

A M E R C Y

into the sea when Reverend Father asks him for help. Reverend Father is the only kind man I ever see. When I arrive here I believe it is the place he warns against. The freezing in hell that comes before the everlasting fire where sinners bubble and singe forever. But the ice comes first, he says. And when I see knives of it hanging from the houses and trees and feel the white air burn my face I am certain the fire is coming. Then Lina smiles when she looks at me and wraps me for warmth. Mistress looks away. Nor is Sorrow happy to see me. She flaps her hand in front of her face as though bees are bothering her. She is ever strange and Lina says she is once more with child. Father still not clear and Sorrow does not say. Will and Scully laugh and deny. Lina believes it is Sir's. Says she has her reason for thinking so. When I ask what reason she says he is a man. Mistress says nothing. Neither do I. But I have a worry. Not because our work is more, but because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand.

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fog

The man moved through the surf, stepping carefully over pebbles and sand to shore. Fog, Atlantic and reeking of plant life, blanketed the bay and slowed him. He could see his boots sloshing but not his satchel nor his hands. When the surf was behind him and his soles sank in mud, he turned to wave to the sloopmen, but because the mast had disappeared in the fog he could not tell whether they remained anchored or risked sailing on—hugging the shore and approximating the location of wharves and docks. Unlike the English fogs he had known since he could walk, or those way north where he lived now, this one was sun fired, turning the world into thick, hot gold. Penetrating it was like struggling through a dream. As mud became swamp grass, he turned left, stepping gingerly until he stumbled against wooden planks leading up beach toward the village.

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Other than his own breath and tread, the world was soundless. It was only after he reached the live oak trees that the fog wavered and split. He moved faster then, more in control but missing, too, the blinding gold he had come through.

Picking his way with growing confidence, he arrived in the ramshackle village sleeping between two huge riverside plantations. There the hostler was persuaded to forgo a deposit if the man signed a note: Jacob Vaark. The saddle was poorly made but the horse, Regina, was a fine one. Mounted, he felt better and rode carefree and a little too fast along beach fronts until he entered an old Lenape trail. Here there was reason to be cautious and he slowed Regina down. In this territory he could not be sure of friend or foe. Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes—freedmen, slaves and indentured—had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class. When that "people's war" lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done—which included the slaughter of opposing tribes and running the Carolinas off their land—spawned a thicket of new laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever! Any social ease between gentry and laborers, forged before and during that rebellion, crumbled beneath a hammer wielded in the interests of the gentry's profits. In Jacob Vaark's view, these were lawless.

laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue.

In short, 1682 and Virginia was still a mess. Who could keep up with the pitched battles for God, king and land? Even with the relative safety of his skin, solitary traveling required prudence. He knew he might ride for hours with no company but geese flying over inland waterways, and suddenly, from behind felled trees a starving deserter with a pistol might emerge, or in a hollow a family of runaways might cower, or an armed felon might threaten. Carrying several kinds of specie and a single knife, he was a juicy target. Eager to be out of this colony into a less precarious but personally more repellent one, Jacob urged the mare to a faster pace. He dismounted twice, the second time to free the bloody hindleg of a young raccoon stuck in a tree break. Regina munched trail-side grass while he tried to be as gentle as possible, avoiding the claws and teeth of the frightened animal. Once he succeeded, the raccoon limped off, perhaps to the ~~mother forced to abandon it~~ mother or more likely into other claws.

Galloping along, he was sweating so heavily his eyes salted and his hair matted on his shoulders. Already October and Regina was drenched and snorting. No such thing as winter down here, he thought, and he might as well have been in Barbados, which he had considered once, although its heat was rumored to be more lethal than this. But that was years ago and the decision was null before he could act on it. An uncle he had never met from the side of his family that had abandoned him died and left him one hundred and twenty acres of a

army of blacks
to King of white
on the side
separated
no - separate

to other
claws
to other
claws

dormant patroonship in a climate he much preferred. One with four distinct seasons. Yet this mist, hot and rife with gnats, did not dampen his spirits. Despite the long sail in three vessels down three different bodies of water, and now the hard ride over the Lenape trail, he took delight in the journey. Breathing the air of a world so new, almost alarming in rawness and temptation, never failed to invigorate him. Once beyond the warm gold of the bay, he saw forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking. The lies of the Company about the easy profit awaiting all comers did not surprise or discourage him. In fact it was hardship, adventure, that attracted him. His whole life had been a mix of confrontation, risk and placating. Now here he was, a ratty orphan become landowner, making a place out of no place, a temperate living from raw life. He relished never knowing what lay in his path, who might approach with what intention. A quick thinker, he flushed with pleasure when a crisis, large or small, needed invention and fast action. Rocking in the poorly made saddle, he faced forward while his eyes swept the surroundings. He knew the landscape intimately from years ago when it was still the old Swedish Nation and, later, when he was an agent for the Company. Still later when the Dutch took control. During and after that contest, there had never been much point in knowing who claimed this or that terrain; this or another outpost. Other than certain natives, to whom it all belonged, from one year to another any stretch might be claimed by a church, controlled by a Company or become the private property of a royal's

gift to a son or a favorite. Since land-claims were always fluid, except for notations on bills of sale, he paid scant attention to old or new names of towns or forts: Fort Orange; Cape Henry; Nieuw Amsterdam; Wiltwyck. In his own geography he was moving from Algonquin to Sequahanna via Chesapeake on through Lenape since turtles had a life span longer than towns. When he sailed the South River into the Chesapeake Bay, he disembarked, found a village and negotiated native trails on horseback, mindful of their fields of maize, careful through their hunting grounds, politely asking permission to enter a small village here, a larger one there. He watered his horse at a particular stream and avoided threatening marshland fronting the pines. Recognizing the slope of certain hills, a copse of oak, an abandoned den, the sudden odor of pine sap—all of that was more than valuable; it was essential. In such ad hoc territory, Jacob simply knew that when he came out of that forest of pine skirting the marshes, he was, at last, in Maryland which, at the moment, belonged to the king. Entirely.

Upon entering this privately owned country, his feelings fought one another to a draw. Unlike colonies up and down the coast—disputed, fought over and regularly renamed; their trade limited to whatever nation was victor—the province of Maryland allowed trade to foreign markets. Good for planters, better for merchants, best for brokers. But the palatinate was Romish to the core. Priests strode openly in its towns; their temples menaced its squares; their sinister missions cropped up at the edge of native villages. Law, courts and trade were their exclusive domain and over-dressed women in

raised heels rode in carts driven by ten-year-old Negroes. He was offended by the lax, flashy cunning of the Papists. "Abhor that arrant whore of Rome." The entire class in the children's quarter of the poorhouse had memorized those lines from their primer. "And all her blasphemies / Drink not of her cursed cup / Obey not her decrees." Which did not mean you could not do business with them, and he had out-dealt them often enough, especially here where tobacco and slaves were married, each currency clutching its partner's elbow. By sustained violence or sudden disease, either one was subject to collapse, inconveniencing everybody but the lender.

Disdain, however difficult to cloak, must be put aside. His previous dealings with this estate had been with the owner's clerk while sitting on alehouse stools. Now, for some reason, he had been invited, summoned rather, to the planter's house—a plantation called Jublio. A trader asked to dine with a gentleman? On a Sunday? So there must be trouble, he thought. Finally, swatting mosquitoes and on the watch for mud snakes that startled the horse, he glimpsed the wide iron gates of Jublio and guided Regina through them. He had heard how grand it was, but could not have been prepared for what lay before him. The house, honey-colored stone, was in truth more like a place where one held court. Far away to the right, beyond the iron fences enclosing the property and softened by mist, he saw rows of quarters, quiet, empty. In the fields, he reckoned, trying to limit the damage sopping weather had wrought on the crop. The comfortable smell of tobacco

leaves, like fireplaces and good women serving ale, cloaked Jublio like balm. The path ended at a small brick plaza, announcing a prideful entrance to a veranda. Jacob stopped. A boy appeared and, dismounting a bit stiffly, he handed over the reins, cautioning the boy.

"Water. No feed."

"Yes, sir," said the boy and turned the horse around, murmuring, "Nice lady. Nice lady," as he led her away.

Jacob Vaark climbed three brick steps, then retraced them to stand back from the house and appraise it. Two wide windows, at least two dozen panes in each, flanked the door. Five more windows on a broad second story held sunlight glittering above the mist. He had never seen a house like it. The wealthiest men he knew built in wood, not brick, riven clapboards with no need for grand pillars suitable for a House of Parliament. Grandiose, he thought, but easy, easy to build in that climate. Soft southern wood, creamy stone, no caulking needed, everything designed for breeze, not freeze. Long hall, probably, parlors, chambers . . . easy work, easy living, but, Lord, the heat.

He removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his hairline with his sleeve. Then, fingering his soaking col-
lat, he remounted the steps and tested the boot scraper. Before he could knock, the door was opened by a small, contradictory man: aged and ageless, deferential and mocking, white hair black face.

"Afternoon, sir."

"Mr. Ortega is expecting me." Jacob surveyed the room over the old man's head.

"Yes, sir. Your hat, sir? Senhor D'Ortega is expecting you. Thank you, sir. This way, sir."

Footfalls, loud and aggressive, were followed by D'Ortega's call.

"Well timed! Come, Jacob. Come." He motioned toward a parlor.

"Good day, sir. Thank you, sir," said Jacob, marveling at his host's coat, his stockings, his fanciful wig. Elaborate and binding as those trappings must be in the heat, D'Ortega's skin was as dry as parchment, while Jacob continued to perspire. The condition of the handkerchief he pulled from his pocket embarrassed him as much as his need for it.

Seated at a small table surrounded by graven idols, the windows closed to the boiling air, he drank sassafras beer and agreed with his host about the weather and dismissed his apologies for making him endure it to come all this way. That said, D'Ortega swiftly got to business. Disaster had struck. Jacob had heard about it, but listened politely with a touch of compassion to the version this here client/debtor recounted. D'Ortega's ship had been anchored a nautical mile from shore for a month waiting for a vessel, due any day, to replenish what he had lost. A third of his cargo had died of ship fever. Fined five thousand pounds of tobacco by the Lord Proprietary's magistrate for throwing their bodies too close to the bay; forced to scoop up the corpses—those they could find (they used pikes and nets, D'Ortega said, a purchase which itself cost two pounds, six)—and ordered to burn or bury them. He'd had to pile them in two drays (six shillings), cart them out to low land where saltweed and alligators would finish the work.

Does he cut his losses and let his ship sail on to Barbados? No, thought Jacob. A sloven man, stubborn in his wrongheadedness like all of the Roman faith, he waits in port for another month for a phantom ship from Lisbon carrying enough cargo to replenish the heads he has lost. While waiting to fill his ship's hold to capacity, it sinks and he has lost not only the vessel, not only the original third, but all, except the crew who were unchained, of course, and four unsalable Angolans red-eyed with anger. Now he wanted more credit and six additional months to pay what he had borrowed.

Dinner was a tedious affair made intolerable by the awkwardness Jacob felt. His rough clothes were in stark contrast to embroidered silk and lace collar. His normally deft fingers turned clumsy with the tableware. There was even a trace of raccoon blood on his hands. Seeded resentment now bloomed. Why such a show on a sleepy afternoon for a single guest well below their station? Intentional, he decided; a stage performance to humiliate him into a groveling acceptance of D'Ortega's wishes. ^{re-education} ^{injection} ^{slow} The meal began with a prayer whispered in a language he could not decipher and a slow signing of the cross before and after. In spite of his dirty hands and sweat-limp hair, Jacob pressed down his annoyance and chose to focus on the food. But his considerable hunger shrank when presented with the heavily seasoned dishes: everything except pickles and radishes was fried or overcooked. The wine, watered and too sweet for his taste, disappointed him, and the company got worse. The sons were as silent as tombs. D'Ortega's wife was a chattering magpie, asking pointless questions—How do you manage living in snow?—and making sense-defying

observations, as though her political judgment were equal to a man's. Perhaps it was their pronunciation, their narrow grasp of the English language, but it seemed to Jacob that nothing transpired in the conversation that had footing in the real world. They both spoke of the gravity, the unique responsibility, this untamed world offered them; its unbreakable connection to God's work and the difficulties they endured on His behalf. Caring for ill or recalcitrant labor was enough, they said, for canonization.

"Are they often ill, Madam?" asked Jacob.

"As they pretend, no," said his hostess. "Scoundrels they are. In Portugal they never get away with this trickery."

"They come from Portugal?" Jacob wondered if the serving woman understood English or if they cursed her only in Portuguese.

"Well, the Angola part of Portugal," said D'Ortega. "It is the most amiable, beautiful land."

"Portugal?"

"Angola. But, of course, Portugal is without peer."

"We are there for four years," added Mistress D'Ortega.

"Portugal?"

"Angola. But, mind you, our children are not born there."

"Portugal, then?"

"No. Maryland."

"Ah. England."

As it turned out, D'Ortega was the third son of a gentleman, in line for nothing. He'd gone to Angola, Portu-

gal's slave pool, to manage shipments to Brazil, but found promises of wealth quicker and more generously met farther abroad. The kick up from one kind of herding to another was swift and immensely enriching. For a while, thought Jacob, D'Ortega did not seem to be making a go of his relatively new station, but he had no doubt he would prevail somehow, as this invitation to dinner was designed to prove.

They had six children, two of whom were old enough to sit at table. Stone-quiet boys, thirteen and fourteen, wearing periwigs like their father as though they were at a ball or a court of law. His bitterness, Jacob understood, was unworthy, the result of having himself ^{no surviving} ~~no~~ ^{surviving} survivors—male or otherwise. Now that his daughter Patricia had followed her dead brothers, there was no one yet to reap the modest but respectable inheritance he hoped to accumulate. Thus, tamping envy as taught in the poorhouse, Jacob entertained himself by conjuring up flaws in the couple's marriage. They seemed well suited to each other: vain, voluptuous, prouder of their pewter and porcelain than of their sons. It was abundantly clear why D'Ortega was in serious debt. Turning profit into useless baubles, unembarrassed by sumptuary, silk stockings and an overdressed wife, wasting candles in midday, he would always be unable to ride out any setback, whether it be lost ship or ruined crop. Watching the couple, Jacob noticed that husband and wife never looked at each other, except for a stolen glance when the other looked elsewhere. He could not tell what was in those surreptitious peeks, but it amused him to divine the worst while he endured the foolish,

incomprehensible talk and inedible dishes. They did not smile, they sneered; did not laugh, giggled. He imagined them vicious with servants and obsequious to priests. His initial embarrassment about the unavoidable consequences of his long journey—muddy boots, soiled hands, perspiration and its odor—was dimmed by Mistress D'Ortega's loud perfume and heavily powdered face. The only, if minor, relief came from the clove-smelling woman who brought the food.

His own Rebekka seemed ever more valuable to him the rare times he was in the company of these rich men's wives, women who changed frocks every day and dressed their servants in sacking. From the moment he saw his bride-to-be struggling down the gangplank with bedding, two boxes and a heavy satchel, he knew his good fortune. He had been willing to accept a bag of bones or an ugly maiden—in fact expected one, since a pretty one would have had several local opportunities to wed. But the young woman who answered his shout in the crowd was plump, comely and capable. Worth every day of the long search made necessary because taking over the patroonship required a wife, and because he wanted a certain kind of mate: an unchurched woman of childbearing age, obedient but not groveling, literate but not proud, independent but nurturing. And he would accept no scold. Just as the first mate's report described her, Rebekka was ideal. There was not a shrewish bone in her body. She never raised her voice in anger. Saw to his needs, made the tenderest dumplings, took to chores in a land completely strange to her with enthusiasm and invention, cheerful as a bluebird. Or

used to be. Three dead infants in a row, followed by the accidental death of Patrician, their five-year-old, had unleavened her. A kind of invisible ash had settled over her which vigils at the small graves in the meadow did nothing to wipe away. Yet she neither complained nor shirked her duties. If anything, she threw herself more vigorously into the farmwork, and when he traveled, as now, on business, trading, collecting, lending, he had no doubts about how his home was being managed. Rebekka and her two helpers were as reliable as sunrise and strong as posts. Besides, time and health were on their side. He was confident she would bear more children and at least one, a boy, would live to thrive.

Dessert, applesauce and pecans, was an improvement, and when he accompanied D'Ortega on the impossible-to-refuse tour of the place, his mood had lifted slightly, enough to admire the estate honestly. The mist had cleared and he was able to see in detail the workmanship and care of the tobacco sheds, wagons, row after row of barrels—orderly and nicely kept—the well-made meat house, milk house, laundry, cookhouse. All but the last, whitewashed plaster, a jot smaller than the slave quarters but, unlike them, in excellent repair. The subject, the purpose, of the meeting had not been approached. D'Ortega had described with attention to minute detail the accidents beyond his control that made him unable to pay what he owed. But how Jacob would be reimbursed had not been broached. Examining the spotted, bug-ridden leaves of tobacco, it became clear what D'Ortega had left to offer. Slaves.

Jacob refused. His farm was modest; his trade needed

only himself. Besides having no place to put them, there was nothing to occupy them.

"Ridiculous," said D'Ortega. "You sell them. Do you know the prices they garner?"

Jacob winced. Flesh was not his commodity.

Still, at his host's insistence, he trailed him to the little sheds where D'Ortega interrupted their half day's rest and ordered some two dozen or more to assemble in a straight line, including the boy who had watered Regina. The two men walked the row, inspecting. D'Ortega identifying talents, weaknesses and possibilities, but silent about the scars, the wounds like misplaced veins tracing their skin. One even had the facial brand required by local law when a slave assaulted a white man a second time. The women's eyes looked shockproof, gazing beyond place and time as though they were not actually there. The men looked at the ground. Except every now and then, when possible, when they thought they were not being evaluated, Jacob could see their quick glances, sideways, wary but, most of all, judging the men who judged them.

Suddenly Jacob felt his stomach seize. The tobacco odor, so welcoming when he arrived, now nauseated him. Or was it the sugared rice, the hog cuts fried and dripping with molasses, the cocoa Lady D'Ortega was giddy about? Whatever it was, he couldn't stay there surrounded by a passel of slaves whose silence made him imagine an avalanche seen from a great distance. No sound, just the knowledge of a roar he could not hear. He begged off, saying the proposal was not acceptable—too much trouble to transport, manage, auction; his

solitary, unencumbered proficiency was what he liked about trade. Specie, bills of credit, quit claims, were portable. One satchel carried all he needed. They walked back toward the house and through the side gate in the ornate fence, D'Ortega pontificating all the while. He would do the selling. Pounds? Spanish sovereigns? He would arrange transportation, hire the handler.

Stomach turning, nostrils assailed, Jacob grew angry. This is a calamity, he thought. Unresolved, it would lead to years in a lawsuit in a province ruled by the king's judges disinclined to favor a distant tradesman over a local Catholic gentleman. The loss, while not unmanageable, struck him as unforgivable. And to such a man. D'Ortega's strut as they had walked the property disgusted him. Moreover, he believed the set of that jaw, the drooping lids, hid something soft, as if his hands, accustomed to reins, whips and lace, had never held a plow or axed a tree. There was something beyond Catholic-in-his, something sordid and overripe. But what could he do? Jacob felt the shame of his weakened position like a soiling of the blood. No wonder they had been excluded from Parliament back home and, although he did not believe they should be hunted down like vermin, other than on business he would never choose to mingle or socialize with the lowest or highest of them. Barely listening to D'Ortega's patter, sly, indirect, instead of straight and manly, Jacob neared the cookhouse and saw a woman standing in the doorway with two children. One on her hip; one hiding behind her skirts. She looked healthy enough, better fed

than the others. On a whim, mostly to silence him and fairly sure D'Ortega would refuse, he said, "Her. That one. I'll take her."

D'Ortega stopped short, a startled look on his face. "Ah, no. Impossible. My wife won't allow. She can't live without her. She is our main cook, the best one."

Jacob drew closer and, recognizing the dove-laced sweat, suspected there was more than cooking D'Ortega stood to lose.

"You said 'any.' I could choose any. If your word is worthless, there is only the law."

D'Ortega lifted an eyebrow, just one, as though on its curve an empire rested. Jacob knew he was struggling with this impertinent threat from an inferior, but he must have thought better of returning the insult with another. He desperately wanted this business over quickly and he wanted his way.

"Well, yes," said D'Ortega, "but there are other women here. More. You see them. Also this one is nursing."

"Then the law it is," said Jacob.

D'Ortega smiled. A lawsuit would certainly be decided in his favor and the time wasted in pursuing it would be to his advantage.

"You astound me," he said.

Jacob refused to back down. "Perhaps another lender would be more to your liking," he said and enjoyed seeing the nostril flare that meant he had struck home. D'Ortega was notorious for unpaid debts and had to search far outside Maryland for a broker since he had exhausted his friends and local lenders refused what they knew would be inevitable default. The air tightened.

"You don't seem to comprehend my offer. I not forfeiting my debt. I honoring it. The value of a seasoned slave is beyond adequate."

"Not if I can't use her."

"Use her? Sell her?"

"My trade is goods and gold, sir," said Jacob Vaark, landowner. And he could not resist adding, "But I understand how hard it is for a Papist to accommodate certain kinds of restraint."

Too subtle? wondered Jacob. Not at all, apparently, for D'Ortega's hand moved to his hip. Jacob's eyes followed the movement as the ringed fingers curled around a scabbard. Would he? Would this curdled, arrogant fop really assault his creditor, murder him and, claiming self-defense, prerogative, rid himself of both debt and social insult even though it would mean complete financial disaster, considering that his coffers were as empty as his scabbard? The soft fingers fumbled for the absent haft. Jacob raised his eyes to D'Ortega's, noticing the cowardice of unarmed gentry confronted with a com-moner. Out here in wilderness dependent on paid guards nowhere in sight this Sunday. He felt like laughing. *diving*
~~Where else but in this disorganized world would such an encounter be possible? Where else could rank tremble before courage? Jacob turned away, letting his exposed, unarmed back convey his scorn. It was a curious moment. Along with his contempt, he felt a wave of exhilaration. Potent. Steady. An inside shift from careful negotiator to the raw boy that once prowled the lanes of town and country. He did not even try to mute his chuckling as he passed the cookhouse and glanced again at the woman standing in its door.~~

Just then the little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes. Perhaps it was that feeling of license, a newly recovered recklessness along with the sight of those little legs rising like two bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes, that made him laugh. A loud, chest-heaving laugh at the comedy, the hopeless irritation, of the visit. His laughter had not subsided when the woman cradling the small boy on her hip came forward. Her voice was barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking its urgency.

"Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter."

Jacob looked up at her, away from the child's feet, his mouth still open with laughter, and was struck by the terror in her eyes. His laugh creaking to a close, he shook his head, thinking, God help me if this is not the most wretched business.

"Why yes. Of course," said D'Ortega, shaking off his earlier embarrassment and trying to re-establish his dignity. "I'll send her to you. Immediately." His eyes widened as did his condescending smile, though he still seemed highly agitated.

"My answer is firm," said Jacob, thinking, I've got to get away from this substitute for a man. But thinking also, perhaps Rebekka would welcome a child around the place. This one here, swimming in horrible shoes, appeared to be about the same age as Partician, and if she got kicked in the head by a mare, the loss would not rock Rebekka so.

"There is a priest here," D'Ortega went on. "He can

bring her to you. I'll have them board a sloop to any port on the coast you desire. . . ."

"No. I said, no."

Suddenly the woman smelling of cloves knelt and closed her eyes.

They wrote new papers. Agreeing that the girl was worth twenty pieces of eight, considering the number of years ahead of her and reducing the balance by three hogsheds of tobacco or fifteen English pounds, the latter preferred. The tension lifted, visibly so on D'Ortega's face. Eager to get away and re-nourish his good opinion of himself, Jacob said abrupt goodbyes to Mistress D'Ortega, the two boys and their father. On his way to the narrow track, he turned Regina around, waved at the couple and once again, in spite of himself, envied the house, the gate, the fence. For the first time he had not tricked, not flattered, not manipulated, but gone head to head with rich gentry. And realized, not for the first time, that only things, not bloodlines or character, separated them. So mighten it be nice to have such a fence to enclose the headstones in his own meadow? And one day, not too far away, to build a house that size on his own property? On that rise in back, with a better prospect of the hills and the valley between them? Not as ornate as D'Ortega's. None of that pagan excess, of course, but fair. And pure, noble even, because it would not be compromised as Jublio was. Access to a fleet of free labor made D'Ortega's leisurely life possible. Without a shipload of enslaved Angolans he would not be merely in debt; he would be eating from his palm instead of porcelain and sleeping in the bush of Africa

rather than a four-post bed. Jacob sneered at wealth dependent on a captured workforce that required more force to maintain. Thin as they were, the dregs of his kind of Protestantism recoiled at whips, chains and armed overseers. He was determined to prove that his own industry could amass the fortune, the station, D'Ortega claimed without trading his conscience for coin.

He tapped Regina to a faster pace. The sun was low; the air cooler. He was in a hurry to get back into Virginia, its shore, and to Pursey's tavern before night, sleep in a bed if they weren't all packed three or four abreast. Otherwise he would join the other patrons and curl on any surface. But first he would have one, perhaps two, drafts of ale, its bitter, clear taste critical to eliminating the sweetish rot of vice and ruined tobacco that seemed to coat his tongue. Jacob returned Regina to the hostler, paid him and strolled to the wharf and Pursey's tavern. On the way he saw a man beating a horse to its knees. Before he could open his mouth to shout, rowdy sailors pulled the man away and let him feel his own knees in mud. Few things angered Jacob more than the brutal handling of domesticated animals. He did not know what the sailors were objecting to, but his own fury was not only because of the pain it inflicted on the horse, but because of the mute, unprotesting surrender-glazing its eyes.

Pursey's was closed on Sunday, as he should have known, so he went to the one always open. Rough, illegal and catering to hard boys, it nevertheless offered good, plentiful food and never strong meat. On his sec-

ond draft, a fiddler and a piper entered for their merriment and their money and, the piper having played less well than himself, raised Jacob's spirits enough for him to join in the singing. When two women came in, the men called out their names with liquored glee. The bawds flounced a bit before choosing a lap to sit in. Jacob demurred when approached. He'd had enough, years ago, of brothels and the disorderly houses kept by wives of sailors at sea. The boyish recklessness that flooded him at Jublio did not extend to the sweet debauchery he had sought as a youth.

Seated at a table cluttered with the remains of earlier meals, he listened to the talk around him, which was mostly sugar, which was to say, rum. Its price and demand becoming greater than tobacco's now that glut was ruining that market. The man who seemed to know most about kill-devil, the simple mechanics of its production, its outrageous prices and beneficial effects, was holding forth with the authority of a mayor.

Burly, pock-faced, he had the aura of a man who had been in exotic places and the eyes of someone unaccustomed to looking at things close to his face. Downes was his name. Peter Downes. A Negro boy had been summoned and now brought six tankards, the handles of three in each hand, and set them on the table. Five men reached for them and quickly swallowed. Downes also, but spit his first swallow on the floor, telling the company that the gesture was both an offering and a protection from poison.

"How so?" someone asked. "Poison may lurk at the bottom."

"Never," said Downes. "Poison is like the drowned; it always floats."

Amid the laughter, Jacob joined the men at the table and listened to Downes' mesmerizing tales ending with a hilarious description of the size of the women's breasts in Barbados.

"I once thought of settling there," said Jacob. "Besides bosoms, what is it like?"

"Like a whore. Lush and deadly," said Downes.

"Meaning?"

Downes wiped his lips with his sleeve. "Meaning all is plentiful and ripe except life. That is scarce and short. Six months, eighteen and—" He waved goodbye fingers.

"Then how do they manage? It must be constant turmoil." Jacob was imagining the difference between the steady controlled labor of Jublio and the disorderliness of sugar plantations.

"Not at all," Downes smiled. "They ship in more. Like firewood, what burns to ash is refueled. And don't forget, there are births. The place is a stew of mulattoes, creoles, zambos, mestizos, lobos, chinos, coyotes." He touched his fingers with his thumb as he listed the types being produced in Barbados.

"Still the risk is high," countered Jacob. "I've heard of whole estates cut down by disease. What will happen when labor dwindles and there is less and less to transport?"

"Why would it dwindle?" Downes spread his hands as if carrying the hull of a ship. "Africans are as interested in selling slaves to the Dutch as an English planter

is in buying them. Rum rules, no matter who does the trading. Laws? What laws? Look," he went on, "Massachusetts has already tried laws against rum selling and failed to stop one dram. The sale of molasses to northern colonies is brisker than ever. More steady profit in it than fur, tobacco, lumber, anything—except gold, I reckon. As long as the fuel is replenished, vats simmer and money heaps. Kill-devil, sugar—there will never be enough. A trade for lifetimes to come."

"Still," Jacob said, "it's a degraded business. And hard."

"Think of it this way. Fur you need to hunt it, kill it, skin it, carry it and probably fight some natives for the rights. Tobacco needs nurture, harvest, drying, packing, toting, but mostly time and ever-fresh soil. Sugar? Rum? Cane grows. You can't stop it; its soil never dies out. You just cut it, cook it, ship it." Downes slapped his palms together.

"That simple, eh?"

"More or less. But the point is this. No loss of investment. None. Ever. No crop failure. No wiped-out beaver or fox. No war to interfere. Crop plentiful, eternal. Slave workers, same. Buyers, eager. Product, heavenly. In a month, the time of the journey from mill to Boston, a man can turn fifty pounds into five times as much. Think of it. Each and every month five times the investment. For certain."

Jacob had to laugh. He recognized the manner: hawker turned middle man eliminating all hesitations and closing all arguments with promises of profit quickly. From Downes' clothes and his apparent unwill-

plaster work

in the

No loss

ingness so far to stand the drinks, Jacob suspected he had not reaped the easy profit he described.

Nevertheless, Jacob decided he would look into it.

After a leisurely meal of oysters, veal, pigeon, parsnips and suet pudding restored his taste buds, he reserved bed space with just one man in it and, strolling outside, thought about the disappointing day and the humiliation of having accepted the girl as part payment. He knew he would never see another farthing from D'Ortega. One day—soon, maybe—to everyone's relief the Stuarts would lose the throne, and a Protestant rule.

Then, he thought, a case against D'Ortega would succeed and he would not be forced to settle for a child as a percentage of what was due him. He knew he had excused the bargain by thinking Rebekka would be eager to have her, but what was truer than that was another thing. From his own childhood he knew there was no good place in the world for waifs and whelps other than the generosity of strangers. Even if bartered, given away, apprenticed, sold, swapped, seduced, tricked for food, labored for shelter or stolen, they were less doomed under adult control. Even if they mattered less than a milch cow to a parent or master, without an adult they were more likely to freeze to death on stone steps, float facedown in canals, or wash up on banks and shoals. He refused to be sentimental about his own orphan status, the years spent with children of all shades, stealing food and cadging gratuities for errands. His mother, he was told, was a girl of no consequence who died in childbirth. His father, who hailed from Amsterdam, left him with a name easily punned and a

cause of deep suspicion. The shame the Dutch had visited on the English was everywhere, especially during his stint in a poorhouse before the luck of being taken on as a runner for a law firm. The job required literacy and led to his being signed up by the Company. Inheriting land softened the chagrin of being both misborn and disowned. Yet he continued to feel a disturbing pulse-of-pity for orphans and strays, remembering well their and his own sad teeming in the markets, lanes, alleyways and ports of every region he traveled. Once before he found it hard to refuse when called on to rescue an unmoored, unwanted child. A decade ago now, a sawyer asked him to take off his hands a sullen, curly-headed girl he had found half dead on a riverbank. Jacob agreed to do it, provided the sawyer forgive the cost of the lumber he was buying. Unlike now, at that time his farm really did need more help. Rebekka was pregnant then, but no previous sons had lived. His farm was sixty cultivated acres out of one hundred and twenty of woodland that was located some seven miles from a hamlet founded by Separatists. The patroonship had lain dormant for years when so many Dutch (except for the powerful and wealthy ones) left or were expelled from the region. The land was still isolated except for the Separatists. Jacob soon learned that they had bolted from their brethren over the question of the Chosen versus the universal nature of salvation. His neighbors favored the first and situated themselves inland beyond fur posts and wars. When Jacob, a small-scale trader for the Company with a side line in fur and lumber, found himself an heir of sorts, he relished the thought of

to see if she was

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becoming a landowning, independent farmer. He didn't change his mind about that. He did what was necessary: secured a wife, someone to help her, planted, built, fathered. . . . He had simply added the trading life. Otherwise he would have to prefer settled farm life and communion with people whose religion dumbfounded him although the seven-mile distance made their blasphemy irrelevant. Yet his land belonged to a traveling man who knew very well that it was not wise to have male labor all over the place during his long absences. His preference for steady female labor over dodgy males was based on his own experience as a youth. A frequently absent master was invitation and temptation—to escape, rape or rob. The two men he used as occasional help presented no threat at all. In the right environment, women were naturally reliable. He believed it now with this ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away just as he believed it a decade earlier with the curly-haired goose girl, the one they called Sorrow. And the acquisition of both could be seen as rescue. Only Lina had been purchased outright and deliberately, but she was a woman, not a child.

Walking in the warm night air, he went as far as possible, until the alehouse lights were gem stones fighting darkness and the voices of carousing men were lost to the silk-rustle of surf. The sky had forgotten completely its morning fire and was tricked out in cool stars on a canvas smooth and dark as Regina's hide. He gazed at the occasional dapple of starlight on the water, then bent down and placed his hands in it. Sand moved under his palms; infant waves died above his wrists,

soaking the cuffs of his sleeves. By and by the detritus of the day washed off, including the faint trace of coon's blood. As he walked back to the inn, nothing was in his way. There was the heat, of course, but no fog, gold or gray, impeded him. Besides, a plan was taking shape. Knowing full well his shortcomings as a farmer—in fact his boredom with its confinement and routine—he had found commerce more to his taste. Now he fondled the idea of an even more satisfying enterprise. And the plan was as sweet as the sugar on which it was based. And there was a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jubilo and a remote labor force in Barbados. Right? Right, he thought, looking at a sky vulgar with stars. Clear and right. The silver that glittered there was not at all unreachable. And that wide swath of cream pouring through the stars was his for the tasting.

The heat was still pressing, his bed partner overactive, yet he slept well enough. Probably because his dreams were of a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog.