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A Caracole in Paris

BY MAX STEELE

LATER, after the blood had been properly shed, I realized what I had always known: all it takes for melodrama is two Southerners.

The Embassy estimated there were ten thousand Americans living that year on the Left Bank. But Mary David Clark was the only Southern woman I met in Paris; and so far as anyone seemed to know, I was the only man there from the Deep South.

I had had, a few weeks before meeting Mary David, a final and spectacular fight with a rather beat and bustless French girl named Claudia who lived at Montparnasse. To avoid seeing her, I had found a cafe on the Place St. Sulpice, near the Cathedral itself.

It is there one morning that I first hear Mary David Clark. She is speaking English in the most wonderful of Delta accents. Her words, slow as the River, delight me; and I smile inwardly, without taking my eyes from the article I am translating for a New York law firm. I do not want, in my present mood, to meet her, or any woman from anywhere; but there is no harm, I think, in letting the soft, familiar words pour over and about me.

"Heah we wuh," she is saying, "sittin on the dining cah." She describes in charming detail, the car, the passengers, their clothes, the rock walls passing by, the stone houses and runted apple trees, the short-legged cows and the fields of flowers. I glance up to see a thin woman. Probably about five years older than myself, say about forty, neat, and fresh in a crisp brown linen suit.

The man she is talking to is eagle-like in his sharpness, and could be anywhere between thirty and forty-five. He catches my eye, knows I am listening, and I know he is not. His face is one I have seen vividly somewhere before.

" . . . and all these American tourists on the dining cah wanting to know if this is Normandy or Brittany and every last one ashamed to ask. So the next time that cute little waiter came prissing up I said

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in my best Alabama French, 'Is this Normandy or Brittany, sir?' In French, of course, and he said, 'It's cauliflower, Madame, *choufleur*,' and put another spoonful on my plate."

The eagle-faced man laughs without true amusement; his intense, pale-blue eyes are ceaselessly scanning the square and terrace for moving prey. I have seen him before in some unpleasant circumstances.

She is almost whispering: "That was four days ago and I haven't spoken one word of French since then."

"How do you manage?" His eyes follow coldly the muscular thighs of Robert, the young waiter, who in his shiney tight pants is pirouetting in and out among the chairs and tables.

"English," she says. "If you speak English plainly enough and slowly enough, anybody in the world can understand you."

The next morning I am there in time to see her come out of the hotel on the square and cross to the fountain where she shakes crumbs out of a napkin for the pigeons strutting and bobbing at her feet. She wets her fingertips in the fountain pool and turns round and round, leisurely drying her fingertips on the napkin and studying the plane trees and the unclouded sky.

With one hand she is clasping now a camel's hair coat in cape fashion about her shoulders; and with the other she swings with a reserved abandon, a beautifully worn, leather satchel. She turns slower and slower, evidently astonished still and pleased to find herself here, at last, alone, at the beginning of adventure, in the heart of Paris.

In the authoritative way she surveys the mansard rooftops, in the proprietary ways she scatters the pigeons of St. Sulpice, one can see the headstrong person she has always been: the tomboy riding a mare with mane as roan as her own straight hair, across a gravel drive to shout for icewater from an overworked Negro cook or a bullied step-mother. Refused, she caracoles in the jonquils until a glass is fetched and a pitcher. And years later, caracoling through a short marriage with a lieutenant who comes back from the Cuban crises, but not to her. Her divorce almost undoes her thousand relatives in Montgomery and Troy and has shaken even her father in his bedside manner where charm heals perhaps more sick than his licensed ignorance can kill.

She comes across the square, her ghosts in file: the not-quite sorority girl, not-quite debutante, not-quite garden club lady, the not-quite wife, the not-quite virgin old maid. And by paradox, she who is not quite anybody, gives, by the result of that same breeding, the appearance of being completely at home everywhere. Graciously she steps

aside and allows the domestics in their saddest black coats to trudge the mica-flecked pavement of her square and even to disturb with their heavy shopping bags the gathering storm of her pigeons.

Thus she arrives and settles herself and tells Robert in her "perfectly good English" that she wants coffee, bread and butter. With other tourists, Robert, who is more athlete than scholar, has always pretended not to understand a word of any language; but he simply asks her in French whether she wants coffee black or with. She reckons milk would be best on such a windy morning. As he attends her he becomes a real, though virile, dandy, adjusting chairs with sharp clicks and wiping tables with smart flicks of his towel. Inside, waiting for the coffee, he tightens his bow tie, tugs his short white jacket toward his waist, and smooths the shiny cloth of his pants across his rounded little buttocks. No one has ever seen Robert smile before but he smiles this morning as he places the coffee before Mary David. Even Robert cannot resist the smile of a freckled-face woman.

Much later, when I rest my eyes again, I see she has finished her breakfast and is rolling up her linen napkin. She reaches efficiently into her satchel and brings out a massively wrought silver napkin ring which she shoves the napkin unceremoniously through. And as if she is certain Robert is hovering near, which he is, she tells him she will be eating breakfast here every morning and asks if she may leave the napkin with him. He is delighted that he does understand English. From the corner of my eye I can see him telling his mother, who sits all day at the cash register. Madame Vavin, the patroness, examines the quality of the silver in the holder, the linen in the napkin, the craftsmanship in both and nods her approval. They have never encouraged tourists; they have tolerated me; but now Robert returns to the door and lingers there, instant to the needs of this soft-spoken woman, new to him in his experiences with American women.

Mary David has taken from her satchel a pad, a sort of bamboo fountain pen with a secret source of ink, and is sketching the lions of the fountain, the pillars of the church, the dome with its copper-green pelican plucking its metal breast for blood, the iron grillwork at the base of the trees, the Vespesian, even the Cinzano ashtrays, all with great speed and a minimum of detail. Robert draws closer to admire the results of her noisy scratchings. He is obviously proud that the new customer is, in addition to being a gentlewoman who appreciates his complete and sudden command of English, an artist as well.

When the sun begins to hit my paper and writing hand, I look up from my translating and am surprised to see the eagle-faced man standing at Mary David's table. He is trying to see the sketches on her pad, but she has flung her hand out casually across them. She says: "No. You mustn't look, I'm sorry. They're croissant. Cafe au lait. Gendarme. Concierge. All that."

"What do you mean, they are all croissant?" Today I can hear his accent is Germanic. And like all Germans when they are being obtuse, he lets his voice become thick and guttural, making up in force what it lacks in intelligence. "You have drawn croissants and gendarmes?"

"I've drawn a picture of 'que voulez-vous'." She motions that he should sit down rather than stand at what he obviously hopes is an informal stance, but suggests rather a soldier at attention who intends to scratch his armpit the second the sergeant's back is turned.

She explains: "They're sketches of the square . . . the cathedral."

"And your concierge?" He sits quickly and clicks on her cup with a spoon to summon Robert.

"Not literally. Before I came here I got so tired of reading and hearing about Paris from people who had to throw in every word of guidebook French they knew: apéritifs, rues, and pensions. You know, and if they're really with it they throw in a merde every page. That's what these drawings are: guidebook sketches. Something every tourist who's been here a week knows."

"But it is for Americans. This fabric you design, isn't it?"

She says: "Certainly. But Americans are more sophisticated now. They don't want the Eiffel tower on their shower curtains. It's a competitive business." It is strange to imagine this slow-talking woman in a competitive fashion- or garment-industry world. "Nobody's going to catch me on a hardtop road."

He settles back and suddenly swells his chest as if he is about to light a cigar. "The apartment I promised you. It is yours."

Apparently she does not understand how hard apartments are to find, what an impossible thing this man has done for her. "I have only to go to his lawyers on the rue de Rennes to sign the lease and the inventory."

"I looked as I crossed the square. I couldn't tell which it is but there's an adorable one up above here," she points with the bamboo over her shoulder, "with hanging baskets and a boxwood hedge."

He is overjoyed. "That is it! That is the one! Morning sun! Everything!" He wants everyone to see his joy, what a bright happy man

he is. His pale eyes take in the street and terrace and stop at me. His smile dissipates. I return his stare which becomes a hostile glint.

Now I know where I have seen him before: at the gate of the American Embassy, circulating a petition to stop our meddling in Asian affairs. He has put on some weight since then, but the harsh angularity is there, the skull head, the nose that could be Roman, Jewish or hawk.

A legal attaché from the Embassy has said he was not to be taken seriously as an agitator. The Communists have refused his advances; the Neo-Fascists do not trust him, and in any case, even if one could determine his rather confused and naive political beliefs, his unreasonable temper makes him unattractive to any party as a propagandist or agitator. As I remember the pamphlet, which I have in my hotel, he was charging American Communists of extreme sophistication in trying to entice America into a war against Asian Communists. Something like that. And I remember now he is the same man who caused a scandal of sorts at the American Express.

He is said by some Americans to be violent and dangerous and certainly he looks it. His tense hands ball into hard fists when he talks, and his jaw muscles work furiously when he is silent. It is said he was in a concentration camp; but Claudia who was with me at the Embassy when he was demonstrating said simply: "If he was in a concentration camp I am certain he was a guard. No one—I have never known one single human being who was in a camp as an inmate—ever calls attention to himself in any way. Above all in a public place." She watched him a while longer, shouting his abuse at the people walking by ignoring him. "He's a Nazi. And a psychotic besides."

Mary David, however, seems to find nothing strange in his manner, and seems even a little charmed by him. But she is Southern, woman, alone in a foreign city; and he has found her an apartment her first week and will sign the lease in his own name to save her from, as he is explaining, paying the exorbitant rent which would be demanded of any American. Still, I can imagine easily her confiding in me after she has the key to the apartment and a knowledge of the community: "Honey, he's got this peculiar odor. I doan know whether it's that awful skin rash or those clothes he sponges himself, but he smells so much like kerosene I'm afraid to strike a match neah him." I will agree that she can't have somebody like that around who might blow up at any moment and she'll pull on her velvet ax-gloves and say: "I mean he's sweet and he found me an apartment and all that and he's

certainly been a perfect gentleman" And she'll be the perfect lady and he'll never even see the ax coming down.

He is being a perfect gentleman now. He leans forward and shows her the price written on a card. Then, as if he has offended me by his exclusive whisper, he leans back and smiles seductively at me. It is that dangerous, latent smile which Claudia observed and which a man, even without warning does not return without risking an outright accusation of flirting. He continues the smile until it becomes a stare, a dare, and then a mockery. Yes, it is the same man who made a scene at the American Express by shouting that all American men are perverted. There should be some way to warn this compatriot, this unbeguiling Southern woman, that she is dealing with a madman.

He looks deliberately away and leans forward and whispers something to Mary David. She waits an appropriate moment before glancing my way. Now I am the one who feels perverted, politically suspect, paranoid. He gulps his coffee and with a Germanic briskness, a clicking of cup to saucer, chair to table, heels to terrace, shakes her hand and leaves.

Before he is out of sight she says to me: "Do you know that man?" Her voice is easy, lazy with me as if she knows I will speak with a Southern accent too.

"I've seen him around," I say.

"He doesn't live near here," she half-explains, half-questions.

"I've seen him at the American Express and near the Embassy."

"Do you know anything about him," she says. "I just met him through a friend on the boat and I don't know anything at all about him. Except his name: Kretzer."

I laugh suddenly. This might as well be Opeleika, Alabama, after church. "You mean you don't even know what his daddy does?"

She laughs. "Honey, I don't even know who his granddaddy was and where his folks come from."

We look at each other fondly. We speak the same language. Later we can give all the unnecessary and similar pages of our biographies. We are both, I am sure, liberal, optimistic about the outcome of the struggle in the South, sure of a new prosperity there for everyone, annoyed with the Northern press, bored to hell and back with aggressive Yankee liberals who will continue to discover in superb innocence what we have protested about for fifteen or twenty or even more years.

"What about him?" she asks.

"I think he's insane." It is strange to be quoting Claudia still and still with perfect confidence in her intuitions.

She feints. She wants not to hear. "I think he's sweet. He's gone to lease an apartment for me. He couldn't be sweeter."

"I think he's dangerous," I say. Maybe later she will tell him what I've said; but at least I will have done my duty by her whatever happens.

"You really think so," she asks.

"I really think he's on the verge of violence." Perhaps I should tell her he had to be dragged, fighting, from the American Express.

"Violent," she says slowly. The word lights up the sky and in its peculiar light everything in sight becomes magic to her. I have said the wrong thing. She is committed to him now. "You really think he might be violent." Again sheet lightning whitens the square and engraves the cathedral against the sky.

"I think," I try again, "he is insane."

"Oh, I don't think *that*," she says. "I think he's just a little nuhvous."

She pulls the camel's hair coat about her shoulders and I cannot tell whether it is the word nervous or the word violent that brings a slight and rather attractive shiver to her wide shoulders.

The rest of the day I am a little uneasy and I cannot tell whether I am about to become infatuated with Mary David or to be caught up in another bout of homesickness. At any rate I hope she heeds my words; but that afternoon, unable to stay away, I return to the square and see them moving her luggage from the hotel and I watch as they cross the square and go through the grilled gateway in the building next to the Vavin's cafe.

As I stand on the cathedral steps in the late afternoon sun, I wonder if this uneasy feeling I have is fear, or jealousy, or lonesomeness. One thing I'm sure of: I will not go back to the Vavin's cafe. Maybe I will go back to Montparnasse. By now Claudia will have found a Frenchman "who understands tenderness" and perhaps gone with him to a new cafe.

It is a long time, several months, before I see Mary David again. Winter has come and is worse than the winter before. Mary David, huddled deep in a leather and fur coat is walking with Kretzer through the bright bare alleys of the Luxembourg. From the upturned collar of his greatcoat he is staring at me and apparently has been watching my approach. I speak to her when she speaks to me and nod to him. I

am prepared to go on past when suddenly she lifts her head and says on a cloud of breath, "It doesn't get this cold even in Nashville, Tennessee, does it?"

"Nashville?" Kretzer says angrily before I can answer. "You mean Asheville." His tone is officious, his voice forced, deep and guttural. I suspect they have been quarreling. We look at each other, Mary David and I, and know to let his correction pass uncorrected.

"You never come to our cafe anymore," she says.

"It's too cold now to cross the park."

"You live on the other side?"

"Near the Lion," I say and point toward the Lion of Belfort.

"I've often wondered. Near the Cloture de Lilas?" she asks.

On an impulse I decide it might be wise for her to know how to find me. Ignoring the suspicion in Kretzer's incredibly mean eyes I say: "I go to the cafe almost directly across Montparnasse from there. The Margot."

Apparently she does not believe in his paranoia yet for she says, disarmingly, "Maybe we will find you there sometime."

I say please do and she is Southern enough to know that the lack of enthusiasm means please don't. I try to see in her face if she is trying to say more than her words. But her brown eyes are watery from the cold and her nose red and her freckles are standing out on her winter-white cheeks.

"Maybe we will see you there or at St. Sulpice?" There is no question that her tone is wistful and for the first time guarded. Has he tightened his grip on her elbow? Is she afraid of him? "Come see us sometime," she says. "If we're not in the cafe, we're in my apartment."

Though I know, I tell her I do not know where her apartment is. She asks Kretzer to give me a card, and it is when he opens his great-coat and his jacket at the collar and reaches for his billfold in the jacket that I see the shoulder holster and the metallic gleam of the pistol's handle.

For some days the conversation and the glimpse of the pistol have naturally worried me; and I have been asking around about the German who caused trouble at the American Embassy. He has, it turns out, caused trouble also at an American cafe off the Odéon. He is generally avoided by almost everyone. No American will go to the cafe at St. Sulpice. I am not at all alone in regarding him as mad.

Tonight in a Montparnasse restaurant I mention him during supper. Claudia who is there with a red-headed Englishman (does he

understand tenderness, Claudia, does he?) is anxious to appear cool and undisturbed by my presence. She holds forth, ready not only to diagnose Kretzer's sickness but to proscribe its cure: "If he'd find himself a boyfriend he'd know what his trouble is. Maybe then he could relax before he goes completely mad."

I point out he has a girlfriend.

"That tomboy!" Claudia is derisive. "A substitute won't do." She smiles that knowing smile which used to infuriate me but which now leaves me calm, for she seems to know instinctively that Mary David might appeal to me and that my interest in Kretzer is malign. "It'll take a real boy, not a sexless spinster." She smiles at me sweetly and I smile back and glance at the Englishman and back to her with a laugh. "Anyway," she says, "why must we always talk about Nazis? They bore me."

Unfortunately for her, Mary David's ambiguous relationship to the German does not bore the others at the table. I am surprised there has already been so much talk about them. It seems there has been a good bit of speculation. There seems to be little doubt that he will eventually beat or even kill her. Claudia shrugs and shakes her head. "No, he's the one who wants to be beat and killed." She speaks with the authority of one who has not wasted her childhood reading anything lighter than Kraft-Ebbing, though in fact all her judgments are from instinct. "She can have him. He's not an interesting type if its the boudoir one has in mind."

Even though I have no plans concerning Mary David for myself, Claudia's words relieve me and I feel inclined either to sigh or smile to relax the muscles in my jaw. Perhaps then they are not actually living together.

Marron, a ridiculously fat girl who has earned the nickname by carrying, as other girls carry purses, a paper cone of roasted chestnuts on the street (it is said she chooses her subway stops and maps her days by the braziers of the chestnut vendors) raises her voice almost hysterically high and the sound is like that of air escaping from the pinched neck of a balloon: "I think he'll kill her."

"Why?" I ask. Nothing is quite real to Marron, except perhaps food, but still I wonder what perceptions have penetrated this ponderous weight.

She feels challenged and not up to it. "Maybe he won't. I don't know. Most of the time I can't take it seriously. I just keep thinking she is Katherine Hepburn caught up in a Carson McCullers' play."

Always she refers life back to art, reality back to mirrors. Someday she will find in a street carnival a mirror that makes her tall and thin and she will accept the price of dreaming through the days as the Fat Lady for the privilege of living brilliantly at night as the thin lady in the mirror and we will see no more of Marron and her paper cones on these boulevards and terraces.

"Marron?" Mary David is saying one afternoon some days later at the cafe near St. Suplice. "She's that poor pitiful overweight creature you see everywhere?"

I nod.

"But it's not her name. It's terrible to call her that. Her name is Bernice something. She's from Brooklyn Heights."

"You know her?"

"She just sat down here one day to rest and started talking. The most astonishing intimate things. The kind of things if you're from the South you lie about forever or at least make jokes about; but she's so deadly earnest. Her mother sent her to those awful health food farms, very expensive she'll tell you, till she got thin, bought her a wardrobe, very expensive clothes, and sent her over here to get married. Frankly that. She's gained forty pounds, she says, I suspect sixty's nearer the truth, and is afraid to go home till she can go back as she says, 'in the same wardrobe.' I wanted to tell her she'll be lucky to go back in the same boat if she doesn't hurry."

This is the first time I've been back to the cafe. Since I caught sight of the pistol, I have come back several times to talk with her but each time he was here and I would pass on down to the rue Bonaparte. Today, I have not seen him and I have entered when she waved to me: Kretzer has gone to see a doctor and is there this afternoon. She has persuaded him at last to go because he is having trouble sleeping. "I can hear him tossing all night." It slips out. She does not turn red but explains in a no-nonsense air: "He's run completely out of money except for some sort of little pension and I'm letting him sleep in the small bedroom I never used anyway." He eats practically nothing but he has begun to drink too much. But only in the last month has he begun to drink so much and sleep so little.

"I thought he lived here at the cafe. This is the first time I've ever passed he wasn't here."

"He said he'd seen you pass. He sees everything." She must see something near panic in my face because she changes her tone. "He loves the Vavins. Especially Robert. They're very sweet to him. He helps

Robert move the tables and chairs in at night and out in the morning and cleans up back of the bar and is teaching him German and English. Mama and Papa Vavin are impressed because no one has been able to interest Robert in anything except athletics before." Today, even though the weather is still cold, Robert is wearing short sleeves that show his biceps and his thin summer pants that show his sturdy thigh and calf muscles. He moves among the tables, his tray held high, with the grace of a football player, not of a ballet dancer. He is very body-conscious, I realize, and very body-proud. I think of Claudia's diagnosis of Kretzer. Is Robert to be his cure?

Mary David glances at her watch. "I hope the doctor will give him some sleeping pills. He won't take tranquillizers. They're part of a Communist plot to lull America to sleep. He's so nervous." She says 'nervous' now, not 'nuhvous.'

At last I can say again what I feel I must say, the reason I have been seeking this meeting. "I think it's more than nerves."

She is prepared to listen. She studies her hands and then sits as still as a cat about to be stroked.

"I'm not the only one who thinks you're being foolish."

She shakes her head impatiently. She can not bear to hear more. "He's just nervous."

"Claudia said"

"Claudia," Mary David says with sudden venom. "Is she that friend of Bernice's . . . ?"

"Yes," I say, "the one in black, always"

"Black hair down her back, black stretch pants"

I nod.

"That slattern," she says. "But I must say she's the only French woman I've ever seen who could wear stretch pants. Why do they" she shakes her head; it's not worth pursuing. I realize now how tense she has become. "Claudia! Back home she'd be a hill-billy"

"Careful," I say. She knows I am from the foothills. "Anyway," I say, "it's none of my business"

"Sweetie, please don't." She looks as though she can't bear to hear more about what people think of Kretzer. I know now she sees him as clearly as I do. She knows even if she will not admit to herself or to him that he is a dangerous man.

We sit watching a beautiful pair of dray horses pulling a flat of wine kegs toward the Buci market. "That's the only thing that makes

me homesick. Animals. And one other thing, you know what it is?"

"Watermelons in the Arab quarters."

She shakes her head. "The French men when they say 'comment'. Sometimes they drawl it out and it sounds just like 'Come on' the way Daddy used to when he was going to take me with him walking."

She checks the sentimentality in her eyes and laughs it from her voice. "Isn't the South impossible?"

"The rest of the country seems to think so," I say.

"Oh, I'm not worried about that. Soon as it gets some money all that will work itself out. Marching around won't do it, alone. Money, it's going to take money." But she is as tired of saying the same old things over and over as I am. "That's where we should be this minute."

I agree, but I know that neither of us feels militant enough to go back. "Claudia," I begin again.

"Claudia! Do you know the first word that came to my mind when I saw her?"

"Slattern," I say. It is strange how women know what type woman will attract a man they are talking to. Claudia is not slatternly at all.

"Common," Mary David says. "She's common."

"Tacky?" I ask.

"No, she's got too much style for that. Marron . . . Bernice is tacky."

For the rest of the afternoon, until it is almost time for Kretzer to come back, we list all the people we know who are common or not, tacky or not. George Washington is common and Martha is tacky; Abraham Lincoln was neither; Robert E. Lee was elegant and so is James Baldwin; Marilyn Monroe ended up not common or tacky. Queen Elizabeth was tacky. Jackie is not. We both agree about the Duchess of Windsor. We ourselves are not of course common or tacky because like all good Southerners we are descended from Pocahontas through the Randolphs of Virginia. This mutual, snobbish nonsense seems, sitting here in the heart of Paris, outrageously funny to us; but gradually it becomes funnier to Mary David than it is to me and as she coughs and dries her eyes with her napkin and begins laughing all over again, I know it is a deeper anguish than homesickness that is shaking her, and making her face wet with laugh-tears. When she controls herself enough to try to see the watch on her wrist, I rise to leave and this time she does not try to stop me. She

quits laughing completely and says: "Honey, thank you for coming by." I say that I have enjoyed being in this common tacky place with her. "Will I see you again?" she asks.

"Certainly," I say.

"Is there any way to get in touch with you?" she keeps the question light, unimportant.

"I'm still looking for a better place, but in the meantime I'm stuck here. It's near the cafe, near the Belfort." I give her my card and write the telephone number of the hotel on it.

"Is it all right to call?"

"They're very good about calls," I say. "They believe they speak English there. Especially over the telephone."

The following morning I have business on the Right Bank and so do not go as usual for breakfast at my cafe. When I arrive there toward noon for a sandwich and to read my mail, the waiter holds open the door for me and corners me near the pinball machine. An American lady has been looking for me. Has she found me? Yes, he says, she has come by early this morning asking for me and has returned an hour or so later and has left a note which he produces from his vest pocket. All it says is that she would like to see me today. "She asks if I know your hotel. I remember you planned to move. I told her I thought it the one nearest the corner. Perhaps I should not" I do not know how to give him the tip he expects, but I study the note and then hand him the money. "It's all right," I say. "Thank you."

"You do still live there."

"Yes, I haven't found anything better."

The waiter is curious about the note. "She walked, I believe, in that direction. Perhaps," he glances at the clock, "no, I doubt she would still be there."

His curiosity is unsatisfied but he can think of nothing else to say to prompt me to talk. My impassivity whets his imagination. "It's probably," I say slowly, "about the stolen diamonds." That will give him something to think about today. My appetite has left and I cross the street making an effort not to run. I should have stayed with her to see what sort of shape Kretzer was in when he returned from the doctor. Through the scrolled iron-and-glass door of my hotel I can see Mary David is not in the narrow hallway lobby. I start to go straight on to her cafe but happen to see the note hanging with my

key. It says: "I do need to talk to you. I will be at the Museum of Man (Trocadero stop) all afternoon (from about noon until closing time, 5?). Please do not go near St. Sulpice or my apartment. If you are not at the Museum before five I will call you here. Please do not call my cafe. MDC." The family which runs the hotel is at lunch in the small dining-room kitchen beyond the bedroom-office. Nevertheless, before I am through reading the note Madame herself has found business at the desk. "Ah you found the note." She waits and when I simply nod she adds. "The young lady seemed rather agitated."

She is curious but since I know nothing I cannot even annoy her by withholding information. "Perhaps it is the march on the Embassy," I say. That will give her something to occupy her mind as she cuts the *Figaro* into squares. She can think of no immediate word to detain me and I am gone, the heavy door sighing shut behind me.

At the Musée d'Homme, I find Mary David, not lingering where she can easily be found, near the entrance, but on a rented stool in the Hottentot room. She is sketching, copying almost every design in the showcases, floor, ceiling, any geometrical design that can be seen in the room or from the window.

She sees me, smiles, holds up her finger to indicate "one second" before finishing a design and closing the book.

I tell her to continue if she likes. But she wants rather to show me the section on American Indians. Here are wonderful prints made by French printmakers three centuries ago showing Indians in the wilderness, where trees are planted in neat, parallel, endless rows, the tops trimmed as square as those of the Luxembourg. I am looking closer at her than at the prints but I can see no puffiness from tears, no bruises from rough handling. "And these marvelous skin paintings done by the Indians themselves." She wants to copy them but later. She has worked enough today. Her tone is too matter-of-fact; she has something important to say.

We cross the wide avenue and find a table in the sun. It is only after the waiter has left us with our drinks that she speaks. She is direct as I knew she would be. "It was a mistake to send Kretzer to a doctor, one I knew nothing about." She drinks almost half her Pernod in one avid gulp "He came back raving. I can't find out what the doctor asked him but whatever it was it was exactly the wrong thing." She sighs and holds her mouth open as if it were parched. "I got absolutely no sleep all night."

"Which doctor? At the American Hospital?"

"He won't go near there. No. The Vavins suggested a neurologist who teaches at the Medical school."

"They're usually good. The faculty."

"Oh, I'm sure," she says. "But he got the wrong one for him. He shouldn't have known the Vavins suggested him. He came back wishing he'd killed the doctor and before morning he had it in his head the Vavins had plotted the entire examination. Now he's got the strange idea Robert was there watching the examination and listening. There's no reasoning with him."

"But Robert was waiting on us. He was in the cafe"

"Oh, I know," she waves her hand impatiently. "Do you mind if I have another." She picks up the Pernod. Again I wait to speak but when I do my voice surprises both of us with its authority: "Have you told the Vavins?"

She has not told them. Kretzer is not serious, he can't be. I say he is. She must tell them. She does not want to disturb them. Especially since she and Kretzer have run up such a bill. Already the Vavins are beginning to be less attentive to them. Robert lets them sit there sometimes twenty minutes, waiting on everyone else before them. Didn't I notice yesterday? Well, she did. That much, at least, is not Kretzer's imagination. It infuriates him. He says there are other reasons Robert is ignoring us, the real reasons, but he won't tell her what they are. And now since the visit to the doctor, he talks of smashing the cafe to smithereens.

I am still puzzling about the debt at the Vavins. "But you're selling your designs, aren't you?"

"My agent's had that thing everybody in New York is getting . . . hepatitis." She gives a brief financial account of herself. She has never really been able to live away from home on her earnings, without subsidy from her father. And now he has become a perfect bastard and has cut her checks in half, trying to get her to come back to the States, if not home. Kretzer not only makes nothing now but also spends a great deal. If he lived somewhere else she could rent his room. Or if he were a different type person she could rent the third bedroom. But he will not hear of any one else in the flat with them. The doctor yesterday took absolutely the last dollar she had. She can understand Kretzer's fury about the fee.

"Are you afraid of him?" I am wondering whether she wants to borrow money, and how much I can lend.

"No," she says. "he's not mean to me." She looks very tired. "He's

just nervous." I advise her to warn the Vavins and to go somewhere else to sleep tonight. But that she says would really make Kretzer mad. Truly mad.

"If you want a place to stay . . ." I am saying as I pay for the second Pernod. I leave the change on the table and she can not look away from it until she realizes she is staring.

"Could you," she asks, "I hate to ask . . . but can you lend me some money until the first. Ten days. I'll be quite frank, that's why I was looking for you."

I give her all the money in my wallet, about twenty dollars, and tell her I can bring her some more in five days when my own check arrives. We both are too embarrassed to go into how much she actually needs; but apparently the twenty dollars is more than she expected and the prospect of additional money in five days is more than she had dreamed of.

She says casually, "Oh, that would be wonderful." But her eyes are full of gratitude and affection and she looks at me as if she has never really seen me before. "I may have to give you my solid-silver cream pitcher, honey."

We laugh and begin telling stories of impoverished old Southern ladies who have sold their chandeliers and poster beds. She knows one who sold her doorknobs and had a closet full of quilts she couldn't get to because the dealer forgot to replace them all with ordinary knobs as he had promised. We both sound a little homesick, but mainly Mary David sounds very tired. She looks at her watch and stands almost immediately. "I'm late." She seems frightened whether she admits it or not. "Honey," she says, "thank you. You don't have to go now. Finish your drink."

"Well, Miss Mary David," I say as I walk her toward the subway, "I think everything's going to be all right when you get your 'front room rented out to some nice working gentleman'." She turns from the subway entrance to the taxi stand. "They're so depressing when they're crowded. I think I'll just take a cab." She is saving face and I am glad. She is making it clear that if you want to lend a lady money you should buy her expensive drinks in a nice part of town and send her home in a cab.

Two days later I am sitting, worrying, at the Cafe near the Belfort. I know the second I glance up and see Marron bearing down toward me that something is wrong. My heart actually jumps in my chest and my throat goes dry. My hand shakes visibly as I try to pick up a glass.

"Have you seen Mary David Clark?" she asks before she sits heavily into the chair I have pulled out for her. "Has she gotten in touch with you?" I shake my head. "She's been phoning your hotel all morning."

"I've been here."

"None of us knew the name of this place. Maybe that's why its never caught on." She breathes short rapid breaths as though to inflate herself like a balloon. I wait. Part of me does not want to hear the news. She looks white and I can tell she has walked at that terrible pace all the way from Montparnasse.

"It is Kretzer," I say.

She nods and takes a deep breath. "He shot Robert. The cafe owner's son. Robert?"

"Vavin. What about Mary David?"

"She's all right."

"Is she all right?"

"She said don't worry about her. But she wants to see you."

"He didn't kill him did he? Robert. Kretzer didn't kill him?"

"He's in the hospital. It went through his shoulder and he's lost a lot of blood."

"And Kretzer. Where is he?"

"He's in jail."

Marron gives me the key which Mary David has sent with a message for me to wait in her apartment until she returns. All afternoon I am in and about the apartment and even when I am out I keep a watch on the entrance. Toward evening I go in and have just turned on the light in the kitchen and the gas jets on the stove for heat when I hear Mary David come in the front door. I call to her so as not to frighten her and her voice is surprisingly cheerful, almost girlish. "Honey, I'm so glad you're here." She is taking off her coat and gloves and scarf and is combing her hair with her fingers before the mirror in the hall.

At the door of the kitchen she lets her pretense of energy fall and she throws her arms around my neck and her whole body trembles against mine but she does not cry as I pat her back. "Ohhh," she says in a long wavering cry. "What a day! Those damned little snotty bureaucrats . . ." Her hair has an auburn smell just as I knew it would. "Those important little people . . ." She pushes herself out of my arms.

"They're tacky, aren't they?"

"You couldn't be more right." She goes past me as if I am a coat-rack she has hung all her troubles on in passing. "They couldn't be more tacky, even if they drove around in Cadillacs." She begins putting pots and skillets on the stove.

"Do you know what I did?" she asks. Again her voice is all bright and party. "I went all the way to the store back of the Madeleine and bought a box of three-minute hominy grits." She turns and laughs and no one could tell she'd spent her day in hospital wards and jails and lawyer's offices. "We're going to have grits and eggs and coffee and buttered toast! Don't you think that would be good?"

"Grits?" I ask.

"Yes!" she says. "Imagine!"

"And ham," I say. "Let me get some ham!"

"And we'll have red ham gravy."

I want an excuse to be out for awhile. All afternoon I've been adjusting myself for long consolations, philosophical probings, psychological speculations. But I should have known that we are both too Southern for immediate directness. We have had practice in avoiding a direct glance at violence and misfortune.

Mary David and I drink without talking until the ham begins to smoke and pop. As she takes up the eggs and the ham, she turns from the frying pans and says: "Now I can rent my rooms."

I am not sure whether she means to me or not, but I have been thinking the same thing and if she mentions it again after supper I will let her know I would like to move in. I try not to look pleased but I have always known this would happen.

"Why are you smiling?" she asks. "What are you laughing at?"

"'Miss Mary David's Boarding House'."

She smiles. "Wouldn't you know I'd come over here and end up taking in boarders? You think all Southerners are cursed forever with genteel poverty?"

"You know what Kipling said." I have been thinking about it all afternoon. "They change their skies above them but not their hearts that roam'."

The muscles in her face begin to play tricks on her and I want to look away while she regains control of it. I realize the words apply not only to Mary David and to me, three thousand miles from the South and still involved in violence; but even more to Kretzer who miles and years away from his Germany is still speaking the beloved language of his concentration camp.

When I look up from the wineglass I see that she has won the struggle. Her face is smooth, as if she'd patted each betraying muscle back into place. "Isn't that funny? That's what Daddy wrote me last week. Only he was quoting from Horace. He loves Horace: 'They change their climates not their dispositions who run beyond the sea'."

For awhile we are silent. Then as though we had worked together every night taking up supper, we put the grits, eggs, ham, toast and coffee on the table, and the cream in the silver pitcher she owes me. She is proud of her pledge.

"Have you tried sherry on grits?" she asks as I hold her chair for her. "You wouldn't believe how good it is."

"You are getting international," I say.

"Wouldn't you know," she says, and now her voice goes flat as the delta, "I'd come over here and get myself in a mess of trouble like this."

I have been determined not to say 'I told you so'; but I have been asked and a certain jealousy of Kretzer (who has sat how many nights in this chair where I am sitting?) pervades me and I cannot resist. "I told you he was dangerous."

"Honey," she says in real surprise, "you didn't need to tell me anything. I told everybody from the beginning he was nervous."

"Nuhvous," I say. "You used to say nuhvous."

"Well, I told you he was nuhvous. Be honest. Didn't I?"

I nod agreement and look up from the grits at the flowered tile around the stove. So here we sit, I think, under a Gallic sky, in one of those ambiguous Southern relationships that will never be quite brother-sister and never quite lover.

She seems to know the nature of my musings and says: "Is it 'who run beyond the sea' or 'who roam beyond the sea'?"

Before I can say that she is mixing up the two quotations, she raises her hand to stop me. "Listen," she whispers.

From far off through the Paris dusk comes the cry of a street haggler on his way home. "Ahhh-bee shee-fon . . . aah-beee shee-fon." He is begging to buy old clothes and rags, but his words are sung out on that plaintive rhythm of street merchants all over the world. It makes no difference be the cry for bones and hides or the love of Allah. "Aah-bee shee-fon . . . aah-bee shee-fon!" Mary David listens, as if to the rhythm of her own heart's blood and calls back in a voice as soft and far away as the rag-merchant's own: "Shwim-pee wah-wah . . . shwim-pee wah-wah" and to her sea island chant of shrimp fresh

out of water, I add my own mountain lullaby of young corn and fresh vegetables: "Roastn-ears green peas . . . rose-nears green peas!" In the candlelight with the dark sky at the windows it is too lovely for Mary David to bear, and with the heel of her hand she brushes her cheeks dry and she sings out again in answer to the far-off ragman: "Shwimp-pee wah-wah. Shwimp-pee wah-wah!"

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