

# SOUTH-EASTER

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THE wind raged about the house clamouring for admission. Windows shuddered in their frames, doors and shutters rattled, and through every aperture there came an agonized keening and howling.

Dora and her father were at their piano and violin playing. This was not so much a duet as two solo performances played more or less simultaneously. Dora, who played the piano very well by ear, accepted as one of her many household duties that she accompany her father's violin-playing every Friday night. But the sullen *maestoso* style which she was bestowing on "Jeannie with the light-brown hair" seemed to be accompanying her own mood rather than her father's playing.

"Too fast! Too fast!" the old man remonstrated.

Dora's capriciousness did not seem to disturb him. If he thought about it at all, he probably attributed it to the wind; women and cats, being sensitive creatures, were always affected by the wind.

"Let's start again from the beginning."

Dora sighed and poised her right hand for an affected plunge on to the keys, then pounded out two or three bars in aggressive *fortissimo*. The old man interrupted her again, gently.

"But, girlie, girlie, that's Sarie Marais you are playing."

"Oh, Pa! I just can't play the piano tonight, I just can't. It must be the South-Easter or something."

There was a sound of muffled banging that might have been a dislodged slate-tile clattering down the roof. Dora was startled.

"That must be Joe. He's coming tonight." And she dashed out to answer the front-door.

It was the next-door neighbour who, as Dora cautiously opened the door, was blown right into the passageway. The visitor was clutching to her head an old felt hat with one hand, and dangling from the other, by a loop of bamboo, a writhing tangle of dark-brown claws and feelers.

"Ag Here, dis 'n vreeslike wind," she gasped.

Then she saw Dora and hastily modulated from Afrikaans to a less assured but more dignified English. She was not to be outdone by Dora's superior airs.

"This wind is jus' terrible. A person can hardly walk in

it. Yet they calls it the Cape doctor. Must be from those doctors what kills but doesn't cure."

A swirl of dust smothered the old woman's eloquence, as Dora pressed her whole weight against the door to shut it.

"They say in the olden days it used to blow all the germs away, but all I can see is it only jus' puts the dust on your stoep."

The visitor tried by dogged cheerfulness to bridge the gap left by Dora's ungracious silence.

"I jus' brought two fresh crawfish for your mother."

She held up the dark spidery mass for admiration.

"Ma's in the kitchen," Dora snapped rudely and re-entered the front-room, leaving the visitor to find her own way to the kitchen.

The old man had replaced his fiddle in its case and was sawing away at a piece of rosin with his bow.

"It's that old busybody, Mrs. De Bruyn, from next-door. If she didn't have crawfish to bring, it would be snoek or kabeljauw, just so she can gossip about other people."

"She's a good women though, girlie." He spoke without looking up.

"Ag, she only wants to gossip about Joe and me."

But the old man was not given to arguing. Dora shut the lid of the piano.

"I feel for something nice, a bit of mebos or something sour like that."

This was not so much a request as a statement of her mood. It was not easy for her to establish any contact with her father, except in routine domestic matters. And yet as a child she had sat listening, and he had talked to her for hours on end. His endless narrative was always about England, dear old England, which was home to him. England seemed to her then a great solid slab of green; one continuous lawn where the flowers were not only colourful but fragrant, and birds were not only pretty but could sing.

But as the years passed he became less communicative, and his nostalgia took a more subtle form. Now he played his fiddle every Friday evening, and Dora had to accompany him. And that was the extent of the rapport between them. Now it was her turn to long for England, and she could no more communicate her longing to him than she could have played the piano from a sheet of music.

England wore for her the bright wrapping-paper of a dream.

In England she would be unequivocally White, not the daughter of a European man and a Coloured mother, but a real person. That was why she had kept for several years two letters she had received from an English soldier she had known during the war.

“Pa! Joe wants us to get married.”

Her father grunted as he polished his violin-case.

“But I don’t want to get married.”

That was as near as she could get to conveying the complex of her feelings.

“Joe’s a nice boy.” He snapped to the catch on the case.

“A very nice boy.”

A tile clattered down the roof and was dashed on to the front stoep. The wind moaned through the telegraph wires. It was the voice of desolation. It was appalling that her father could have so little understanding of her. But then he wasn’t Coloured. He was nothing but a no-class ‘rooinek’. Her mother never used the word ‘Coloured.’

“Don’t be always calling people Coloured. She’s only a little sallow.”

She knew her mother had already held her inquisition on Joe as a prospective son-in-law with one or other of her neighbours. Probably the very Mrs. De Bruyn who was now in the kitchen.

“Joe Sampson? Do you know the Sampsons? You know what, the son is a postman. Is hulle van die wittes of die bruines? Are they the white Sampsons or the brown? Well you know mos, the mother is a little on the brown side, but the father’s a real blue-eyed Englishman.”

That was enough for Dora’s mother. Joe was approved and encouraged. He was always welcome, when on his rounds, to a cup of coffee and a slice of cocoanut tart. And only the announcement of the wedding was awaited now. Dora felt trapped.

“Dora, see to the door, girlie. That must be Joe banging.”

She left her father in the front-room where he had become oblivious to everything except the table he was French-polishing, and went into the dark passageway. She opened the door to a gust of wind, to Joe, and an assortment of rubble that was blown in after him.

“Ag, maar dis ’n vreeslike wind. This wind is jus’ terrible,” he repeated, seeing Dora.

Dora tried to show a welcoming smile to her lover, but it

was lost in the half-light of the passage. He slid a firm arm around her waist and squeezed a handful of warm flesh. That was welcome enough for him.

"Naand Dora," he said, and then to please her, in English, "Evenin' Dora."

In that quick repetition of the bilingual greeting he managed to convey his own eager passion. Dora, angrily ambivalent, her senses roused into conflict with her resolve to end all this marriage business, could only say:

"Pa's in the front-room and Ma's in the kitchen, so we'll have to go in the yard."

So he followed her to the back of the house, making tentative attempts to touch her body and find the welcome there that was not in her voice.

"Don't do that, man, can't you behave respectable?" she whispered as they passed the kitchen door.

The back-yard was completely enclosed by the thick foliage of the grape-vine creeper. There was a giant hissing and whispering as the leaves trembled in the wind. On the ground, in a rectangle of light thrown by the kitchen window, the shadows of the agitated leaves were dancing a wild tarantella. They sat down on a cast-iron bench.

"What's the matter with you, girlie?"

"I just don't want to get married, Joe. I jus' don't."

Joe momentarily baffled was finally forced into articulation.

"But I love you, man. You know mos, I got a good job. We can get married. We can live in a room in my mother's house."

And he ran his hand along her thighs to emphasize the desirability of it all.

If Dora was unable to tell her father the real nature of her obsession, she couldn't even begin to explain to Joe. Perhaps only the writer of those two letters from England would have been able to understand. A desperate fleeting thought came to her that she should write to the Queen of England. She could only sit stiffly on the iron bench in dumb misery.

While Joe's hands were seeking some capitulation from her thighs, her breasts, her hair, she fingered in imagination the two letters that she had kept for so long in a drawer with some old picture postcards of seaside resorts her father had known in England. She could hear the muffled mutterings of her mother and Mrs. De Bruyn coming from the kitchen. Scheming,

plotting voices that were dissolving her dream and undermining her resolution. She felt a sudden irrelevant pity for the two crawfish scratching feebly in the cauldron in which they were being boiled. Before the water reached boiling-point they would have ceased struggling, and their purple-brown shells would have faded to a lifeless pink. She could feel Joe's coarse curly hair brushing against her cheek as he buried his face in her neck, and it was a comfort to her in her exile.

Almost she could have told him about those two letters. Joe would not have been surprized. He not only knew of their existence, but only he knew that there had been a third, never delivered. For Joe, all was fair in love. And where perfidious Englishmen were concerned, all was not only fair, but just. All English soldiers were married men trifling with the affections of unsuspecting South African girls.

A sudden burst of wind through the vine jerked a large fat green caterpillar from among the leaves, and on to Dora's hand lying inertly in her lap. She cried out in horror and clutched at Joe with both hands. He was quick to respond, and all the accumulated stimulating of her body seemed to concentrate into a tidal wave of sensation. She was no longer resistant. Every part of her was responding with a hungry eagerness, and all that fierce rebellion was outside of her and was only part of the wind rushing through the grave-vine and rattling the corrugated fence. England was lost.

Mrs. De Bruyn opened the kitchen door and raising her voice against the noise of the wind, bade her hostess goodnight. It was as though the two old women had decided that the matter was settled and there was no further need for consultation.

"I'll make a good crawfish curry," Dora's mother called out in Afrikaans.

Later when Dora lay in bed listening to the wind, she felt abandoned and betrayed. Even the wind was not a mere natural phenomenon. It cried out for personification; something malevolent, cunning, irresistible; stirring long-dormant impulses, rousing half-tolerated frustrations as it caught up stray newspapers and pinned them flapping helplessly against the wall, and sent empty cans scuttling down the street with loud clanking protests. A stray cat, buffeted by the wind, uttered a sour complaining whine, and Dora wept the quiet hopeless tears of her exile.