

LIBRE

by Barbara Hambly

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Art by David Sullivan

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Barbara Hambly lived in New Orleans for three years with her late husband, science fiction writer George Alec Effinger. The city provides the setting for her crime fiction, the pre-Civil War Benjamin January series. What better way to begin a journey through time and the New Orleans of mystery-writing imagination than with a tale of January, former slave and sometime sleuth. Ms. Hambly's new novel is *Renfield, Slave of Dracula*.

“If they fear she has been kidnapped, why not call the City Guard?” Benjamin January paused on the steps that led up to the gallery of the *garçonnière*, looking down at his mother in the narrow yard. He’d just returned from teaching his first piano class of the winter—new students, Americans, in the suburb of St. Mary upriver—and had been hoping to get a few hours’ nap before he had to dress up again and play for a subscription ball over on Rue Orleans. There was a saying among the musicians of New Orleans, *You can sleep during Lent*—which wasn’t entirely true because the holy season was dotted with “exceptions,” like Washington’s Birthday balls—but the week or two after the first frost were always the worst. He’d played for the opening of the French Opera House last night, and had gone on to provide quadrilles and pantaleones at a ball at the townhouse of a wealthy sugar planter. The sellers of fresh milk and crayfish had been beginning their morning rounds when he’d finally returned to his room above his mother’s kitchen.

Afternoon coffee with his mother’s friends was not something he wanted to deal with on three hours of sleep, particularly not when his mother had that glint in her eye.

“The City Guard.” Livia Lev-esque sniffed. “You know what they are, my son. If a slave disappears they’ll sober up and hunt for the thief because the owner will give them a reward. If a *libre* disappears—” She used the Spanish term for their people, the free people of color, though Louisiana hadn’t been a possession of Spain for thirty years now. “—they have other things to do. You come downstairs now, Ben. Poor Madame Rochier is nearly mad with fear and grief.”

That his mother was up to something—that there was something about the disappearance of eighteen-year-old Marie-Zulieka Rochier that she wasn’t going to admit in her first preemptory demand that he undertake the search—January guessed from his mother’s tone, and the way she held her head. He was forty-one, and had consciously noticed before the age of four—when she and he and his younger sister

Olympe had all still been slaves on a sugar plantation upriver—all the signs when she was doctoring some unpalatable truth.

When he followed her into the dining room of the trim little cottage on Rue Burgundy he was sure of it.

Casmalia Rochier was certainly afraid, and certainly upset. But in her dark eyes and in the set of her perfect mouth, as she turned her head to reply to a question, was a world of suspicion and frozen rage.

Like January's mother—like the other four women sipping his mother's cook's excellent coffee around the cherrywood table—Casmalia Rochier was a *placée*, the free colored mistress of a wealthy white man. Many years ago, according to custom, banker Louis Rochier had bought her a house and settled on her the income to raise their mixed-race children in comfort and safety. A similar arrangement between January's mother and St-Denis Janvier, now long gathered to his ancestors, had paid for both the music lessons that led to his current profession and the medical training in France that had proved to be so completely useless the moment he returned to the United States ... and, of course, had paid for this house.

A similar arrangement existed between January's youngest sister Dominique—currently passing Casmalia the sugar—and a young sugar planter; between his old friend Catherine Clisson, who smiled a welcome to him as he came into the room, and another equally wealthy planter. An arrangement like that had provided the foundation of Bernadette Métoyer's chocolate shop and the investments that paid for the gowns of the four daughters Agnes Pellicot was trying to "place" in arrangements of their own. Bernadette and Agnes were both angrily denouncing the New Orleans City Guards to Casmalia and barely glanced at January, but Dominique got to her feet and rustled to the sideboard for another cup of coffee for her older brother:

"You are going to find Zozo for us, aren't you, p'tit?"

He was almost twenty years the elder and six feet, three inches tall, and smiled inwardly at being called "little one" by this piece of graceful fluff.

"If I can. *Have* you notified the City Guards?" He looked across at Casmalia Rochier, and her eyes ducked away from his. "They may display little interest in recovering artisans' wives or market girls when they go missing, but they're going to look for the daughter of Louis Rochier, even one born on the shady side of the street."

He didn't add, *And what's more, you know it*. But it was in his eyes when she looked back at him. *What is it you all aren't telling me?*

"My mother tells me Marie-Zulieka disappeared this morning. When? How?"

Surely she wasn't out by herself?"

"Of course not!" Casmalia's back went even more rigid at the suggestion. "She went to the market with her sister and Marie-Therese Pellicot. But Marie-Therese was taken ill, and Zozo left little Lucie with Marie-Therese and hurried home to fetch Tommy, our yardman, to help her get home—"

Seventeen years of living in Paris brought, *Why didn't she fetch a cab?* to January's lips, only to be reminded, with a small stab of too-familiar anger, that it was against the law for a man or woman of color to ride in a cab.

Except, of course, as the driver or as a servant perched on the box.

Catherine Clisson finished softly, "She never made it home."

"Lucie and Marie-Therese waited for almost an hour," added Agnes, her round, rouged face puckered with distress at the memory of her daughter's illness and the fear that stalked every *libre*—the fear of kidnap by slave traders. Of being taken out of New Orleans and sold. "Finally Lucie asked one of the market women's children to run see what was keeping Tommy."

"That was the first I heard."

"Is Marie-Therese all right?"

Agnes nodded, and her plump shoulders relaxed. "Just a little indisposition of the stomach, you know. I tell the girls, never buy snacks and treats from those market women unless you know them—who knows what goes into those ices? But of course girls never listen. She'll be well for the ball at the Salle tonight." There was an edge to Agnes's voice. Marie-Therese had not yet found a protector after one season of attending the quadroon balls at the Salle d'Orleans, and her mother wasn't going to let another season go by, however poorly the girl might feel.

January's glance returned to Casmalia. "Has your daughter a lover?"

"My daughter has accepted a most flattering offer from Jules Dutuille." The woman brought forth the name of the sugar broker with a slow flourish, like a card player spreading four of a kind beneath the noses of her enemies. But January saw the look that flashed between Catherine Clisson and his sister, and remembered hearing something—he couldn't place what—disparaging about the man.

He knew the odds were only fifty-fifty that he'd get a truthful answer to his next question. "Was there anyone else?"

"No!" Casmalia dabbed—very carefully—at her painted eyes with a tiny square of lawn and lace, and Clisson and Dominique again traded a glance.

“Benjamin, it is vital—*vital*—not only that my daughter be found swiftly, but that no word of this—this terrible tragedy—be allowed to reach M’sieu Dutuille’s ears ... or those of M’sieu Rochier. Poor M’sieu Dutuille would be devastated—”

“I understand.” And he did understand, seeing how his mother, Bernadette Métoyer, and Agnes Pellicot all leaned forward to catch and sift every word. Gossip was the lifeblood of the free colored demimonde. The fact that Casmalia Rochier, devastatingly elegant in her expensive simplicity, was inclined to boast virtually guaranteed that her misfortune would be trumpeted abroad.

Her own business, of course, but dispensing with an audience would greatly increase his chances of getting anything like truthful answers. “Maman, with Madame Rochier’s permission I’m going to walk her home. Please, all of you ladies, finish your coffee. I’ll return in a few minutes. Madame?” He held out his arm, onto which Casmalia Rochier laid one exquisitely kid-gloved hand.

“You don’t think it was slave-stealers, do you?” he asked, very quietly, as he led Casmalia out through the long French doors of his mother’s cottage and onto Rue Burgundy. Even this far from the river—nearly half a mile—the sound of the levee made a jumbled background to the closer noises of passing carriages, of servants and women talking in doorways and breezeways, of dogs barking in yards: the noises of New Orleans in the winter season, between cotton harvest and sugar-boiling, when the planters came into town and opened up their houses and the city came alive.

Casmalia Rochier glanced right and left, as if making sure none of her friends had tiptoed after them to listen, and let out her breath in an angry sigh. “Ben, it is absolutely imperative—”

He held up a hand. “I know. That M’sieu Dutuille doesn’t hear of it—or M’sieu Rochier. Who do you think it was?”

“Nicholas Saverne.” Her eyes, green-gray like those of so many *libres*, turned steely. “A lawyer from Mobile, absolutely *no* family, and encroaching as a weed. He swears he’ll be the wealthiest man in the parish in a year, but I know his kind!”

“Would your daughter have gone with him willingly?”

“Of course not!” But her glance again fled from his. “Her father went to great lengths to arrange this match with M’sieu Dutuille, who is absolutely infatuated with her. She would never do a thing like that to me.”

Not, January was interested to note, *to him*.

“She is a most dutiful girl—and needless to say, deeply in love with M’sieu Dutuille.”

By the defensive note in her voice it was clear to January that Marie-Zulieka had been nothing of the kind. He handed Casmalia across the plank that bridged the gutter of Rue des Ursulines; they had reached the pale-green cottage, with its fresh pink trim, that Louis Rochier had twenty years ago purchased for his *placée*. Because January was a man—and no Creole, black or white, would walk straight through the French doors of the parlor like a barbarian—he followed her down the narrow breezeway that separated her cottage from the next, and through the yard into the dining room: Any of her woman friends would have been escorted through her bedroom. This custom allowed him to note the layout of the house, which was substantially the same as his mother’s and that of every other *placée* in the French town. The four-room cottage faced the street, and the building behind housed kitchen, laundry, slave quarters, and the *garçonnière*: the room or rooms for the growing sons of the house.

A girl who had to be Lucie darted out of the French doors at the rear of the house as January and Casmalia approached: “Did you find her?” She raised frightened eyes up to her mother. “She didn’t really get stolen away by the American animals, did she?”

January replied reassuringly, “I don’t think so, p’tit. But if she gets stranded on foot someplace far away, she might have to sell her earrings to get home. Might I see her jewel box, so we can tell how much she’ll have with her to sell?”

After a quick glance at her mother, Lucie led the way self-importantly to the door into the bedroom she clearly shared with her sister. January had already noted the three sets of bedding that the housemaid was hanging to air on the railings of the gallery: Between Marie-Zulieka and Lucie, who looked to be eight or nine, Casmalia had evidently borne at least three sons. They would be out, he guessed, either at school or more probably at whatever shops or businesses to which they’d been apprenticed. The daughters of *placées* almost routinely became *placées* themselves, the sons almost universally artisans or clerks.

He recalled, too, from his own childhood, how he—the ungainly son who too closely resembled his mother’s slave husband—had been early relegated to the *garçonnière*, and how Dominique, from her birth, had been given her own pretty room in the cottage, much like this that Marie-Zulieka and Lucie shared. The walls were papered with green-and-white French wallpapers; armoire, bureau, and the bed beneath the looped-back pink cloud of the mosquito bar were French, and new. Like Dominique, obviously her mother’s lace-trimmed princess, clothed in white mull muslin with whose simple prettiness even the most exacting Frenchwoman could not have found fault.

Of a piece with her mother, he thought, glancing back at Casmalia. Aside from the tignon—the wrapped head scarf mandated by law to mark all women of color, slave and free, apart from white women—Casmalia’s simple elegance would not

have been out of place in Paris or London.

Yet he'd seen her wearing diamonds, when he played music for the quadrone balls. Louis Rochier was obviously a generous patron.

And a generous father. The jewel box Lucie opened for his inspection was a miniature treasure-house of pearls, sapphire, and aquamarine, expensive and yet carefully chosen to be not one carat more than rigidly appropriate for a girl just "out." Yet something was missing...

"These are the things M'sieu Dutuille sent to her, on the occasion of her contract being signed." Rather impatiently, Casmalia cleared the small stack of books from the corner of the bureau, and spread out upon it a much costlier parure of rubies. "Of course completely unsuitable for her to wear as yet—perhaps ever, if you ask my opinion. She's so fair they're not her color at all."

It was a subtle brag. Like the white, upon whose power they depended, most *libres* saw greater beauty in pale complexions and silky hair than in the reminders of a slave-born past. "I suppose she'll have to wear them to please him," Casmalia continued airily. "When the time comes, I'll suggest she have them reset."

"I think they're pretty," ventured Lucie, and her mother sniffed.

"Vulgar. But as you can see, Ben, she certainly did *not* abscond. Not and leave all this behind. I don't see her pearls here—there was a pearl-and-aquamarine set that her grandmother gave her, God rest her soul: *far* too showy for morning. I can't imagine she'd have worn it..."

"She did," provided Lucie. "And I think it was beautiful."

"Nonsense. It was incorrect to wear in the daytime—what on earth can she have been thinking? And no one is interested in what little girls think."

"And I'll bet you have jewels just as beautiful, Lucie," said January, who had carefully taken everything out of Marie-Zulieka's jewel box and gently probed with his fingers every corner of its satin lining. "Would you show them to me, before I go?"

They were, as he'd guessed, just as carefully chosen to be suitable for a girl of nine: a single pearl on a fine gold chain, coral beads, a gold cross to wear on Sundays ... "And what's this?" With great care he lifted the tiny, brittle bundle no bigger than the joint of his little finger, wrapped in pink paper, though quite properly he didn't open it.

One didn't, with such things. Not without permission.

“That’s my gris-gris.” Lucie took the bundle, unwrapped it to show the tiny dried foot of a bird, a sparrow or a wren by its size. “It brings me good luck. Zozo has one, too.”

“And does Zozo keep hers in her jewel box?”

Lucie nodded.

He refilled and closed the box, and replaced on the corner of the bureau the books Casmalia had tossed aside: Böckh on ancient Greece and Lamarck on animals, a Spanish edition of *Don Quixote*, and a text on the stars that had been much talked of in Paris when he was there a few years ago. Inside the cover of each was marked *A. Vouziers, 12 Rue de la Petit Monnaie*—that address was crossed out, along with two others he recognized as being in the same maze of ancient streets behind the Louvre in Paris, and then—*53 Rue Marigny*.

He said, “Then we can be sure it will bring Zozo good luck as well.”

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“I consulted with my sister,” said January that evening to Hannibal Sefton, at a break during the dancing in the Théâtre d’Orleans while the guests made serious inroads on the buffet and the musicians sorted through their music and flexed the cramp from their hands. Needless to say, the sister January referred to was not the lovely Dominique but Olympe, his full-blood sister who’d run off with the voodooos at the age of sixteen. “She says she didn’t sell Zozo Rochier anything to make Marie-Therese Pellicot sick, but the symptoms sound like hellebore of some kind. My aunties back on the plantation would give the children something of the kind when we got worms. I hope Agnes didn’t force Marie-Therese out of bed to come to the ball.”

His eyes strayed across the dance floor that had been raised over the backs of the seats in the pit to the wide double doors that led through to the lobby. From the lobby a discreet passageway connected to the building next-door—the Salle d’Orleans—where a ball was going on for the ladies of the free colored demimonde, the *plaçees* and their daughters.

M’sieu Davis, who owned both buildings, was careful to stagger the intermissions so that the husbands and brothers of the respectable ladies attending the ball at the Théâtre could sneak back in good time to have a cup of punch with their wives, after dancing with their mistresses next-door.

“Surely she wouldn’t.” Hannibal set his violin on top of January’s piano, unobtrusively collected two champagne glasses from the tray of a passing waiter, and led the way to the lobby. It wouldn’t do for the musicians to be seen drinking the same champagne as the guests. “Even Agnes...”

“Agnes Pellicot is living on investments that have gone down in value and has three daughters besides Marie-Therese to bring out.”

They traversed the passageway to the upstairs lobby of the Salle, and emerging, January scanned the room for Dominique: cautiously, because a black musician who was perceived as “uppity”—that is, attending a ball designed for white men in some capacity other than that of a servant—was just as liable to be thrashed on this side of the passageway as on the other. Music still flowed like a sparkling river through the archways that led from the ballroom, and with it the swish of skirts, the brisk pat of slippers on the waxed floor, the laughter of the ladies, and the rumble of men’s talk. Impossible to tell whether his sister would be able to gracefully slip from her protector—or whether she’d remember to do so. In ten minutes he’d have to be back....

A moment later, however, Dominique appeared in the archway, a fantasia of green and bronze, calling back over her shoulder, “Darling, if I don’t get some air I’ll be obliged to faint in your arms and that would simply *destroy* the flowers you gave me—”

January took his untouched champagne glass, picked a waiter’s silver tray from a corner of the buffet in the lobby, and carried the glass to her with the respectful air of one who knows his place. “Would madame care for champagne?”

“How precious of you, p’tit! What I’d really like is about a quart of arsenic to give to Eulalia Figes—such a witch! She said my dress—”

“Were you able to find out about Nicholas Saverne?” January had learned years ago that if one truly needed specific information, ruthlessly interrupting Dominique’s digressions upon her friends and acquaintances was the only way to get it.

“Oh, a perfect chevalier, dearest. He speaks French like a Parisian, he sends to Paris for his boots—he really does, p’tit, Nathalie Grillot’s mother checked—Bourdet makes his coats, the best in town, but it’s all show. Maman Grillot and Agnes Pellicot both looked into his finances when he seemed to be showing an interest in Nathalie and in Marie-Therese, and learned that he’s always borrowing from somewhere or other to invest in lands that he turns around and mortgages to invest in steamboat shares, but at the bottom he’s not worth the horseshoes on a dead horse. And he owes money to God and all His saints—to every shirtmaker and tobacconist and hat maker in town. But men are impressed—bankers and investors, I mean, and tavern keepers, who’re the ones who control votes. Henri’s mama”—Henri was Dominique’s protector, son of the truly formidable Widow Viellard—”says Nicholas Saverne tries even harder to impress the Americans, and that he’s spoken of running for Congress.”

“He may well succeed,” remarked Hannibal, returning from a trip to the unguarded buffet, a bottle of champagne in hand. As a white man—albeit an outcast—he ran less of a risk for helping himself. “Americans seem to be impressed by the show of wealth and aren’t as careful about checking on a man as Mama Grillot and Agnes Pellicot.”

“Handsome?” January asked.

Dominique shrugged coquettishly. “If you like all your goods in the shop window.”

“Does Marie-Zulieka love him?”

The young woman’s eyes lost their surface brightness as her delicate brows tugged together; from playful bubblyness, her expression shifted, thoughtful and a little sad. “I don’t think Zozo really loves anyone ... except Lucie, of course, and that *frightful* old tutor of hers, M’sieu Vouziers. One would think when a girl’s finished with her governess’s lessons she’d be glad to toss her books into the river—heaven knows *I* was. But when has any man stopped courting a pretty girl just because she tells him she isn’t interested? He *always* thinks he can *make* her interested. And if that girl’s about to be pushed into an arrangement with the likes of Jules Dutuille—”

“What’s wrong with Jules Dutuille?”

“He drinks,” responded Dominique promptly. “Oh, all men drink, of course—I think they’d go insane if they couldn’t...”

“I certainly would,” put in Hannibal.

“Well, all you do when you drink is recite poetry nobody understands, and then fall asleep, *cher*.” Dominique reached over to pat Hannibal’s thin cheek. “You’re very sweet about it. You don’t say cruel things, or destroy one’s letters from one’s family, or kill one’s pets.... My maid’s sweetheart’s cousin is a maid in Dutuille’s household, you see, and anyway everyone knows about Dutuille.”

“I don’t.”

“That’s because you’re serious and hardworking and have no time for idle chatter in the cafés.” She flashed him a dazzling smile, which sobered again at the recollection of things she had heard. “He never lets his wife see her family—they live up in St. Francisville—nor his son’s wife; they go in terror of his rages. He’s tried three or four times to come to an arrangement with a mistress, but Babette Figes begged her mother not to conclude the contract with him, and so did Cresside Morisset. Only Zozo couldn’t refuse him, you see, because her father was in business with him. So yes, she could have run off with Nicholas, only I don’t think

she did.”

“Why not?” asked January, curious, though it was a conclusion he’d already arrived at.

Dominique shrugged again. “Because if she had, she’d have taken her jewels, silly! That appalling ruby parure is worth over a thousand dollars! With his debts, he’d never have let her pass up that chance. On the other hand...”

She hesitated, and January finished softly, “On the other hand, Nicholas might have thought himself justified under the circumstances in slipping poison into Marie-Therese’s coffee himself, and kidnapping Zozo, guessing she’d go without a fuss.”

The young woman nodded. “I think that’s what her mama fears.”

“And if she didn’t take her jewels,” he continued, “which are worth a thousand dollars, there’s no telling when Nicholas might decide that once Marie-Zulieka has run off to Mobile with him, *she herself* is worth fifteen hundred dollars.”

Dominique’s eyes widened. The thought had clearly never crossed her mind. “Oh, no,” she breathed. “No, p’tit, he *wouldn’t*...”

“Don’t underestimate what a white man would or wouldn’t do when there’s money involved, and a woman not of his own race,” said January quietly. “One more thing, and then we have to get back to the ballroom. Is Nicholas Saverne here tonight?”

Dominique silently shook her head.

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“I don’t understand,” said Hannibal, some hours later when next the Théâtre musicians had a break. “Your sister and her friends are free women, aren’t they? If Jules Dutuille is such a blackguard—and I must say in the defense of us devotees of Dionysus that a man needn’t be a drunkard to treat women like cattle—Marie-Zulieka can say no. Her mother might put up a fuss—God knows my aunts did when a cousin of mine refused to marry a chinless viscount who would have paid off my uncle’s gambling debts—yet there’s no way she or anyone can *force* her compliance.”

January was silent for a few moments, reflecting on the width of the gulf that even after several years’ residence still separated the shabby Irish fiddler from the world of New Orleans. Even Dominique, raised in the free colored demimonde, was separated from the world of her brother and her older sister Olympe, who

remembered what it was to be slaves. The narrow brick corridor to which they'd retreated—it led to the kitchen quarters of the Salle d'Orleans—was at least warm. From it, he and Hannibal could look across the rear courtyard to the lighted windows both of the Salle and, beyond, to those of the Théâtre where the well-bred French and Spanish Creole ladies were still pretending their vanished husbands and brothers were “out having a smoke” or “down in the gambling rooms.” Another world.

Another universe.

“Your cousin is white,” he said at last. “And presumably lives in a land where law applies to everyone. Maybe the law isn't always just, and maybe it's not enforced equally, but it is recognized to apply. You have to understand that nothing that concerns the free colored here in New Orleans is legally clear, or as it seems to be. Rules change with a few degrees difference in the color of a woman's skin. They shift from one hour to the next, from one house to the next. It's all the custom of the country, and nothing that concerns us—slaves, or ex-slaves, or the children or grandchildren of ex-slaves—is official or truly legal or truly illegal.

“Casmalia Rochier and her children are legally free. But since she isn't legally married to Louis Rochier, he can make things far more difficult for her and her family than your uncle could ever make things for your aunt. It isn't simply a matter of Uncle Freddy going to the sponging house. Rochier has it in his power to end the education of the boys, possibly to sell Casmalia's servants—the yardman and the cook. If he's angry enough to cast Casmalia off, it would be disaster for the family. Free or not, there was no question of the girl not agreeing to become the mistress of anyone her father ordered her to. And no one who matters to him—none of his white relatives or acquaintances—will think or say a thing about it.”

The fiddler opened his mouth to say something—probably along the lines of, *Would a man do that to his own children?*—and closed it. The lights of the Salle's kitchen, where the other three musicians joked and laughed with the cook and waiters who served both Salle and Théâtre, reflected in the dark of his eyes. Reflected the recollection, January guessed, of the number of Englishmen and Americans and Irishmen and Frenchmen they'd both known in their lives who were capable of doing exactly those things to even their legitimate families, let alone their mistresses and bastards.

Some white men of January's acquaintance loved and cared for their “Rampart Street families,” their “alligator eggs,” as tenderly as they did their white wives and white children.

Some didn't.

The difference was that for the *libres*, there was neither legal, nor social, recourse.

No wonder women like his mother, and Agnes Pellicot, and Bernadette Métoyer, made damn sure the money was in the bank and in their own names.

In time, Hannibal asked, “Do you think Nicholas Saverne kidnapped this girl?”

January shook his head. “He might have, but I doubt it.”

“Then where is she?”

A clamor of voices from the kitchen broke his thought. Uncle Bichet, who played the bull fiddle, called out, “Gotta get back to the ballroom, boys, ‘fore old Davis has an apoplexy and fires the lot of us.”

January extended a hand down to help Hannibal to his feet. “I think I know; by noon tomorrow I’ll be sure.”

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Though Nicholas Saverne wasn’t at either the respectable Théâtre ball that night or the quadron festivities next-door, Louis Rochier attended both. January observed him on those occasions when he was in the Théâtre with his wife and daughters, a square pink-faced man with an incongruous cupid-bow mouth. Most of the time, however, Rochier spent in the Salle d’Orleans with his mistress Casmalia, with his son and the other men of the New Orleans business community who likewise either had mistresses or simply liked to flirt with lively ladies.

After the whites went home—and French Creoles were notorious for the lateness of their dancing—January and the other musicians drifted down the passageway and sat in with their colleagues in the Salle’s little orchestra until nearly four, when the quadron ladies and their patrons finally, as they said, “broke the circle” and headed home. Rochier had sent his white family home in the carriage; January saw the tension as the man spoke with Casmalia, and guessed that the banker had demanded where his daughter was, and had been fobbed off with a lie.

It was still pitch-black, and thickly foggy, when January returned home. Dim clamor still drifted from the wharves along the levee, and the gambling rooms of Rue Royale, but as he walked along the Rue Burgundy the stillness was eerie, thick with the molasses reek of burnt sugar from the plantations along the Bayou Road, and the cold-stifled stench of the gutters. At his mother’s house, Bella the cook was already starting the kitchen fires. She sniffed in disdain—like her mistress, Bella had little use for musicians—but gave him a cup of coffee and bread and butter before he went upstairs to his *garçonnière* to change clothes. She didn’t even come to the glowing kitchen door when he came down again a few minutes later and crossed to the passway beside the house that led back to the street.

The house itself was silent and dark.

Walking downriver along Rue Burgundy, January had almost reached Rue Esplanade when he realized he was being followed. In the fog it would be a waste of time to glance behind him, even when he passed the intersections where the city's iron lanterns hung on chains across the streets. To stop and look back would let his pursuer know that he'd been detected, though January was almost certain who it was. He turned down Rue Ursulines, and then along Rue Dauphine, and still his own footfalls on the wet brick banquettes were echoed by the muted drip-drip of following boot heels. Lantern light up ahead outlined the dark shape of a man washing down the banquette ahead of him: Country Ned, that would be, he guessed, Maître Passebon the perfumier's yardman.

As he came even with the old man January called out a greeting in the sloppy Gombo French of the cane fields, the half-African patois that the tutors his mother's patron had hired for him in childhood had never quite been able to beat from his memory. "Got a buckra hound-doggin'—you be a mama partridge for a dollar?" he said. "No *ewu*—" He used one of the several African words for danger, and the tribal scars on Country Ned's face twisted their patterns with his grin.

"Shit, Ben, *ewu* just fluff up my feathers." He took the proffered dollar, passed his broom to January, and walked off down the street without breaking the rhythm of January's steps. January himself continued to scrape the broom on the bricks, and swept himself back into the moist dark of the carriageway from Passebon's courtyard as the pursuer solidified out of the fog.

That it was Nicholas Saverne on his heels, January had never had a doubt. Casmalia's yardman Tommy might have told the young lawyer that Marie-Zulieka was being hunted by the big piano player, or the maid might have given that information, for fifty cents or just because they sympathized with any girl who'd flee from an "arrangement" with Jules Dutuille: It didn't matter. As Saverne passed through the ravelly blotch of lantern light that had illuminated Country Ned's sweeping, January identified the blink of expensive watch fobs, the sharp cut of M'sieu Bourdet's tailoring, and the varnished shine of Parisian boots. He'd meant to wait till Saverne's footfalls died away into the distance before himself emerging from his hiding place and circling around in the opposite direction, but at a guess Country Ned stopped too soon.

While January was still waiting in the carriageway, he heard Saverne stop, then come striding back, fast. He turned to duck down the carriageway and into the dark yard but the yellow light veered and jerked as the lantern was snatched up from the pavement where it had rested, and a voice called out, "You, boy, stop!"

Since Saverne almost certainly knew who he was anyway, January halted, stood waiting in the high brick arch for the white man to stride up to him, Country Ned's lantern in hand. "Are you Janvier?" He used the familiar address *tu*—as most

white Frenchmen did to children, pets, or slaves. One day January supposed he'd get used to being called that again.

"I am."

"Have you found her?"

January folded his hands, replied, "No, sir, I have not."

"You're lying." A white man would have called another white man out for the words—a custom January had always regarded as perfectly insane. "Where'd you be going at this hour, if not to her?"

"I guess I'm going home, sir."

Saverne's cane came up, the instinctive gesture of a man who doesn't take even respectfully phrased impudence from Negroes; January steeled himself to take the blow rather than risk escalating the violence by warding it off. But when he didn't flinch, Nicholas Saverne stopped, as if the idiocy of assaulting the one man who might possibly help him penetrated his shapely skull and golden hair. He stood for an instant, his mouth hard with frustrated anger, struggling with the idea that there were things a black man—or any man—could not be forced to do.

The rage died out of his eyes. The cane came down. "You know where she is?" Though he still used *tu*, his tone had changed, as if he spoke to a fellow man, of whom one must ask, rather than casually command. "Where she might be?"

He pulled a wallet from his pocket, fished coins from it that flickered gold in the oily orange light. January remained standing with his hands folded, and neither reached for nor looked at the proffered money.

Saverne lowered his hand. "Don't tell me you agree with that harpy mother of hers, that'd turn her over to a—a boar-pig like Dutuille. Talk about pearls to swine! What do you want, then, to take me to her?"

"Her word that it's what she wants."

For one instant, January thought the young man was going to snap, *Girls don't know what they want!* There was certainly something of the kind on his lips as he drew in breath, then let it out again.

January said nothing.

After a moment, slowly, the young man said, "Girls—sometimes they let themselves be pushed, by their families and their friends. Make no mistake, Janvier: I love that girl. And she loves me, I know she does. I will treat her like a princess, like

a queen; I'm not a rich man now, but I will be one day soon. She will never have cause to regret it if she comes back to Mobile with me. I swear that to you. I swear that to *her*, if you speak to her."

"If I speak to her," said January, "I'll tell her."

Saverne stepped closer, pleading in his pale eyes. "Tell her not to worry about her father. I'll keep him away from her, no matter what he tries or says. In Mobile he can't get to her."

It wasn't a black man's place to ask whether Saverne had considered what Louis Rochier might do to the rest of the family, and he doubted whether the man would consider it if reminded how completely in Rochier's power Casmalia and Lucie and the several brothers were.

"I love her," Saverne repeated softly. "Make her understand."

* * * *

The sun had risen, turning the fog to milk, by the time January reached Rue Marigny. He loitered outside Number 53, smelling the smoke of kitchen fires all up and down that quiet street of tiny wooden cottages, until he saw the white-haired Alois Vouziers emerge, resplendent in a rusty black coat, and totter off down the street, a satchel of books on his back. Not long after that a stout young woman came out the same door, ushering four blond boys of stair-step ages, from about thirteen by the look of him down to about eight, dressed as boys would be who are apprenticed to craftsmen or clerks. Not so very different, thought January, from Marie-Zulieka's brothers, except that these boys didn't have to worry about being kidnapped on their way to and from work, and sold up to the newly opening cotton territories in Missouri. Though the neighborhood was one of poor French and poor Germans, the refugees from the continuing turmoils in Europe that had followed Napoleon's downfall, the woman called after the boys in the pure French of the educated Parisians not to be late for their grand-père's lessons that night.

When the younger children came out to play January crossed to the oldest of them, a little girl of six or so, and said, "Would you take in a note for me, to the young lady who is staying with your grand-père?"

"Señorita Maria?" asked the girl, and January nodded.

"Señorita Maria would be her name."

* * * *

"She's passing herself off as a Spaniard, then?" inquired Hannibal, when January met him later in the day, at one of the coffee stands at the downstream end of the

market. From the rickety table where they sat between the market's square brick pillars, January could see the wharves, piled with cargo and milling with stevedores, sailors, and whores. Down at this end of the market where the river turned around Algiers Point, they were crowded with ocean-going ships: the *Constellation* and the *Tribune*, the *Waccamaw* and the *Martha*, bound for Baltimore, Vera Cruz, Liverpool, New York.

Paris, thought January, feeling the stabbing pinch of regret. As if he'd inadvertantly put weight on an unhealed break in his leg, he drew back from the thought that he one day might return to the city where he had truly been free.

He lived in New Orleans now, despite all things, because it was the home of the only family he had. But he remembered what it had been like, to know that one's family wasn't enough.

"I thought she would be," he continued. "I knew from what Casmalia said—and from the color of her dresses and her jewels—that Marie-Zulieka was fair enough to pass. And she'd clearly planned her escape. The only reason she would have worn evening jewels to the market was because she planned to sell them and flee."

"The rubies were worth more," pointed out the fiddler.

"If she was the kind of girl who'd take jewels from one suitor to hand to another, she might have." January picked apart the little screw of newspaper the coffee woman had sold him for a penny, fished forth a broken lump of strong-tasting muscovado sugar. "She could have stuffed them into her marketing basket, along with the worming medicine that she used to poison Marie-Therese."

Behind and around them, market women, porters, slaves with shopping baskets came and went among the stalls with their bright heaps of vegetables, their silver cascades of fish; a thousand elbows and basket rims brushed his shoulders from behind, like the leaves of a gently moving tree. "But their disappearance would announce her intentions more quickly. It's just possible that Nicholas Saverne would know the voodooes in town, and where to find poison like that to slip into Marie-Therese's coffee; if he was disguised he could probably have done it undetected. But if Zozo didn't expect to disappear, why would she have worn any jewels? No," he said softly. "She planned it herself. And she wanted no fortune to hand to an indebted lover; nothing that came from her family, or the protector she was leaving behind. That much was clear. She took only what her grandmother had given her—and her gris-gris. Even if she were fleeing New Orleans, taking another life and another name, she would not leave that behind."

"Is that what she did? What she's doing?"

January nodded. Behind Hannibal's shoulder, he caught a brief glimpse of a

thin, stooped, scholarly old man in a rusty black coat, leading a young woman along the wharves toward the gangplank of the *Mary*, bound for Boston, according to the chalked board outside the shipping office. A lovely eighteen-year-old with dark curls escaping from beneath her bonnet, and the gray eyes that told nothing of her heritage.

I will not be what my mother was, he heard her voice again in his mind, the words she had spoken to him that morning in old M'sieu Vouziers's little house. I will not take a kind protector, only to save me from an unkind one. It is the world that I must flee, and not only one man.

The crowd closed around them and they were gone.

“I knew she spoke Spanish from the copy of *Don Quixote* I saw in her room—well, half the people in New Orleans do. And since the only family she has are under the thumb of her father, I guessed she'd go to her tutor, for advice at least. If old M'sieu Vouziers trusted her enough to lend her books that he'd owned for years—books he'd brought with him from Paris—that argued a bond beyond what her family would comprehend or even be aware of. I'll have to get the books back from her mother, by the way, and return them to the old man. I'll do that sometime after I slip this under the door, early tomorrow morning.”

He held up the note she'd given him. A single pale spot on one edge of the wafer marked where her tear had fallen as she'd sealed it up.

Hannibal coughed, the racking wheeze of a consumptive that shook his whole thin frame. “You'll have to be quick about it, before she sells them.” He fished in his pocket for his laudanum bottle as January tucked the note back into his jacket. “She won't have an easy time, you know.”

“She knows that. It's infinitely harder for a woman to leave a man not for another man but for herself,” he went on softly. “And harder for a woman of color than for a white woman; a woman of color moreover whose family can conceive of no other position for a woman, if she's fair-skinned and pretty, than the *placée* of a white. Not only her family, but her friends—literally every other person she knows.”

“I suppose King Solomon's family thought him insane when he chose wisdom over riches—not that, as King of Israel, Solomon was ever in a position of having to wonder whether he'd eat on any given day. At least in Boston she'll be allowed to hold a position in a girls' school somewhere. Louis Rochier won't really cast the whole family off because Zozo put a spoke in his wheel with his business partner, will he?”

“I hope not. I don't think so, since she's disappearing from town. She meant to literally disappear, you know, without a trace, for that very reason. I convinced her to write to her mother, at least. Casmalia can let Rochier know, or not.”

“Care to take a small wager on what she’ll decide to do?”

January sniffed with bitter laughter. “Not a chance.”

“I didn’t think you would.” Hannibal poured another dollop of laudanum into his coffee, raised the cup in a toast. “To Marie-Zulieka, then—or whatever name she’ll take in her new life. *Macte nova virtute, puella, sic itur ad astra*, as Virgil said. *Blessings on your youngcourage; that’s the way to the stars*. Though we had best pray she succeeds. I doubt Casmalia will welcome her, if she ever comes back.”

“No.” January watched, above the milling crowd on the wharves, as the *Mary*’s white sails half unfurled, and the current took the ship from the dock. A dark small form still stood at the rail, watching the water widen between herself and all the world as she had known it. “No, she won’t be back.”

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