

Rival Adventures

Cameron Dockery

CHAPTER XI

SYNOPSIS: Lotus, working under cover for the F. B. I., secured a job as singer at Mile Duval's cafe. She received offer from Herman Balch, Bundist, and his associates to report what was going on. Lawrence, F. B. I. agent, who was working with her, had her tell Balch that someone was working on dope smuggling. When she called at their apartment, they took her to small island, from which she made her escape in pirogue and found her way to island owned by Curtis Corbin, where she told her story to Mr. Corbin and his son, Stacy, who Lotus knew.

She stared at it uncertainly . . . Here was a means of escape, but of what advantage would it be to escape from this island, only to become lost in the myriad bayous and lakes that traversed the delta country?

She looked away from it, still hesitating. A beam of light seemed to seek out her eyes, the same steady, bright light she had seen before, beckoning her on.

Uncertain no longer, she climbed into the pirogue, undid the rope, and grabbing the sturdy pole, pushed off from the bank.

At first it took all of her skill to manipulate the unwieldy pirogue, but it was a small one of hollowed-out cottonwood and she had had much experience with canoes.

After several minutes of unpleasant, non-progressive exertion, Lotus slid off her coat, planted her feet solidly in the bottom of the dugout and began poling toward the distant light.

It remained bright and unwavering, a beacon in the half-light of early morning. She kept her eyes on it constantly, afraid that if, for some reason, it went out, she would lose her sense of direction completely.

She poled on, never looking behind, not pausing until she had put the palmettoed arm of an island between herself and the mouth of the bayou she had recently left. Then, for a moment, she rested, taking in great heaving breaths of the morning-fresh

air and letting the pole act as a rudder in the wake of the drifting pirogue.

Then, suddenly, as though a curtain had been lifted, the pirogue rounded another tongue of land and her objective lay before her . . .

From the water's edge, turf sloped gradually, and topping the rise was a large mansion of the Greek Revival period. At first, she thought it some freak of architecture, perhaps an Athenian temple in the wilderness, but a closer view showed it to be a large, square house, with two-story colonnades surrounding it.

Relief surged over her at this example of civilization. She was too breathless to call out, but she spied an opening into the enclosed area, and with a violent shove of her pole sent the pirogue heading for it.

The sudden thrust of the pole made a sucking gurgle. The young man sat up, he stared incredulously at the picture of a beautiful girl in a sequined evening gown, poling a pirogue toward his swimming enclosure.

He shouted warningly.

Lotus started to speak, but the words were knocked out of her . . .

Suddenly, with startling violence, the pirogue struck something beneath the water. It seemed to tilt, to dip. She fell, head first, hitting her shoulder against the edge of the pirogue with stunning force.

Down . . . down . . . down . . .

At last she turned and slowly began to rise to the surface.

"Are you all right, Rosa?"

Breath was returning to her with agonizing slowness. Someone was pressing rhythmically on her ribs, in and out, in and out. Feeling returned to her body—beneath her limp hands were the smooth, white-painted boards of the diving float.

She gasped, rolled over on her back, felt the pain of her bruised shoulder and opened her eyes.

"Stacy Corbin!"

"Almost literally in the flesh!"

"Oh, Stacy, I'm so glad to see you!"

She was glad, she realized. Even though Stacy might be in-

involved in all this himself, he looked wholesome, and civilized, and cheerful, and glad to see her.

He grinned. "I'm not used to having mermaids turn up in my own private swimming pool—it's quite a treat—you look just like one, you know."

"Guess I blacked out. I know how to swim, but it was all so unexpected that I didn't have a chance to get my breath." She rubbed her shoulder tenderly and winced.

Stacy was beside her in an instant. "Say, you're going to have a nice purple mark there in a few hours. Hurt any place else?"

"No. It's just a bruise, I guess."

"Belle Fleur," Lotus repeated slowly when Stacy Corbin announced the name of the house. "That has a pleasant sound—was it your idea?"

He laughed. "Goodness, no! Do I look as though I'd pick a fancy French title like that? It was named in 1835 when it was built."

"It doesn't look that old, Stacy."

"Oh, Dad had it completely restored from cellar to attic. He had a pair of architects come down from New York to do the job." A queer, sardonic grin lit his face. "It got us in bad with the local element—they thought we should have employed someone from New Orleans who knew the family history."

She turned to him in surprise. "You mean you bought it directly from the family?"

"Yes. They didn't want to let it go either."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it was a perfectly legal business deal, but they didn't seem to take it that way. You see, they had just formed a company to manufacture bagasse."

"Bagasse. What's that?"

"It's the residue of sugar cane, the fibrous part; they use it to make wallboard."

"It ought to be popular stuff now, with a housing boom on."

"It is. I don't know but what they got the best of the deal, after all. But we got Belle Fleur. You see, Dad had a lot of people buy stock in the company, then

he bought it from them at a controlling interest. When the owners found it out, they were pretty excited and willing to do almost anything to regain control of their company. Of course, they never should have distributed so much stock, in the first place."

"They don't sound very businesslike."

He grinned impishly. "Well, they didn't expect some of the original stockholders to sell. And they probably wouldn't have, either, if they'd known it would give Dad a monopoly. But he hired a lot of people to buy it up for him. Dad's pretty clever when it comes to a business deal."

Whispered words came back to Lotus, as though the curvaceous Chloe Duval were standing beside her:

"Clever like the fox, theirs is the old-world desire for power. Eet brings only trouble and disaster, eet benefits no one, not even those who reap financial reward. You weel see."

"But that doesn't explain how you got Belle Fleur."

"Oh, they gave it to Dad in exchange for his shares of stock. He'd been looking for an old, historical plantation place, but none of these sunk-in-tradition families would sell. He had to put the pressure on them."

He stared down at her half-curiously. "Say, I never asked you how or why you got here?"

She pointed to the still-burning beacon atop the belvedere. "I followed your candle in the window."

Stacy gave it a quick, approving glance.

"Say, that thing's a great idea, isn't it? We had it put there because Dad and I still can't find our way around with the motorboat after it gets dark. You can see that from any direction and head for it."

As if to make up for his lack of curiosity now, he peered at her from under his fine, light brows. "How did you happen to pop up in this neck of the woods?"

"It's a long story," she said wearily.

"It must be."

He studied her for a moment. "Look, Dad's up at the house and he'll want to know all about it, too. Let's go up and get you some dry clothes and have breakfast, then you can tell us both over the couch-couch caille."

In spite of herself, she laughed. "Heavens, what's that?"

"Our Acadian cook makes it. It's just a French name for cornbread and clabber, but it's good."

As Stacy Corbin led her upstairs to a guest room, Lotus had a hurried impression of an expensively and tastefully furnished home, completely restored to its former elegance, from the marble mantel of classic design to the fine details of carving on the solid cypress doors.

He opened the door into a room filled with a massive mahogany four-poster and appropriate accouterments for a lady's bedroom.

"If you don't object to a shirt and slacks, I think I have an outfit that may come near you size."

"Anything would seem more appropriate than this evening gown." She indicated the sequined sheath which still clung to her tenaciously.

Stacy made an appreciative chirping sound.

"More appropriate, maybe, but not half so becoming, I'll be back in fifty seconds flat."

Stacy knocked a moment later. Through the door he handed her a soft white sports shirt, white flannel slacks, socks and a pair of sneakers.

"They've only been worn once," he explained. "But it was some of the ersatz war material and it shrank like the dickens. The sneakers were left here by a friend of Dad's—maybe they'll fit. Come downstairs when you're dressed. I'll be waiting."

Stacy was waiting for her at the foot of the great stairway. His eyes sparkled with approval.

"You look like a little girl in that outfit, Rosa. Wait until Dad sees you. He's eating breakfast—let's join him."

Lotus didn't know quite what she had expected, but it was not what she found.

Time had made Curtis Corbin a caricature of his son. He was a larger man, but the clean-cut, youthful lines that were Stacy's had been rounded by age and self-indulgence. His hair, the same ash blond as Stacy's, was white at the temples and the eyes were darker than his son's with a flint-like quality which betrayed his keen business sense. That was a polite term for it Lotus thought. The area around his irises was netted by fine red lines which gave him a slightly debauched appearance.

"Sit down and have some breakfast," he urged. "Stacy has been telling me something about you while he waited. I can see I've missed something by not visiting the famous Cafe Duval."

"I hear you have a story to tell," he said finally.

"Yes, I don't know what to do—whether to go to the police or not."

"The police?"

His eyebrows rose in twin arcs just as Stacy's did. "Just a minute." He motioned to the sullen-eyed Negro who was serving them. "That will be all, Lobbella. I'll ring when I want you."

When the girl had gone, he turned his hard eyes on Lotus. "Now—"

She told them of her relationship with Balch, of the conversation she had supposedly overheard in the Cafe, of her going to the house on Decatur Street and subsequent events. She watched their expressions carefully to note any hint of surprise. There was none.

"And you were thinking of going to the police?"

"I don't know what to do."

"What would you accuse these people of—kidnapping?" His sharp voice was tinged with sarcasm.

"Well . . . I don't suppose I could really—"

"All right. You say they had that young fellow bound and gagged. Well, he was a trespasser in their apartment, wasn't he? A burglar—?" He bit down on the dead cigar viciously. "You say they forced you to go with them. But they didn't ask you to go to their apartment, that was your own bright little idea, wasn't it?"

Lotus stared at Curtis Corbin across the magnificent polished dining table at Belle Fleur.

He was refuting every suggestion she made in connection with the police. It was what she had expected. But she had to be sure. She decided to make him commit himself even further.

"But what about the German officer?" she demanded. "He told me he was patriotic and loved his country."

"What's wrong with that? The war with Germany ended months ago. There are thousands of patriotic Germans—very fine people, most of them."

"Well, I guess that's right . . ."

"There's another thing." Corbin senior laid the dead cigar aside and frowned at her. "Stacy tells me that you had a little trouble with the police yourself. Under the circumstances I would advise you not to do anything that would invite them to look up your past."

The advice was given in such a low tone that it sounded threatening.

After breakfast, Stacy and Lotus strolled on the sunlit lawn around Belle Fleur. Her thoughts were racing.

"Dad's right, Rosa. From a policeman's viewpoint, your story would be as leaky as a sieve. How could you prove it? You didn't sign any sort of written agree-

ment with these men, did you?"

"No—I didn't even get paid."

"Well, there you are. There's another point—how could you explain the fact that you were involved and doing business with them?"

He reached up, ran his fingers through her hair. "Look, sweet, why don't you stay out here a week or so with us? It'll give you a chance to get over your scare."

"What would Chloe say? I'd lose my job."

Inwardly she was triumphant. If she could stay at Belle Fleur for a few days it would give her a chance to quiz the servants and do some snooping on her own.

"I'm going in to town today. I'll explain things to Mamselle Duval and pick up your clothes."

Stacy went inside to dress and Lotus took advantage of his suggestion to make herself at home. She decided to explore outside first.

Toward the back, behind a large formal garden which separated them from the house, was a row of small, one-room brick cabins. Several of these had been joined together and cemented, and iron bars or meshing put across their open faces, where doors and windows had once yawned.

She wandered over to it, peering into the varied exhibits . . . Zoos had always repelled Lotus. The frightened discontent and restlessness of imprisoned animals deprived of the sunlight and their own natural habitat always seemed to her a travesty on man's sense of justice.

Then she came to a glassed enclosure. There was sand on the floor, and springing from a large box in the center of the glass and steel-meshed cage, the gnarled and twisted branches of a dead tree.

It was like coming upon an evil, leering stranger whom you had hoped never to run into again. The box which she had last seen on the dock in New Orleans was staring at her. His partially coiled, muscular body was suspended in ropelike loops for the dead tree.

As she returned his malevolent stare, a hand was placed on her sore shoulder, spinning her around roughly . . .

"What are you doing here?"

Curtis Corbin's voice was harsh, the expression in his cold blue eyes almost as venomous as the reptile's.

For a cold, panicky moment Lotus was afraid. Then the grip of Curtis Corbin's fingers on her shoulder relaxed and her composure returned.

"Stacy told me to make myself at home," she explained. "I was just looking at the animals."

Before he took his hand away he slid it down her arm to her

Pine Swamp News

Mr. Cary Brown has returned from Elkin Memorial hospital and is slowly improving.

Mrs. Mary Jane Blackburn is visiting relatives here this week.

Mr. Cleve Holloway and Mesdames, Clay, Page and Howard Holloway, of Waynesboro, Va., are visiting Mr. and Mrs. J. M. Holloway.

Mr. Jess Holloway, of Oxford, Ohio, returned home Friday after being called home to his mother's funeral.

Mrs. Steve Scott is ill with measles.

Mrs. Earl Lee Joiner and Mrs. Ted Holloway made a business trip to Wilkesboro, Saturday.

BIRTH ANNOUNCED

Mr. and Mrs. Jack H. Schaum, of Pennsylvania, announces the arrival of an eight pound daughter, Sandra. Mrs. Schaum is the former, Miss June Gross.

elbow. She bit her lips to repress a shudder.

"What do you think of my Brazilian boa, eh?"

"He's evil looking," she said frankly. "What became of his mate?"

The eyes were hard again, probing. "His mate? How did you know he had one, Rosa?"

"I saw it. I was with Stacy when the snakes arrived on the ship—the Gonzales. It was Mardi Gras day. There were two snakes then."

He was obviously startled and annoyed. Evidently Stacy had either forgotten or thought it better not to mention what he did on Carnival day or whom he had spent it with.

"Well the other snake died. It was practically dead on arrival. I'm having it stuffed for my study in the house."

"You must like reptiles."

She studied him curiously. The whole idea of snakes was exceedingly repugnant to her but Corbin's eyes were glowing with an almost fanatical light.

Stacy, dressed smartly in a cream gabardine suit, stood on the long narrow dock leading from the island. He was about to step into a streamlined little motor boat whose brass fittings and paintwork were now reflected dazzlingly in the water. He waved and Lotus ran over to him. Suddenly she was filled with an uncontrollable dread of being left alone on this island with a man like Curtis Corbin.

"Stacy, take me with you!"

He stared at her. "What is it, Rosa? What's happened?"

(To Be Continued)

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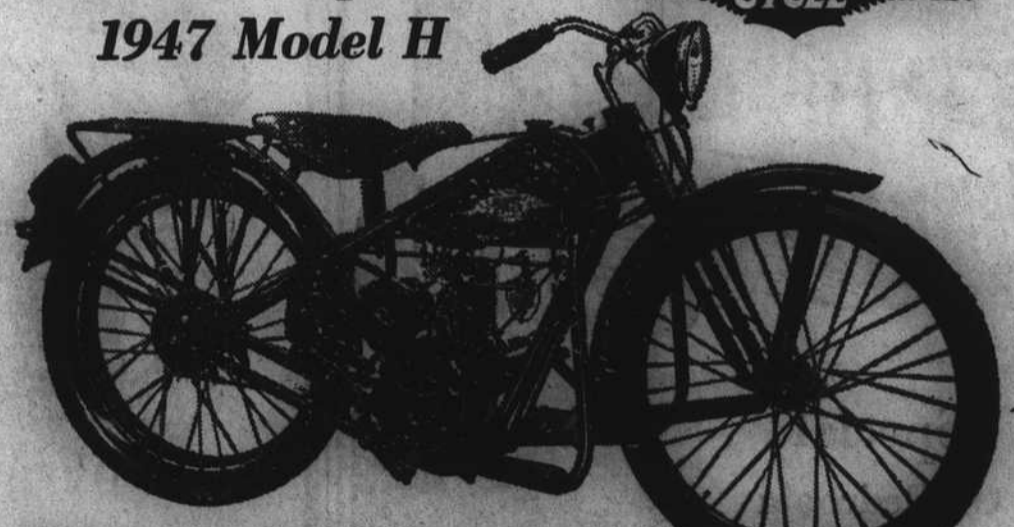
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