

STONE IN THE RIVER

By
Harry Stiehl

I
THE RIVER WAS NAMED PEDERNALES, meaning *flints*, but the boy always called it Stone-in-the-River. He was thirteen when he first saw it: a mud-snaking thing that in flood-time hurled boulders in its swollen anger, hurled trunks and torsos of houses, swept over trees so that only their topmost arching arms sourced over it in lamentation, wept as over beautiful blind Jerusalem, *Quomodo sedet sola civitas*, or the Cities of the Plain. But when he first saw it—greengold, opalescent, shimmering when the chinaberries skimmed on its surface—and the trees along its banks in high August were women-harps of murmuring strummed leaves, he stopped still in wonder.

He had come up from San Antonio to this branching ranch country of cedar and liveoak and mesquite in August just to “look around,” for his mother had bought a section of land up here, but he was going back in the autumn to a school in San Antonio, to a grubby priests’s-school held in the Archbishop’s parochial palm, where, as his father’s sisters, aunts, genteel German ostriches, said, narrowing their already-narrow eyes, he would have to go to school with “Messicans and other Papist trash.”

“Trash yourself,” he wanted to say, but always suppressed it, for his mother had raised him to be Mother’s little gentleman who would stand up and pull out chairs for ladies and open doors discreetly, the Texas threat to Little Lord Fauntleroy, and who would say in later years to friends and connection, kith and kin and lovers, Have-another-mint-Honey, in a taught Southron voice, but who, when he first went to school “among

Texans” evoked only exasperated awe among the boys his age—salt creatures adept at the secrets of Sex—Jesus, do you come from England or something? He had come from the Dutch West Indies where he had observed the lemon-cheeked expatriate Chelsea ladies preside over the tea-service of four-o’clock-sharp with afflicted elegance and whose Lytton-Virginia-Forster effeteness he had aped with open snobbishness, so that he spoke always with the purest sighing AHS and OES, harps of sound, and he discriminated for discrimination’s sake.

He stood still, stopped in wonder. The chinaberries, yellow as shrivelling tallow-drops, plopped into the water, “repeating three clear tones,” and the mockingbirds called in the high August country to the nameless presences of the air, What do you say, say, say? He could say nothing, but stood with his mother and his sister in their city finery, and thought, It’s ours.

His mother stirred at his side, rustled, cool in her lime linen, scandalous too, but it was too hot for widow-weeds, and she was “swept-out with grieving, any ways.” She said to Lawrence’s sister, “Bea, honey, give me your hanky, think I smudged myself coming through this jungle,” for she was always the white-gloves-and-green-tea girl even in the doldrums of mourning, and her coquetry before her dazzled son was, as the aunts said, Jezebel stuff. Beatrice handed over her handkerchief. She was fifteen with straw-straight hair frizzled into starlet curls except where the babyish bangs fell forward over the broad innocent brow. She had cool sometimes-grey, sometimes-green eyes and a sizzling figure shortly to cut its swath through a swarm of boys, who would

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Parts II and III will appear in subsequent issues.*

moon after her saying, Bea-Bea, honey, let me taste your honey.

The river shimmered, mirroring light. Wasps and bees, dusty with light, glittered, swam lazily through the haze. He could see a sweep of hills, a swan-flight of summer fields where the corn dried, the desiccate leaves hanging down like hands, dusty, dejected, and the rise, the caliche-streaked beginning, to the boulders, to the granite-scarred bluff, rolling north to the Enchanted Mountain, "site of the famous Comanche Raid against the Texas Rangers." He had been there, to the north, earlier in the day, with his aunt and his favourite uncle.

There, in the autumn, the aunts said, the haws hung purple, and in autumns to come he was to see them, ghost-blooded sockets of October twilight, when he would hunt with his uncle in the hills, Uncle Jake who had carved tombstones for his father in San Antonio during the earning-my-daily-bread days, but who had now retired home to the hills where he was born, to sit among his chickens and pigpens and smokehouses and watercress creeks, while Aunt Lolly poked and piddled in the sweetpotato-petunia patch, scrabbling up "them yum-yum yams" to be served, smoking, on a smear of country butter. Uncle Jake was a dry-going easy-humoured man dithering vaguely through the like-one-another days, but Aunt Lolly was always after him, never letting him rest-a-spell on the coming-apart porch where the honeysuckle vined among hummingbird blurs and the sunflowers disked their wheels of seed, but was always croaking after him, Jacob, Jacob, do this and do that and don't do *that*, so that he almost wished he was back among the tombstones, carving, or, better, under one of them, if he hadn't known that Aunt Lolly would come dry-eyed and prissy in her poke-bonnet to poke the maidenfern-mosshair roses into the granite urns by the Methodist moderate Angel, and say, Jacob, Jacob, w-i-i-i-i-i-i-de you ever do that?

JACOB'S FATHER, HEINRICH BRAUN, had carved tombstones too, and before that he had been a Methodist circuit rider, circulating round and about through the German settlements on the

Edwards Plateau in central Texas. Heinrich had been born in one of those settlements; so had Jacob; so had the boy's father, Robert Braun, dead in the West Indies but buried in San Antonio beside Heinrich, old Grandfather Braun. Heinrich had started as a circuit rider, had then branched out into the tombstone trade, and had kept it as a lucrative sideline in his grand old age when he blossomed out into a full-blown blustering Minister, scaring so many of his congregation with his sulphur fulminations that part of them broke off, formed another branch, set up a rival Methodist racket, and hired a reformed-Unitarian Northerner to fan the gentle monotony of their late Sunday mornings with mildly imprecating, camomile-tea sermons.

The boy had never known Grandfather Braun, who had died in 1925, but the boy's mother remembered him, what a warlock *he* was, what a beastly old Prussian tyrant, what a dehydrated Bismarck of a man. Grandfather Braun's grandfather had fought and died under Blücher, and his father, born just before Waterloo, had been "in the Prussian Guard," had had a skull shako and all, and had been disgraced in some foiled military coup, and had skipped the country to come to Texas in 1848 with his apfel-cheeked bride. Grandfather Braun had been born in the following year, 1849.

"What a bore it all is," the boy's mother used to sigh, "just because they fought with Blücher," and she pronounced it purposely to rhyme with *butcher*, "and sassed old Metternich, *ce vieux squelette gélé*, and lost all their possessions, and," she went on with astringent invention, "just because they were given the Luther Holy Medal for driving the druids out of Germany, they think they can queen it over everybody. I'll grant you that the sons *are* handsome upstanding braw laddies, including the one I married, but they're most of them drunkards and shiftless-genteel neo-illiterates. Now, Jacob," and this last lovingly, for she dearly loved Jacob, "now, isn't it so?" And Jacob would have to agree.

They had left Jacob back at the car, a high-riding, heavy-as-hell, funeral-black Fleetwood with fawn-serge interiors and pseudo-saint's-niches for flowers. Jacob had said, when they had

asked him to walk to the river, "It's too hot for white folks and I've seen the Pedernales. Just you follow the path, Susan, and I'll sit here and rest a spell," not wanting to admit that he, lately, had begun to feel his seventy years, what with Aunt Lolly coming after him all the time like a thin ghost, Jacob, Jacob. So they had come by themselves, the trio, the path being easy to follow, despite Susan's remark on the way that it was "thick as the jungles of Venezuela," where her own parents still lived in exiled monotony, French-Irish lapsed Catholics from New Orleans, still a-working for Rockefeller. They had come to inspect their river.

Staring at what they owned now, at their section of land, at their part of the river with china-berries plopping into it, they drew together in sympathy, united as they had not been since the spring, since the death of the father, and the widow Susan Braun, smiling at her daughter Beatrice and at her son Lawrence, said finally, "I hope you kids will like it, I hope I did right," and Beatrice answered sing-song, that it was lovely, even if it *was* way out in the sticks, and the son suggested, in measured considering tones, that it was like a little slice of Americana.

THE WIDOWED MOTHER was thirty-three. At the age of fifty, her husband had suddenly collapsed and died "in the Islands." He had been born in this Texas country, had served in the cavalry in what was now called the First World War instead of the Great War, had gone to Mexico afterwards as a minion in the Rockefeller empire, and had risen to be a "director," a jefe, in the foreign operations. He had met and married Susan in Tampico.

"Those were the days," Susan would say, "what an innocent I was then, with my little wide-eyed convent sobriety and my idea of sin as women-smoking-in-public. And here were all these fancy bachelors drinking themselves into public dis-integration, and lamenting that they weren't back in the States. As if there they would have had girls sprawling all over them, as the Mexican girls did, and as if most of them weren't spawned in the underbelly of Pittsburgh or some other Yankee burg without even that proverbial

pot to their name. So I married one of them, although *he* was a Southerner and of good family, Ludwig of Bavaria's Prussian-Texan poor relations, with a lost *schloss* in the Old Country and swan-and-huntress statues scattered impressively about, to hear them tell it, married him and tried to reform him and make him amount to something in the end. Well, he did, but he broke too, such a weak man. But those were the days, I should really write a book about it . . ." She was always going to write a book, but if you asked her whether she had ever tried to, she would say, Not yet. Her tastes in reading ran to Somerset Maugham and gossip biographies and, especially, to murder fiction, which, during her Island days, she had devoured by the llama-load, spinning the pages by as she dipped her hand from time to time into the bedside bon-bons.

Susan had been married young, at seventeen, and Beatrice had arrived just enough later to make it respectable. (The grandmother had scanned the calendar, but it was all right.) By the time the boy was born, in 1927, and Susan was twenty, she was already tired of Tampico. There was absolutely NO place to go, except in a snail's-pace Pullman up to the Texas border to Brownsville or Laredo, or south to Vera Cruz. But then—*mirabile dictu!*—her husband had received a promotion in the Company, and there had been a giddily brief year and a half in Mexico City before, late in 1930, the Company was finally forced to abandon its Mexican concessions and, would you believe it, there were weeds growing in a year in the Tampico refineries "right through the asphalt." So the family removed with the Company to the West Indies, to an island off the Golfo de Maracaibo, where Susan's father worked for another branch of the Company, only he was a jefe of longer standing. Susan had enjoyed Mexico City, and would talk about it often.

What a city it had been in those days—before it was so tourist-infested with Kansas school-teachers and Brooklyn Jews and bohemian ne'er-do-wells—when you could go down to the Alameda on a Sunday morning and listen to the band-concert with nothing but Spanish vocables showering round you in a fine, incomprehensible rain. The Funeral Market across the calle would be

awash with dripping wreaths, all dismally identical, silver-wrapped, with the permanganate purple bleeding from the stained funerary leaves and the sellers pouring water on them periodically to keep them fresh in the morning heat. She would go on to Mass, down the calle, to the Cathedral, not because she was pious or ever communicated or even believed, but because she felt like it. And afterwards the flower-sellers in the Zócalo would be happily hawking the cut-this-morning blossoms for the Mass-going upper-class trade, and she would buy a boutonniere for Bob and push it sportily into the lapel of his Panama suit inside the cantina where he had spent most of the morning, and they would lunch at the Hotel Ritz or the old azulejo-tiled Sanborn's or, if they wanted to splurge, catch a cab over to the Reforma or to one of the French restaurants in the Paseo or the Calle Londres. The children would be at home with the criada, a caramel-skinned mestiza extravagantly fond of the son. (The criada, being female, slightly despised baby girls.)

And then, perhaps, after the long leisurely lunch, Susan and Bob would walk through Chapultepec Park until teatime, and if they didn't happen to quarrel, it would have been a beautiful Sunday, one to preserve and press away between the pages of some invisible book.

However, they often happened to quarrel. These skirmishes always came from the jealousy of Bob over Susan's supposed affairs, and they followed a set pattern, with charge and counter-charge following one another pell-mell, and mounting to Susan's aggrieved recrimination about the amount of alcohol Bob was putting away, so he would shout back at her, until she would collapse into wordless tears, but would say, later, when she was lounging back at home on the settee, that she didn't know where it would all end, Bob having stormed off somewhere "to get good and slayed." And suddenly, she would have a migraine, the pain coming down on her like the tropical night, and she would lie up in her room like a white abandoned moth for days on end, with cologne-drenched linen on her exhausted eyelids, and the children being cared for by the criada, and Beatrice, who could walk well, having to tip-toe about the house. There was no

lock on Susan's door, but Bob understood he must stay away at those times, because if he even came to inquire how she was getting on, Susan would turn on him her huge eyes of tragedy with their don't-come-near-me look.

The migraines seldom lasted beyond five days, for about Friday following the Sunday spat, Bob would come home at noon from the office where he had practically lived all week, and come upstairs with a bunch of flowers or a box of Whitman's Sampler chocolates that he had bought at Sanborn's, and would push open the door into the musty cavern where the princess lay . . . and come to the side of the Fairy Fourposter where she slept above her unbruised pea, and kiss away the thorns of her long terrible slumber, and say, Susan, honey, I'm sorry, only don't deny me, honey, don't deny me.

And she would wake, stir from the dust of her secret vigil, and welcome Bob and welcome the children while the criada ran the bath-water, and she would come down later to candlelight dinner in the French lace or a cool linen dress shaken with lime-flowers. Then she and Bob would go out, and the children would not see them until the following afternoon, when the criada would take them up to Mummy's room to see Mummy-and-Daddy together and be kissed goodbye before they were taken to the Park.

Beatrice was in her sixth year, and the boy in his fourth year, when the family left Mexico. That was the first week of November, 1930, and on El Día de los Difuntos, Susan went out to the Cemetery to watch the blessing of the graves. There, in the rented vaults, slumbered the unknown dead, divided into classes and groups still by the demarcation of wealth, with over the baronial Spanish names the opulent baroque Angels attended by clustering cherubim, and the Coplas of Jorge Manrique ("It's the Spanish Gray's Elegy," Bob had once explained) in swooning gilt script cut into marble, their stoical message on mutability a discreet rebuke to the ostentatious mementoes of the governing class. Further down the slope were the slabs of the small tienda-owners, with the fading photographs of the occupants enclosed in oval affairs of looped and swirled metal resembling monstrosities. And then

there were the narrow graves of the numberless *bijos de nadie*, with only a wooden cross and perhaps a sun-paled Guadalupe turning their shadows over a topping of white pebble. On that day in 1930, the Day of the Dead, Susan had as yet no real dead to mourn, for she could hardly remember her mother's mother who had "passed over" in New Orleans when Susan was just a little girl of five.

THEY CAME BACK from the Pedernales and climbed into Jacob's Fleetwood, the children chattering, the mother silent, and drove toward the town, Jacob singing some German songs as he spun the car with mortician expertise round sudden curves as they descended, past serrated ridges of cedar, toward the valley.

The town. You have seen the town, the slumbering stone houses of central Texas with their rifle-slits for the Indian raids and the gingerbread scrollwork that was added on as the people prospered. If you passed into the houses, into Jacob's town house, you would go back—fifty, sixty, eighty years—into a place of high dark furniture, heavy waxed oak topped with pink marble and watched over by mirrors, long ovals of silence that echo the emptiness, one to another, invisible histories written into the good German glass of the people who had passed through the rooms, caballeros in cambric, las damas in brocade, the Spanish and German crossing, the cross of the swords on the wall, the loop of the shakos with their *Todtenkopf* emblems, and the stillness preserved in its prime.

There, the church-bells peal over the town, the Protestant bells and the great Catholic bell, so that the air at noon is bronzing with sound, like the bells in Mexico at Taxco and Puebla, and the Angelus comes morning-and-evening from the great Catholic bell, and sometimes its funeral toll—slow and correct and distinct—rung by Franciscans rides out in wide grace over the town. Funerals and weddings are meaningful here, ceremonies of joy, gusting into laughter and the regret of grief, and grief here has its nails, like the God on the nails, and its anfractuous shadows. Nor is the sinister neglected, nor the twisted and deprived, the secret sorrows that can never be

told, the arrows that arrive in the night, out of nowhere, out of nothing: it is a town, you see, like any other.

And through the town, like others you have seen, rides the River, slow and wide here, choked and slow, like the River of Rivers as it meets its Delta. Here it is named Pedernales, meaning *flints*, and the stone bridges go over it, and into it all summer long weep the women-harps of the willows, the crepe myrtle and salt-cedar and the glittering chinaberry trees with their parabolas of shade, where three may linger in the diminishing amber of the long afternoon on a lawn by a fine town-house to look at the river and the stone bridges looping it, where a boy and his mother and sister may look at the leaves falling into the water of the river and swirling away like the years.

Spin the years forward, spin the years back: the tale of the years is a telling of voices, the mother and father, the son and the daughter, and a wake of widows, of grandmothers numberless, and what the aunts said, of Texas, the Islands, and of Mexico, lost. And the boy, like a bee in the amber, in the beads of his mother's amber, can peer down a panoply of ceremonious summers, forward and back in this high August summer, hearing the women-harps of the murmuring strummed leaves, and crying *Sanctus, Sanctus*, in his dusty Latin of the town and the river to the Stone-in-the-River like the tombs of the vanished in the river of all our dead.

II

BITTER ALOES oozed from the cut chunky leaves, stacked like starfish in resinous black wooden troughs on the caliche arid hillside, oozed in droplets, glittering, glinting, as from the gold chalice the transubstantiated wine might fall to the priest's tongue in a perishable splash. *Lignum vitae* trees, hardest of woods, bent in the trade-winds where the boy, with his mother, walked. She was no more the Twenties beauty in the green cloche hat which lay with its burnt feathers in some dust-bin, lost, while the grainy kodaks which had, in the Lost Decade, fixed the woman and the hat in a stylized moment, yellowed now in the morocco album that the boy sometimes

turned, pointing, exclaiming: at his sister in a Mexican garden, with a sandpail, bangs, and a baby-dress; at his father diving into the Huasteca Pool in Tampico; at his mother sitting, with tennis racquet and iced lemonade, under the striped Maracaibo beach umbrella. He was a small boy, herringbone-thin, so browned from the tropic sun that when his mother sometimes saw him trudging, back from the beach, up the Company asphalt roads, in his brown bathing-suit, he appeared to her to have on nothing at all.

They walked back to the hearse-high Packard and climbed in, his hands sticky with the em-purpled sea-grapes, uvas, that he had been eating. Glittering in the candescent noon like a fragmented heliograph, the Packard moved away, dipped crossing the Spanish Lagoon, then whirled with increasing speed down the Oranjestadt road where his mother was to shop, in the Chinese stores, for jade and ivory.

The Packard meant little to him, for his father bought a new one every year—they came, lashed in tarpaulins, from New York on a Company tanker—but on their last vacation in the States, some boys his age had called out to one another, Look, geez, a new Packard! In the States something vague and terrible called The Depression was going on, and about it his parents talked in conspiratorial tones. Although they were, in effect, disenfranchised by their residence in the Dutch colony, his parents were strong Roosevelt supporters. In the election of last fall, the boy himself had favoured Landon, of whom he knew nothing, simply because the name sounded like London.

Lawrence was passionately Anglophile and had, with his mother, tea every afternoon at four-thirty, eating the chocolate biscuit and petit beurre and Swedish cakes as he stared past acacias, candelabra cactus, and pigeon-house across the coral to the lagoon two hundred yards away, the reef and the turquoise Caribbean.

Beyond, to the south, across a gulf which, every summer, he could see from the porthole of the oil tanker as he peered out at palm fronds marking the shifting and shallow currents and shoals, Maracaibo lay, a city of pink Le Corbusier architecture and yellow Moorish façades, where his

mother's parents lived. His grandparents had plátanos and mangos, avocados and guava-trees, in their yard, but they did not have sea-grapes, his favourite, so what more could be said for Maracaibo? Of his grandparents, indeed, he thought very seldom, although his henna-haired grandmother (Lawrence and Beatrice had argued whether this were a true dye or only a rinse, and he had settled it by consulting the *Britannica* to see that it was a dye, like Tyrian shell, and that the Egyptians had used it; the grandmother herself insisted that it was merely a rinse with which she "revived" her hair) came at least once a year to visit them, and she always brought him a present or a wild Venezuelan orchid for his collection. His grandfather was too busy with his work to come: he was always flying over the jungle and the monte where the head-hunters lived; he checked on supplies in the individual Company camps encircling the lagoon.

Now, in the siesta light, they entered Oranjestadt, its red glazed roofs glittering mirrors of blood, the flamboyant trees between the houses and the shut shops dropping to the ground their clotting blossoms, orange with rot empurpled, and their glossy pods of beans. Beyond the quay bobbed fishing-boats. They had, of course, arrived at the wrong time for shopping. Everything would be shut, for the next two hours, against the heat, and even the Chinese merchants could not be routed out to display their laces and teakwood, their bronze temple bells and trumpeting ivory elephants or the flecked pale jade.

They went therefore to the Hotel whose German manager sometimes dined with them at their house in the Lago camp, arguing of the new Germany, for he was a passionate Nazi and spread the gospel at every opportunity. Fortunately, he was not in the coffee-room: the mother declared that he gave her a migraine with his statistics and steel-helmet Nietzscheanism and his technical know-how. (The German was, like Lawrence's mother, a camera enthusiast, and could manipulate lenses and Leicas with wearying mastery.)

They had chilled consommé, barracuda with lime, and hot Lipton's tea.

As they ate, Lawrence watched his mother's cartwheel yellow hat, sunflower straw, and her

fingers flashing with rings: the wedding band and the amethyst solitaire that she had bought that spring, in Curaçao, when they waited for the Grace Liner as it moved on a leisurely tourist route through the Caribbean. They had gone from there to Cartagena, had visited the ruined convent above the city, where the black protected vultures clustered on the splintered ruins from whence, centuries ago, the nuns had leapt down a long ravine to escape Henry Morgan's men, who, bored with their shipside sodomy, were hungry as hawks for a woman. Coming back, down the slashed caliche hillside picked with cacti, they had seen the liner, riding sleekly expensive in the bay, beyond the coffee bodegas. The liner, with its swimming-pools and shops and tennis courts, had been, to Lawrence, a miracle, and he had never tired of the elegant dining-room with its menus in French and its dinner-music from the balconied orchestra and its weekly masquerade party with confetti and Chinese lanterns. It was in that dining-room that he had tasted, for the first and last time, breast of pheasant under glass. At home in the oil colony, his father raised for his personal amusement, pheasants, Phasis birds, and the homing pigeons that circled at evening, downward to darkness on extended wings, exactly as in the Wallace Stevens masterpiece. But his father's pheasants were never eaten. Iridescent, kingly, their tail-feathers trailing, they strode mincingly over gravel as if on bound feet. If the boy had been told then, what he had learned later, that while he ate breast of pheasant under glass, surfeited with a spurious Versailles luxury, men and women were standing in bread-lines in the States, angry and hopeless, he would not have understood, would have asked, his eyes widening, "Bread? Bread? But why don't they eat breast of pheasant under glass?"

He squeezed, now, the limes over the barracuda, a fish he loathed, but its name was so rakishly lovely that he could never resist it on a menu. His mother listlessly ate, for she had not wanted this luncheon and she had, he suspected, a faint migraine. Her migraines were famous and lasted, occasionally, for days. On those days he had to be very quiet, reading in the big Rockwell Kent *Shakespeare* or *Moby Dick*, hardly daring to

turn a page that he might disturb his mother, make her come to her bedroom door, like a Fury in a niche, to cry that sharper than a barracuda's tooth was a noisy child. He was actually not noisy at all, unlike his sister who played football with tom-boy verve on the neighbourhood team. Indeed, they could hardly get Lawrence to say a word when company was present. And though he looked, as one lady had declared, like "an insane little mouse," he was suspected of being intolerably brilliant, and they would have accused him of having a prodigious memory had he not, so disconcertingly often, forgotten to do or to learn dozens of ordinary things which everyone else could practically perform in his sleep.

On the summers that the children didn't go to Venezuela, they might accompany their parents on the regular Caribbean tour, circling the Greater and Lesser Antilles and Central America. If the father accompanied them, they would have to make the trip to Curaçao in a tiny Dutch tub; the mother and Lawrence would be prostrate in the stateroom with *mal-de-mer*, while the father and Beatrice would be roaming top-side. In Willemstadt, upon their arrival, they would stay in the Hotel Americano where there were large hot rooms to be had. The hotel balcony overlooked the ship canal. A pontoon-bridge spanned this canal; it was swung back from time to time to permit the passage of a ship. The father would sit drinking in the hotel bar, while the mother lay upstairs dazed with a faint migraine, and in the three days or so before they could all go aboard the luxury liner for their cruise, the children would be forced to invent games, utilizing what they could see: the portly burghers in the lobby, the orange tile roofs of the town beyond, the Governor's Palace on the point, and always, the ships passing and passing, the bridge swinging and swinging, on the ship canal, while the lobby fans whirled like wings of a wounded bird.

His mother talked to Lawrence during lunch of Mexico and Texas and New Orleans, places where she had lived, and her words for him wove themselves into a pattern. She had been educated in convents and could mercilessly mock the nuns' twittering piety, the little cliques and the cloister scandals. Her mimicry of a certain Mother Supe-

rior was lethal but loving, *au coeur*: to listen to her was like reading the Canterbury Tales. She had not lost her faith, but had slowly “lapsed” from it, though she still went sometimes to the Church in Sint Nikolass or to the Cathedral in Oranjestadt, where the old Dutch Bishop spoke, in Papiamento, on faith and morals. In the matter of Spain and Abyssinia, however, she was militantly anticlerical and read with credulous delight many flat ephemeral pamphlets of the liberal camp with crude cartoons of bishops blessing cannons. She was, also, passionately pro-Jewish, although in the Lago colony she had little opportunity to demonstrate her humanitarian goodwill, for the Company personnel offices in New York screened tirelessly for Negroes, homosexuals, and Jews. Racial purity was the without-which-nothing of pre-eminence in executive echelons, and her husband had risen and risen in the Company under the benevolent smiles of his family’s many Methodist ghosts.

When, after lunch, they found that they still had nearly an hour before the shops reopened, the mother suggested that they drive still further west, to the sea and the old lime orchards. These lime-trees seemed to Lawrence centuries old; they bore both blossoms and cool green fruit.

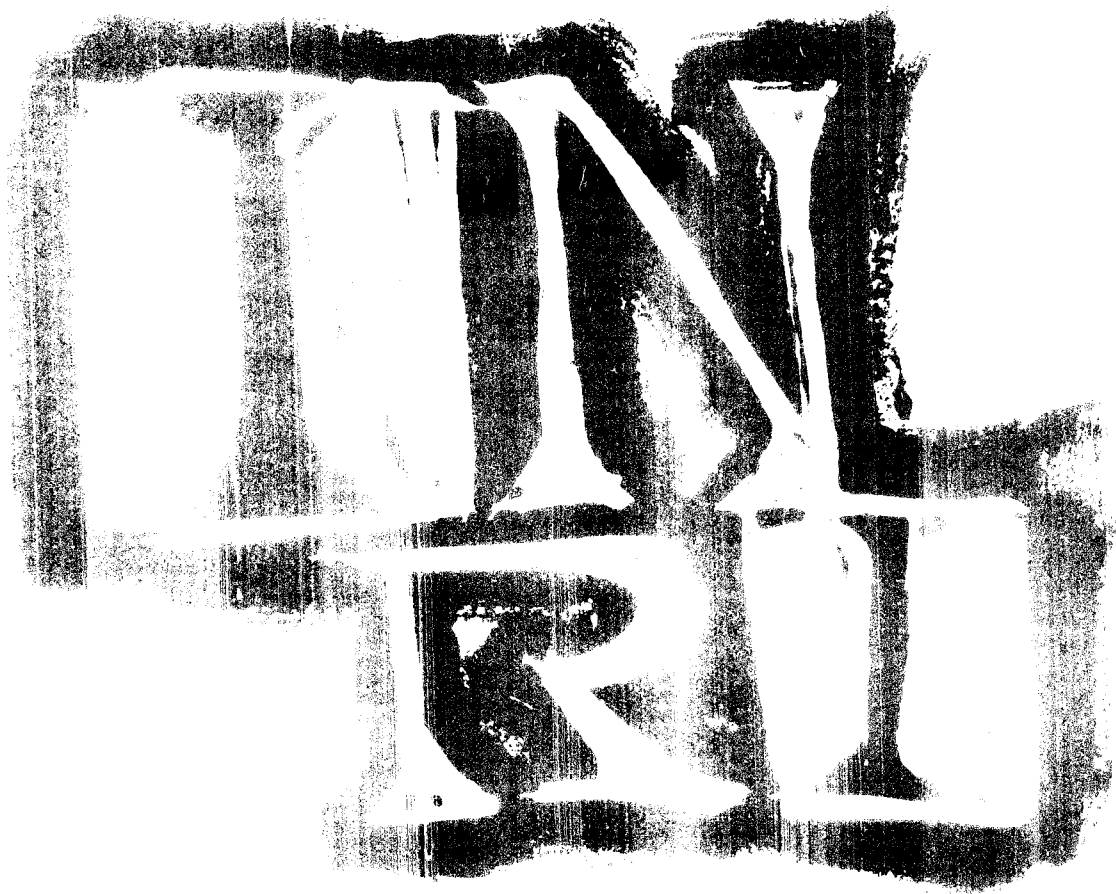
Mother and son walked under the patterning shade while the lime-blossoms drifted upon them, and the mother cried that it was exactly like the book they had begun to read together recently, an endless book by Proust that had come as a book-club “dividend.” They had, in their garden in the Colony, acacia trees whose blossoms spiralled down, also, in a papery shimmer and whose winged seeds were blown across the trellised bougainvillea to the water-lilies of the gold-fish pool; on certain branches of these acacias, Lawrence had wired his orchids, whose air-fed leaves he watched anxiously for blooms, but for months and months on end he waited in vain while spiders spun tenuous webs along its air-fed leaves, along its roots like clustering chow-mein noodles.

From this land’s-end-point, beyond the lime orchards, which at sunset would be dramatically encrimsoned, soaked in a great spreading stain of blood and dully glowing as stained-glass masses of jewels, they saw the tile-roofed mansion of

a great financier, an Amsterdam Jew, and the mother who had once been invited there to a distinguished soirée, told her son a curious and bitter tale, which, decades later, in a winter foreign city, he would recall with that surge of melancholy tendresse which refreshes the withered heart.

Some years back, a young English girl, a beauty honey-lidded as Juventius, with mild violet eyes, had come to Aruba to marry the great Jew. She was installed in the finest hostel of Oranjestadt,—not in the hotel where the boy had eaten barracuda, but in a finer one that had since burned down. In the course of her presentation to Island society, which preceded her wedding, she met a young Company engineer and became so infatuated with him that, sick unto death, she wished indeed to die. He was, according to reports of disinterested observers, a quite commonplace young man with a certain expertise at tennis and a deep tan, but to her he was Adonis by the board-hound slain between the yew trees. At the Nuptial Mass in the Roman Catholic Cathedral, for the Jew had embraced that distinguished Faith, she bent her neck before the priest like Anne Boleyn putting it on the block. And the headsman-Jew knelt by her, imperturbably, to whisper of the elegant recriminations with which he would repay her infidelity. But she, who could not be faithful *au coeur*, was determined not to falter before the eyes of men. She would be, immured in marriage, as chaste to the memory of her love as a prioress is to the Holy Bridegroom. She reckoned, however, without the immemorial demands of the heart and, under the aegis of Venus, she fell one night into the arms of her young man. They were discovered by the Jew with his dogs. Raising his jewelled hunting pistol, he shot, with perfect outraged propriety, the young tennis player. And the wife, when she saw her love dead, went calmly to a hill by their house and ate great quantities of the bitter aloes plants which her husband had informed her were poisonous. Bitter aloes is a violent cathartic. For years, afterwards, the wife imagined she could taste on her tongue that curious and potent essence.

*This is the introduction to a three-part novella.
Parts II and III will appear in subsequent issues.*



THE SEVEN SORROWS

A PORTFOLIO OF ART

by

Margaret Krebs

"The art of our time, sacred art included, will necessarily be characterized by a certain poverty, grimness and roughness which correspond to the violent realities of a cruel age."

Thomas Merton, in *DISPUTED QUESTIONS*

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