

# Weird Tales

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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# SWEET-GRASS

by HENRY-S-WHITEHEAD



"Take off the 'obi' now; otherwise I will kill you both."

**A**TALE, this, of the Black Obayi of Ashantee. . . .

Nybladh, administrator for the Copenhagen Company of the Rasmussen Central, allotted Estate Fairfield to young Cornelis Hansen, just out from Denmark to the Danish West Indies to begin the life of a sugar planter. Cornelis, tall, straight, ruddy-cheeked, twenty-two, fell in love with the island of Santa Cruz and with his pretty little house.

Nybladh had indeed used diplomacy in that allotment. An inexperienced estate manager could do little harm at Fairfield. The house stood, quite near the sea, at the western end

of the Central's many properties, among dimpling hills. Hillside cane was a losing venture. Very little was grown at Fairfield, and that on its small proportion of level bottom-land. Then, Cornelis could be promoted as soon as he became accustomed to the practicalities. That would mean a favorable report to Old Strach, Cornelis' uncle in Copenhagen. Old Strach owned the Central.

Cornelis proved to be a social success from the very start. The Santa Crucian gentry drove up to call on him in their family carriages, to the little stone house glistening frostily in the Caribbean sunlight. It had been

freshly whitewashed—Crucian wash, held together with molasses, and now baked to the appearance of alabaster by the relentless sun.

At their own houses Cornelis met the resident planters, chiefly Scottish and Irish gentlefolk and their sons and daughters. Also he became acquainted with the officers at the three Danish garrisons — at Christiansted, Frederiksted, and Kingshill. Many visitors, too, came over from St. Thomas, the capital, forty-three miles away; others, too, from the English Islands — Antigua, St. Kitts, even sometimes from Montserrat or St. Lucia. There was never any lack of good company on Santa Cruz. This tropical life was vastly different from Copenhagen. Cornelis was never homesick. He did not want to go back to cold Copenhagen. There, it seemed now to Cornelis, he had been spending a beginningless eternity, absorbed in his chemistry, his English, and other dull studies. All that had been to fit him to take his place here in this pleasant, short-houred, expensive life of a tropical planter in the sugar-trade. He enjoyed the new life from its very beginning. Yet, in spite of his pleasant housing, his hospitable entertainment, his unaccustomed freedom to come and go, he was, sometimes poignantly, lonesome.

His new friends did not, perhaps, realize the overpowering effect of the sudden change upon this northern-bred man; the effects of the moonlight and the soft trade-wind; the life of love which surrounded him here. Love whispered to him vaguely, compellingly. It summoned him from the palm fronds, rustling dryly in the continuous breeze; love was telegraphed through the shy, bovine eyes of the brown girls in his estate-house village; love assailed him in the breath of the honeylike sweet grass, undulating all day and all night under the white moonlight of the Caribbees, pouring over him intox-

icatingly through his opened jalousies as he lay, often sleepless, through long nights of spice and balm smells on his mahogany bedstead—pale grass, looking like snow under the moon.

The half-formulated yearnings which these sights and sounds were begetting were quite new and fresh in his experience. Here fresh instincts, newly released, stirred, flared up, at the glare of early-afternoon sunlight, at the painful scarlet of the hibiscus blooms, the incredible indigo of the sea—all these flames of vividness through burning days, wilting into a caressing coolness, abruptly, at the fall of the brief, tropic dusk. The fundament of his crystallizing desire was for companionship in the blazing life of this place of rapid growth and early fading, where time slipped away so fast.

At first he had wondered, vaguely, how other men had met this primal urge. Very soon he saw that the answer to that was all about him, here in his own estate-village. Here were ruddy *zambos*, pale-brown mulattoes, cream-colored octoroons—*mestizos* of every type, of every shade of skin. That was one answer; that had been the great answer, here in the West Indies, from time immemorial; the answer here on Santa Cruz of the Spaniards and the Dutch, as many names showed; of the French and of his own people, the Danes. He wondered, whimsically, what had been the answer in the case of those austere Knights of Malta who had owned the island for a season.

But, for Cornelis, fastidiousness intervened. Across the edge of that solution hung the barrier of his inertia, his resistance, his pride of a Caucasian. The barrier seemed insurmountable to Cornelis.

Marriage? Was he not young for that? He asked himself that question many times. One did not marry, ideally, without love; love true and deep and trustful; love founded on

acquaintance, appreciation, some conviction of permanence. Those were the backgrounds of marriage.

Some daughter of one of the gentry planters, perhaps? Those girls had the domestic virtues. But—he was comfortable enough with his good servants at Fairfield House. His yearnings had little relation to somebody to preside over his household. Somehow, to Cornelis, these young ladies of the planter gentry were not alluring, vital. The most attractive of them, Honoria Macartney, he could hardly imagine beside him perpetually. Honoria had the dead-white skin of the Caucasian creole lady whose face has been screened from the sun since infancy.

“And how are you enjoying the island?” she had asked him on an afternoon when he had been visiting the Macartney’s, eating some of Honoria’s perfect small frosted cakes; drinking her rather too-strong tea on the east gallery of her father’s estate-house near Christiansted.

Cornelis reassured her. He was enjoying himself very much indeed. Everything Honoria said, did, wore—he felt instinctively—was—*suitable*. That was the English word for it. Yes.

Looking at her, as he had looked at her various other afternoons, Cornelis was certain his mother in Copenhagen would approve of her as a daughter-in-law. Most of the Crucian young gentry ladies were like that. Suitable—that was the precise word. . . .

THAT night he lay, sleepless, on the mahogany bed. The grass on the rolling hillsides seen through the opened jalousies under the full moon of February was at its palest, more than ever suggesting snow. That he had observed driving up the straight road from the sea to his house less than an hour before. He had dined with the Macartneys—a placid, uneventful evening. Mrs. Macartney had mentioned that Honoria had

made the dessert. It had been a Danish dessert, for him: “red grout”—sago pudding stained purple with cactus-fruit. Honoria had made it perfectly. He had complimented her upon her pudding.

The warm, pulsing breath of the sweet grass surged through the open windows in a fashion to turn the head of a stone image. It was exotic, too sweet, exaggerated, like everything else in this climate! Cornelis turned over again, seeking a cool place on the broad bed. Then he sat up in bed, impatiently throwing off the sheet. A thin streak of moonlight edged the bed below his feet. He slipped out of bed, walked over to a window. He leaned out, looking down at the acres of undulating grass. There seemed to be some strange, hypnotic rhythm to it, some vague magic, as it swayed in the night wind. The scent poured over him in great, pulsing breaths. He shut his eyes and drew it in, abandoning his senses to its effect.

Instinctively, without thought or plan, he walked out of his open bedroom door, down the stairs, out upon the south gallery below. The smooth tiles there felt caressingly cool to his bare feet. Jessamine here mingled with the sweet grass. He drew a light cane chair to the gallery’s edge and sat, leaning his arms on the stone coping, his shadow sharply defined in the cold moonlight. He looked out at the sea a long time. Then he shut his eyes, drinking in the intoxicating, mixed odors.

A sound secured his attention. He raised his head, looked down his narrow private road toward the sea. Clearly outlined in the moonlight a girl, possibly fifteen, came along the road toward him. About her lithe body hung a loose slip, and around her head, carelessly twined, turbanwise, was draped a white towel. She was quite close, making no sound on the sandy road with her bare feet.

His shadow moving slightly, perhaps, startled her. She paused in her

languorous stride, a slender neck bearing erect a fawnlike head, nostrils wide, eyes open, taken unawares.

Then the girl recognized him and curtsied, her sudden smile revealing white, regular teeth set in a delicate, wide mouth, a mouth made for love. In the transforming magic of the moonlight her pale brown skin showed like cream.

"Bathing in de sea," she murmured explanatorily.

Lingeringly, as though with reluctance, she resumed her sedate, slow walk, the muscles flowing, rippling, as though to pass around the house to the village at the rear. Her eyes she kept fixed on Cornelis.

Cornelis, startled, had felt suddenly cold at the unexpected, wraith-like sight of her. Now his blood surged back, his heart pounding tumultuously. A turbulent wave of sea air sweetened from acres of sweet grass surged over him. He closed his eyes.

"Come!" he whispered, almost inaudibly.

But the girl heard. She paused, looked up at him, hesitating. He managed to nod his head at her. The blood pounded in his veins; he felt detached, weak, drowned in the odor of sweet grass and jessamine.

The girl ran lightly up the gallery's stone steps. The pattern of the small jessamine leaves played grotesquely upon her when she paused, as moonlight filtered through them and they moved in the light, irregular sea breeze.

Cornelis rose and looked down into the girl's eyes. Their amber irises were very wide and an eery light played in them; a kind of luminous glow, a softening. . . .

Trembling, he placed a tentative hand on her shoulder, gently. She leaned toward him; his arms went about her firm, slender body. Young Cornelis Hansen felt, for the first time, a girl's heart tumultuously beating against his breast.

A hush enveloped the quiet of the pure, clear night. No dog muttered from the sleeping estate-village. A fresh breath, enervating, redolent of the acres of waving grass, fanned the gallery. A delicate beam of moonlight seemed, to young Cornelis, entranced, bewitched, to usher them into the open doorway of his house. . . .

Then, suddenly, almost brutally it seemed, even to him, he thrust this pale, brown girl of gossamer and moonlight away from him. He stood clear of her, no longer bemused by the witchery of the breeze and the moonlight's magic. With more of gentleness he laid again his hand on the delicate, rounded shoulder. As gently he turned the girl about and marched her, resolutely—like a Dane—toward the gallery steps. His fastidiousness had reasserted itself.

"Good night—my child," said Cornelis.

The girl looked up at him shyly, out of the corners of her eyes, puzzled and resentful.

"Good night, sar," she murmured, and slipped down the steps and like a shadow around the corner of the house.

Cornelis walked firmly into his house and shut the door behind him. He went into his dining-room and poured himself a glass of French brandy at the sideboard. He drank his brandy and rinsed out the glass from the earthenware water-gugglet, throwing the water onto the stone floor. Then he mounted the stairs to his bedroom, got into bed, rolled over on his side, and went to sleep.

ON THE morning after his tea he was riding about his fields so early that he was finished with his managerial inspection before 9. Ten o'clock saw him, very carefully shaved, and wearing spotless white drill and his best Danish straw hat instead of a sun helmet, driving a pair of horses in the light phaeton toward Christiansted.

That same afternoon, during the period devoted to swizzels of old rum or brandy and, especially among the Danes, tea and coffee and cakes—the period of sociability before the company at the various great houses broke up before its various dinner-parties—Cornelis called at the Nybladhs'. The Administrator and his wife were pleased to see him, as always. Several others were present, quite a company in fact, for the swizzel-hour at Nybladhs' was almost an official occasion.

After a quarter of an hour, Cornelis drew the Administrator aside and they spoke together briefly, then returned to the company gathered about an enormous mahogany table which held the silver swizzel jug and the afternoon's lunch.

At the next pause in the conversation Nybladhs' rose, focusing his guests' attention upon himself. He held up his glass.

"Be pleased to fill all glasses," he commanded, importantly.

There was a considerable bustle about the great round table. Nybladhs' noted the fulfilling of his command. Servants hurried about among the guests. When all were freshly served he cleared his throat and waved his own glass ceremoniously.

"I announce"—he paused, impressively, all eyes dutifully upon him. "I announce—the engagement of Herr Hansen and Miss Honoria Macartney. Skoal!" He boomed it out sonorously. Every glass was raised.

Cornelis bowed from the waist, deeply, to each of his pledgers, as they drank the health of himself and his bride-to-be.

Thus did Honoria, daughter of the great Irish-West Indian family of the Fighting Macartneys, become the Fru Hansen, after an exceptionally brief engagement, and leave her father's house to live at Estate Fairfield with her husband who was the nephew of Old Strach.

A West Indian family does not pick up titles from the populace by knocking about their estates and doing nothing. The Fighting Macartneys were well worthy of theirs. Even Saul Macartney, their ancient black sheep, who had paid the penalty of piracy by hanging in St. Thomas in 1824 along with the notorious Fawcett, his chief, and who, as some believed, had been strangely magicked even after his death by his cousin Camilla Lanigan who was believed to practise obeah and was immensely respected by the negroes—even the disgraced Saul was no poltroon. The jewels Saul and Captain Fawcett buried under Melbourne House, Saul's Santa Cruz mansion, had not been handed that miscreant over the counter!

This young Honoria was of that sanguine blood, even though her sheltered life had made her walk somewhat mincing and there was no color in her cheeks. She began her reign at Fairfield like a sensible young housewife, studying Cornelis' likes and dislikes, satisfying him profoundly, beyond his very moderate expectations. The ardent yet self-contained young man had linked to himself something compounded of fire and silk. Honoria brought to her housekeeping, too, great skill and knowledge, from her young lifetime in her mother's great house near Christiansted.

She was a jewel of a wife, this young Honoria Hansen, born Macartney. Cornelis came suddenly to love her with an ardency which even he had never dreamed of as possible, like flame. Then their love was tempered in a fearful happening.

ONE morning when Cornelis was riding early about his sugar fields, it came to him, traversing a cane-range on his black mare, Aase, that never, before or since that sleepless night when he had called the girl to him on the gallery, had he laid

eyes upon that girl. That he would recognize the girl whom, for a moment of abandoned forgetfulness of his fastidious reserve, he had held in his arms, whose body had lain against his heart, was beyond question in his mind. Then it occurred to him that he had thought of the girl as living in his village. That night when he had dismissed her, she had walked away around the house toward the cabins at the rear. He shuddered—those cabins!

Yet the fact remained that, cogitate the matter as he might, riding along at Aase's delicate walking pace, he could not recollect having laid eyes upon her, either before or since that night when he had sent her away. It was very curious, inexplicable indeed—if the girl lived in his village. There was really no way to enquire. Well, it did not greatly matter, of course! A brown girl was—a brown girl. They were all alike. Cornelis rode on to another canefield.

Telepathy, perhaps! When he arrived at Fairfield House toward 11, under the mounting brilliance of the late-morning sunlight, and tossed his bridle-reins to Alonzo his groom at the front gallery steps, the girl stood beside the door of Fairfield House, inside the high hallway. She curtsied gravely to him as he passed within.

Cornelis' mouth went dry. He managed to nod at the girl, who reached for his sun helmet and hung it on the hallway hatrack.

"Mistress say de brekfuss prepare' in few moments, sar," announced the girl.

Honoriam, in his absence, it appeared, had engaged this girl as a house-servant. There was no other explanation of her presence in the house. She had been carefully dressed, rustling with starch, the very picture of demureness. Cornelis strode upstairs to wash before late breakfast, which came at 11.

His equanimity was sufficiently restored after breakfast to enquire of

Honoriam about the new housemaid. The girl had been engaged that morning, taking the place of one Anastasia Holmquist, a Black girl, who had sent a message, by this girl, Julietta Aagaard, that she was leaving the service of Fru Hansen, and had obtained Julietta to take her place.

"She seems a very quiet, good girl," added Honoriam, "and she knows her duties."

"She is not of our village, eh?" enquired Cornelis, tentatively.

"No. She says she lives with her mother, somewhere up in the hills." Honoriam indicated with a gesture the section of the island behind Fairfield.

Cornelis found his mind relieved. The girl was not of his village. Only one thing remained to be explained. He understood now why he had not observed the girl about the estate. But what had she been doing "bathing in the sea" at night? Such a practise was unheard of among the negroes. Few, indeed, would venture abroad or even out of their houses, unless necessity compelled, after dark. The houses themselves were closed up tightly, at nightfall, the doors of the cabins marked with crosses to keep out Jumbée—ghosts; their corrugated-iron roofs strewed with handfuls of sea-sand, the counting of which delayed the werewolf marauding nightly. A vast superstition ruled the lives of the Santa Crucian negroes with chains of iron. They believed in necromancy, witchcraft; they practised the obeah for sickness among themselves, took their vengeance with the aid of the Vauxdoux; practises brought in through Cartagena and Jamaica; from Dakar to the Congo mouths in the slave days; Obayi from Ashantee; Vauxdoux, worship of the Snake with its attendant horrors, through the savage Dahomeyans who had slaved for King Christophe in the sugar fields of Black Haiti.

To go from up in the hills to the sea, at night, for a bath—it was simply unheard of. Yet, the girl, see-



ing him there on the gallery, had been plainly startled. She had come from the sea. Her lithe body, the towel about her head, had been sea-damp that night. It was unheard of, unless——. Cornelis had learned something in the six months of his residence on Santa Cruz.

“Who is Julietta’s mother?” he enquired suddenly.

Honorina did not know anything about Julietta’s mother. This was the West End of Santa Cruz, and Honorina had lived all her life near Christiansted.

But, three days later, from a brow-beaten Alonzo, Cornelis learned the truth. The deference with which the young Julietta had been treated by the other servants, the Black People of his village, had been marked. Reluctantly Alonzo told his master the truth. Julietta’s mother was the *mamaloï*, the witch-woman, of this portion of the island.

Beyond satisfying his curiosity, this news meant little to Cornelis. He was too much a product of civilization, too much Caucasian, for the possible inferences to have their full effect upon him. It was not until some days later, when he surprized the look of sullen hatred in Julietta’s swiftly drooped eyes, that it recurred to him; that the thought crossed his mind that Julietta had come into service in Fairfield House to retaliate upon him for her rejection. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned! There was no Danish equivalent to the English proverb, or if there was, it lay outside Cornelis’ knowledge. Yet, although a European Dane—despite the fact that his residence on Santa Cruz had not been long enough for him to realize what such deadly dislike as he had surprized in Julietta’s glance might mean—Cornelis, no imbecile, did realize at the least a certain sense of discomfort.

Honorina, born on the island, could have helped the situation. But—there was no developed “situation.”

Cornelis wished this girl at the bottom of the sea; transplanted to another and distant island of the archipelago, but beyond that there was no more than the sense of discomfort at the girl’s quiet, efficient presence about her duties in his house. He could not, of course, explain to his young wife his reason for wishing lithe Julietta away.

But the sense of discomfort, somehow, persisted strangely. He could not see Julietta, demure, neat, submissive to her young mistress, without being unpleasantly reminded of what he came to think of as his folly.

THEN, without rime or reason, the sense of discomfort localized itself. Cornelis, annoyed during the night by a vague itching on his upper arms, discovered in the early-morning light a slight rash. Prickly heat, he told himself, and anointed his burning arms with salve. Useless. The rash persisted, annoyed him all through his morning field-inspection.

That late-morning, in his shower bath after his ride among the cane fields, he noticed that the rash was spreading. It ran now below his elbows, was coming out about his neck. It burned detestably. He was obliged to towel himself very softly on the arms and neck that morning before he dressed for breakfast in his spotless white drill.

Julietta, waiting on table, did not look at him; went about her duties like a cleverly made automaton, her look distant, introspective.

Honorina reported an annoyance. One of Cornelis’ shirts had disappeared. They discussed it briefly over breakfast.

“But—it must turn up.” Cornelis dismissed the topic, spoke of his plowing of the field abutting on Högensborg.

That night he was nearly frantic with his itching. Pustules, small, hard, reddish knobs that burned like fire, covered his arms and neck, were

spreading across the firm pectoral muscles of his chest, down his sides.

Honorina offered sympathy, and some salve for prickly heat she had brought from her father's house. Together they anointed Cornelis' burning skin.

"You must drive in to Frederiksted and see Dr. Schaff in the morning," commanded Honorina. She dusted her husband's body with her own lady-like rice-powder.

The dawn after a sleepless night discovered Cornelis' torso a mass of the small, red, hard pustules. He was in agony. Honorina it was who drove in the five miles to Frederiksted, fetched Dr. Schaff from his duties at his municipal hospital, leaving his assistant, Dr. Malling-Holm, in charge of the cases there assembled. Cornelis, Old Strach's nephew, must not be kept waiting. Besides, Honorina had been insistent. She had seen something of the suffering of her man.

Schaff had been on the island five years; had earned his promotion there to be Chief Municipal Physician. He knew much about tropical mischances in his field of medicine. He looked with interest at the pustules. Cold-bloodedly he punctured several. He wanted an analysis. He left a new kind of salve, drove back to the hospital with his specimens.

He drove back late in the afternoon, when the hospital day's rush was over. He found Cornelis writhing in bed, his body tortured with the solid spread of the infection. Curiously, his hands and face were free of the now solidly massed red pustules. They stopped at his wrists, and again at his neck. Below the waist, at the sides, his body was free of the infection, which extended, however, down the front and back of his thighs.

"It iss verree curious, this!" commented the doctor, speaking English on Honorina's account. "It iss as though he had worn an infected shirt."

Cornelis, through his three degrees of fever, spoke to Honorina.

"Have you discovered my shirt? You said there was a shirt gone."

"Ha—so-o-o!" muttered the doctor. "And where?"

"I can not say," said Honorina, her lips suddenly dry. She and the doctor looked at each other.

"A servant, perhaps?"

"It must be." Honorina nodded. "No one else——"

Honorina disappeared while the doctor anointed Cornelis, writhing, afresh; soothed him with a long, bitter draft.

Below, Honorina had resolutely summoned all the servants. They stood before her, expressionless.

"The master's shirt is to be returned this night," commanded Honorina imperiously. "I shall expect to find it—on the south gallery by 9 o'clock. Otherwise"—she looked about her at each expressionless face—"otherwise—the fort. There will be a dark room for every one of you—no food, no sleep, until it is confessed. I will have none of this in my house. That is all."

She came upstairs again, helped the doctor assiduously. At the door when he took his departure, she whispered:

"I have ordered them to return the shirt by 9 tonight."

The doctor looked at her meaningly, an eyebrow lifted. "So! You understand, then, eh? It is bad, bad, this Black 'stupidness'. Burn the shirt."

"Yes—of course," said Honorina.

At 9 she descended the stairs, went out upon the south gallery among the scents of the white-flowering jessamine; the sweet grass. All was silent. The servants had left the house, as usual, about an hour before.

The shirt hung over the stone gallery-coping. She ran down the steps, found a stick, lifted the crumpled shirt on its end, carefully, carried it into the house. It bore no marks, save the crumpling. It had been soiled before its disappearance.

She carried it into the kitchen, carefully lowered the corner of the thin garment until it caught fire from the embers of a charcoal-pot. The thin linen flamed up, and with her stick she manipulated it until every particle of it was consumed, and then stirred the embers. A few sparks came out. The shirt was completely burned.

Her face drawn, she returned to the bedroom above. Cornelis was asleep. She sat beside his bed for two hours; then, after a long look at his flushed face, she departed silently for her own room.

In the morning the fever was broken. Many of the smaller pustules had disappeared. The remaining rash was going down. Cornelis, at her beseeching, remained in bed. At noon he arose. He felt perfectly well, he said.

"All that vexation about a little prickly heat!" Honoria sighed. She had four brothers. Men! They were much alike. How often had she heard her mother, and other mature women, say that!

That night Cornelis' skin was entirely restored. It was as though there had been no interval of burning agony. Cornelis, apparently, had forgotten that painful interval. But the reaction had made him especially cheerful at dinnertime. He laughed and joked rather more than usual. He did not even notice Julietta as she waited, silently, on the table.

Two nights later, at the dinner-table, Cornelis collapsed forward in the middle of a phrase. He went deathly white, his lips suddenly dry, a searing pain like the thrust of a carving-knife through and through his chest. Sudden froth stood at the corners of his mouth. The table-edge athwart him alone kept him from falling prone. He hung there, in intolerable agony, for seconds. Then, slowly, as it had "gone in," the white-hot "knife" was withdrawn. He

drew in a labored breath, and Honoria supported him upright. She had flown to him, around the table.

As she stood upright propping him back into his chair, she saw Julietta. The brown girl's lips were drawn back from her even, beautiful teeth, her wide mouth in an animal-like snarl, her amber eyes boring into Cornelis' face, a very Greek-mask of hatred. An instant afterward, Julietta's face was that of the blank, submissive housemaid. But Honoria had seen.

At a bound her hands were clenched tight about the girl's slender arms and Julietta was being shaken like a willow wand in a great gale. Her tray, with glasses, shot resoundingly to the stone floor, to a tinkle of smashed glass. The Fighting McCartney blood showed red in Honoria's pallid face.

"It's you, then, you deadly creature, is it, eh? You who have done this devilish thing to your master! You—in my house! It was you, then, who made the rash, with your double-damned 'magic'!"

In the primitive urge of her fury at one who had struck at her man, Honoria had the slim brown girl against the room's wall now, holding her helpless in a grasp like steel with her own slender arms.

Cornelis, faint after that surge of unbearable, deadly pain, struggled to speak, there in his chair. Well-nigh helpless, he looked on at this unaccountable struggle. At last he found his voice, a voice faint and weak.

"What is it?—what is it, Honoria, my dear?"

"It's this witch!" cried Honoria, through clenched teeth. "It is she who has put the obeah on you." Then, "You she-devil, you will 'take it off' or I'll kill you here and now. Take it off, then! take it off!"

Honoria's voice had risen to a menacing scream. The girl cowered, wiltingly, under her fierce attack.

"Ooh Gahd—me mistress! Ooh,

Gahd! 'Taint I, ma'am, I swear to Gahd—I ain't do it, ma'am. Ooh, Gahd—me boans! Yo' break me, mistress. Fo' Gahd-love leave me to go!"

But Honoria, unrelaxed, the fighting-blood of her clan aroused, held the brown girl relentlessly.

"Take it off!" came, ever and again, through her small, clenched teeth. The brown girl began to struggle, ineffectually, gave it up, submitted to be held against the wall, her eyes now wide, frightened at this unexpected, sudden violence.

"What is it that you tell her to do?" This from Cornelis, recovering, shocked, puzzled.

"It is their damnable 'obi'," hissed Honoria. "I will make her 'take it off' you or I'll kill her."

"It is her mother," said Cornelis, suddenly inspired. "I know about her mother. I asked. Her mother, this girl's mother, there in the hills—it is the girl's mother who does this wickedness."

Honoria suddenly shifted her desperate grip upon the girl's numb arms. She twisted, and Julietta's slender body, yielding, collapsed limply to the floor. With a lightning-like motion, back and then forward again, Honoria menaced her with the great carving-knife, snatched from before her husband.

"Get up!" Her voice was low now, deadly. "Get up, you devil, and lead me to your mother's house."

Julietta, trembling, silent, dragged herself to her feet. Honoria pointed to the door with the knife's great shining blade: In silence the girl slipped out, Honoria following. Cornelis sat, still numb with that fearful reaction after his unbearable pain, slumped forward now in his mahogany armchair at the head of his table. His bones felt like water. His head sank forward on his arms. He remained motionless until Alonzo, the groom, summoned from the village by the frightened, gray-faced cook, who

had overheard, roused him, supported him upstairs.

THE two women passed around the corner of Fairfield House, skirted the huddled cabins of the estate-village in silence, began to mount the steep hill at the back. Through tangled brush and twining, resistant guinea-grass, a slender trail wound abruptly upward into the deeper hills beyond. Up, and always up they went, the Caucasian lady grim and silent, the great knife held menacingly behind the unseeing back of the brown girl who stepped around turns and avoided roots and small rocks with the ease of custom.

At the head of the second ravine Honoria's conductress turned sharply to the right and led the way along the hill's edge toward a small clearing among the mahogany and tibet-tree scrub. A dingy cabin, of wood, with the inevitable corrugated iron roof, hung perilously on the hill's seaward edge. Straight to its door walked Julietta, paused, tapped, opened the door, and pressed close by Honoria, entered.

A dark brown woman peered at them across a small table. With her thumb, Honoria noted, she was rubbing very carefully the side of a small waxlike thing, which glistened dully in the illumination of a small, smoky oil lamp standing on the table. The woman, her eyes glassy as though from the effects of some narcotic drug, peered dully at the intruders.

Honoria, her left hand clenched tightly on Julietta's wincing shoulder, confronted her, the knife's point resting on the table beside the brown hand which held the wax. This was molded, Honoria observed, to the rough simulacrum of a human being.

"That is my husband!" announced Honoria without preamble. "You will take your 'obi' off now. Otherwise I will kill you both."

A long, blackened needle lay beside

the brown woman's hand on the table. She looked up into Honoria's face, dully.

"Yes, me mistress," she acquiesced in a singsong voice.

"You will do that at once!" Honoria tapped her knife-blade on the table decisively. "I am Fru Hansen. I was Honoria Macartney. I mean what I say. Come!"

The brown woman laid the wax image carefully down on the table. She rose, dreamily, fumbled about in the semi-darkness of the cabin. She returned carrying a shining, new tin, half filled with water. This, as carefully as she had handled the wax image, she set down beside it. Then, as gingerly, she picked up the image, muttered a string of unintelligible words in the old Crucian Creole, thickly interspersed with Dahomeyan. Honoria recognized several of the words—"caffoon," "Shandrâmadan"—but the sequence she could not grasp.

The brown woman ended her speech, plunged the image into the water. She washed it carefully, as though it had been an incredibly tiny infant and she fearful of doing it some injury by clumsy handling. She removed it from the tin of water, the drops running down its surface of oily wax. She handed the image, with a suggestion of relaxed care now, to Honoria.

"Him aff, now, me mistress; I swear-yo', him aff! I swear yo' be Gahd, an' help me de Jesus!"

Honoria took the image into her hand, looked at it curiously in that dim light, made upon it with her thumb the sign of the cross. Then she slowly broke it into pieces, the sweat standing in beads on her face. She turned, without another word, and walked out of the cabin. As she proceeded down the trail, laboriously now, her legs weak in her high-heeled slippers, she cast crumbling bits of the wax right and left into the dense scrub among the bushes at the trail's

sides. Her mouth and throat felt strangely dry. She murmured inarticulate prayers.

SHE limped into Fairfield House half an hour later and found Cornelis entirely restored. He asked her many questions, and to these she returned somewhat evasive answers. Yes—she had gone to Julietta's mother's cabin up the hill. Yes—the "stupidness" of these people needed a lifetime to realize. No—there had been no difficulty. Julietta's mother was a "stupid" old creature. There would be no more trouble, she was sure. It was extraordinary what effects they could produce. They brought it with them from Africa, of course—stupidness, wickedness—and handed it down from generation to generation. . . .

She might have her own thoughts—men were very much alike, as her mother had said—as the days wore into weeks, the weeks to the placid years which lay before her, with her man, here at Fairfield for a while, later, perhaps, in some larger house, in a more important position.

What had caused that devilish little Julietta to contrive such a thing? Those eyes! that mouth! Honoria had seen the hatred in her face.

She would, of course, never ask Cornelis. Best to leave such matters alone. Men! She had fought for this man—her man.

She would give him of her full devotion. There would be children in time. She would have, to replace Julietta, a new housemaid. There was one she remembered, near Christiansted. She would drive over tomorrow. The affairs of a Santa Crucian wife!

Cornelis plainly loved her. He was hers. There would be deviled land-crabs, sprinkled with port wine, dusted with herbs, baked in the stone oven, for breakfast. . . .