of a strange stirring in an otherwise calm sea. Running to the rail, I saw, turning slowly on their backs, hundreds of great white maggots with crescent mouths upon which were stretched horrible teeth. "Sharks," said Cooley. "Snap us up like flies."

And the next morning, I came on deck to find the ship, its sails furled, at rest on a gently rolling sea. Off the starboard side, gleaming in the sunlight as though each grain of sand on its shore held its own tiny sun, was a small island. Above, seagulls circled our naked masts ceaselessly uttering their begging cries. I looked at the empty shingle, counted six stunted palm trees and measured my height against a low bluff rimmed with sea grass.

"You'd like to get off there, wouldn't you, Jessie?" asked Purvis. "You wouldn't be happy for long. There's nothing to eat or drink. It's just a bit of land only fit for birds and crabs."

"Does it have a name?"

"Whatever name you want to give it . . . there's bits of land like that all over this world. They don't belong to no one. I don't care for the look of them myself. It's not right they should be so empty."

For the first time in many weeks, I wondered if I might truly reach home. Then, as I strained to get a closer look at the island, a thing flew up out of the water, a fish with all the colors of the rainbow playing among its scales. I gasped and pointed as another sprang from the sea, then another . . .

"Flying fish," said Purvis. "There's peculiar creatures in these waters."

"My mother has a sewing box," I said, "and just such a fish is carved on it, but I thought it was an imaginary thing."

"I've heard the Indians eat them," said Purvis. "I wouldn't want to eat anything that hadn't made up its mind whether it belonged in water or air."

"I don't wish to disturb your rest," a familiar voice broke in. "But there's work to be done."

Ben Stout was standing behind us holding an iron file. Purvis looked at him as though he were a piece of decking. Then he said to me with an air of great confidence, "We'll be in Cuban waters in a day or so, and not long after that, we'll be on land again where men is the same height." And he shot a ferocious glance at Stout who took notice of it with a wistful smile.

"That's a worthy thought," Stout said, "and I'll think hard on it. Meanwhile, take this file." He held it out to Purvis who snatched the tool from his hand and left.

"You won't be dancing the slaves in a regular way no more, Jessie," Stout said to me. "But that don't mean you can take your ease."

I wanted to cry, *Get on with it!* but didn't dare. I ground my teeth instead.

"The buckets!" he shouted suddenly. I jumped. "The buckets!" he repeated. "I thought your heart bled for the

niggers! See how you neglect them, lad!" He grabbed my arm before I could get away. "I haven't told you which hold, have I?" he asked gently. "You do have a bad temper, don't you, Jessie?"

I wondered if he would break my arm. All at once, he let go. "Go help Cooley in the forehold," he said without even looking at me.

When I reached the hold, I found two buckets waiting for me. I emptied them over the side, and went back to get more. Cooley was just hoisting a third bucket onto the deck. It was filled with dead rats. I guessed the slaves had killed them by breaking the beasts' necks with their shackles. I emptied the rats over too.

Later, when I had a moment to myself, I went back and stared at the island again. The shadows from the sea grass had lengthened and the sand had lost its morning glitter. The tiny bit of land looked cold and lonely. I went to where Purvis was kneeling in front of a black man. He was working away at the shackles with the file Stout had given him. There was blood on it. Behind the man stood a dozen or so others waiting their turns.

By midafternoon all the slaves were free of their shackles. They were on deck, most of them staring at the island which the ship's bowsprit wavered toward like a compass needle. I

watched Isaac Porter scouring the shackles. Sharkey, who was standing next to me, shook his head.

“Cawthorne’s a fool to hang on to those things,” he said. “He knows better—he knows a slaver ain’t just a ship carrying slaves. If we’re caught with some of what we’ve got on this ship, we might just as well be caught with the slaves themselves. I know of masters who’ve burned their ships once they’ve unshipped their cargo—just to make sure there was no trace left of what they’d been doing. But Cawthorne’s so greedy—he’s like a man choking on one chicken bone while he’s grabbing for another.”

I looked at the black people standing silently on the deck. “Thirty must have died,” I said. “Maybe more.”

“It’s a great day for them,” Sharkey said, “now we’ve taken off their restraints.”

“They could kill us . . . ”

“Oh, no! It’s too late for that. They’d not have been turned loose if there was any such danger.”

“I wonder where they think they are,” I muttered.

“They don’t think much,” responded Sharkey. “You can be sure they’re glad to be alive! Ain’t we all glad?” he asked, and clapped me on the back.

The hatches were left open. The slaves moved about the deck as freely as their physical distress permitted. I thought

it strange that they touched nothing. The very youngest had such swollen bellies that if you’d not seen their hollow eyes, their legs as thin and wrinkled as the limbs of old people, you might have thought them overfed. They showed no surprise at this new turn of events. They were beyond surprise. When they spoke, they kept their heads close together and their lips barely moved. At night, they went below to sleep. During the day we cleaned out the holds as thoroughly as we could while Stout bellowed down at us from the deck pretending we were not working as hard as we should.

“It’s an utter waste of time,” Purvis complained. “You can’t ever get the stench out.”

Three days after leaving the island, the Spanish flag flew from *The Moonlight*, giving us, declared Purvis, the right to anchor in Cuban waters off a serene stretch of coast that showed no sign of human habitation. “We’re a Spanish ship now,” he said, “and no American warship will take the chance of searching us and risk getting into trouble with the Spanish government.”

“But if we’re seen by a British warship?”

“Then we’ll run up the American flag.” His tone made it sound so easy, but his expression was grim.

“We’re in danger from now on, aren’t we?” I asked.

Purvis hesitated a moment, then said, “We’ve never been out of it. But it’s worse when we unship the cargo.”

We began to wait—as we had off the coast of Africa. There were lookouts posted day and night. On the second evening, I saw a light flicker from the beach. At the Captain's command, Sam Wick signaled back with a lantern and, like an idling star, the light flickered once again.

At midnight, a boat drew alongside us. The night was warm and damp, and I'd come up to sleep on deck hoping that Cawthorne and Stout were sufficiently preoccupied with the approaching sale of the slaves not to bother about me and where I chose to berth. By lantern light, I observed the Captain standing by the rail grinning hugely into the dark as though to persuade it to smile back at him. A minute later, a tall black-haired individual sprang upon the deck accompanied by a black man who kept his head bowed as though it had grown that way. The tall individual was wearing a shirt so frilled and lacy that his chin appeared to be drowning in sea foam. The Captain bowed to him as if he were a lord. He did not return the bow, only looked about him with disgust. The two of them went to the Captain's quarters in front of which the black man stood like a sentinel.

"He's got no tongue," said Purvis who'd come to sit beside me. My scalp crawled. "Who's got no tongue?" I asked.

"The Spaniard's slave," replied Purvis. "I forget why

they cut it out of him. I think it even gave Cawthorne quite a turn when he found out about it. He don't like the Spaniard. Last time he drank up all the Captain's best brandy while they were haggling over money."

I said nothing. I had grown suddenly dizzy. I had had such fits before—seconds, sometimes whole minutes, when I did not know where I was, when everything grew strange and soft and blurred. I stared desperately at Purvis. Now that Sam Wick had moved away with the lantern, I couldn't see Purvis' eyes, but how immense his jaw was! His lips were moving. I heard nothing.

"Purvis!" I croaked.

He put his hand on my shoulder. I felt steadier.

"Haggling over money," he said again. That haggling had begun off the coast of Africa—now it was coming to an end here.

"That Spaniard is said to be the richest broker in Cuba," Purvis was saying. My ears sharpened. I felt the deck beneath me once again. "He bribes the highest officials," Purvis added admiringly.

"Why must he bribe them?"

"Why, the Spanish government is said to have undertaken to suppress the trade . . . of course they don't, no more than we do!"

“So all the governments are against the trade,” I said, “and in the same way.”

“I don’t know about the Portuguese,” Purvis replied in a thoughtful way.

“And do the British carry slaves in the holds of their anti-slavery warships?”

“No, not them!” said Purvis scornfully.

“How does the Spaniard get the slaves to the market?”

“They’ll be taken off our ship in skiffs, and they’ll be marched to a plantation a few miles inland. I went with Cawthorne last time. What grub we had! The plantation owner takes one or two of the best of the slaves, pays off the local magistrates all the way to Havana. That’s where most of them will be sold.”

“And when does Cawthorne get his money?”

“When the cargo has been unloaded,” Purvis said.

I swallowed noisily. I could feel him peering at me in the dark.

“It’s this last moment that’s always the worst,” he said, to comfort me I knew.

“Purvis? Where do you live?” I asked.

“Live? What do you mean?”

“Where’s your home? Do you have a family?”

“A sister, older than me. That’s all. She lives in Boston.

or used to. I haven’t seen her in fifteen years. She’s dead for all I know.” He was silent a moment. Then he said, “My home is where I’m at.”

I thought of my home. If I ever got back, I would not, I told myself silently, ever go to the slave market on St. Louis and Chartres Streets again.