

Eugene MARAIS, Deep River

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Deep River

Oh, Deep River, Oh, dark stream,
How long did I wait, how long did I dream,
The dagger of love in my heart turning?
- In your embrace ends all my grief
Extinguish, Oh Deep River, the flame of hate.-
The great yearning which does not me forsake.
I see from far the gleam of steel and gold,
I hear the soft rumbling of water deep and cold;
I hear your voice as whispering in a dream,
Come swiftly, Oh Deep River, Oh Dark Stream
(Translation of the song of Juanita Perreira).

This story was brought together from the letters inherited from the late Dr. Paul de Roubaix. He wrote them before his death to his friends. Where the word “I” is used the reader must understand that it is Dr. De Roubaix speaking and not the compiler. The first letter is copied nearly in its entirety.

You cannot imagine the astonishment that the meeting caused both François (that is Col. Sois de Ville, former commandant in the police) and me. It was late in the afternoon, just after the match between the All Blacks and the Springboks. De Ville was still suffering from his wounds, but nothing would keep him away from the game. We trudged along to our seats – he still had his crutches. The policemen of course all knew him and did everything possible to help...

We were hardly back at home for an hour when there was a knock at the front door and before I stood up the door was pushed open and a man appeared on the threshold. De Ville immediately recognized him; but it took me a few seconds to recall his face. We see in front of us a young man of about 28 or 30 years, clean shaven and well built – He looked at us with a sad smile on his face, then he extended his hand with the exclamation: “Sois! Paul!”

Do you know who it was?...Boy van Niekerk! We have seen him about twenty years ago. We were at the same small farm school as children, and as you know, Sois later had an important military career and became chief of the police, while I continued my studies eventually to be

promoted in Europe in the field of medicine. Boy van Niekerk was the only son of rich parents. He soon became a rugby player of world renown and became famous in the first Springbok team overseas which made him popular through out the world for some time. We have often seen his photograph in newspapers and magazines, but never again in real person, until that afternoon when he stood in the door. Whether we were happy...? That is obvious. In our youth he was closer to us than many a family member. We nearly embraced, although we Afrikaners tend never to show our feelings. I noticed that he still had his friendly smile, but he was quiet, nearly timid. From the outset I could sense that something was disturbing him. It was not the same cheerful Boy of earlier.

We of course have heard of his marriage to Marie de Villiers in the newspapers, of the death of his parents, of his becoming the owner of the family farm, Avonduur, and above all of his withdrawal from first class rugby which was lamented by the press here and overseas.

And then he disappeared from the public eye. He became a farmer, and neither Sois nor me ever had contact with him, although we often spoke of him and at times made plans to visit Avonduur. Then he appeared himself this afternoon after the great game.

We naturally first discussed the game and once again applauded the Springboks victory. The impression of being withdrawn, of despondency, slowly intensified. He spoke, answered questions and told us a bit about himself, but there was something in his mood which overshadowed everything. We learned that his wife had a baby, then eight months old, and it was when he spoke of the small Mary that his eyes lighted up and a certain degree of life returned to his features. Naturally a child like the small Mary van Niekerk could no where be found in the world. But when he spoke of his wife there were signs of depression – even grief.

Sois opened a bottle of wine and we spoke again of the old days and spoke and spoke, and Boy became more and more despondent and quiet.

When it became time to take our leave, he suddenly asked De Ville: “Sois, do you believe in sorcery? I mean the sorcery practised by the blacks? You worked extensively with the blacks and I have heard of some of the cases you were involved in when you were still in the police service.”

He looked at De Ville in great seriousness as if his answer would be of the utmost importance.

De Ville started laughing, “Of course I belief in sorcery,” he answered, “not so much in the sorcery of the blacks, but I have seen for instance how a giant of a young man jumped around and danced to comply to the orders of a frail little girl he could have squashed between his fingers!”

We all started laughing – also Boy van Niekerk, but in his case it was forced.

“Yes, I know, “ he said “that would be your answer,” and timidly he continued: “You know one reads so much about these type of things, especially in the English journals in which learned travellers claim that there is more to African magic than most people belief or know.”

And then, after a moment of reflection, he suddenly stood up, and offered the usual parting words: “Well, it was great to meet you again. It is late, my wife will be anxious,” and he prepared himself to leave.

But Sois of course realised that there was something seriously wrong with our friend. He pushed Boy friendly back into his chair. “No my friend, what is the hurry. Tell me what’s wrong. I might be able to give advice or to help. Often things happen under the name of sorcery, which in reality is far more serious than the so-called sorcery.”

It took considerable persuasion to get Boy to talk, but once he started the story came passionately. It was immediately apparent that the young man suffered under a great burden and that he was burning to reveal everything to somebody, to seek help from whichever quarter.

“I’ll tell you, Sois,” he says in a semi-pleading tone to De Ville, “You might possibly help. I’m in a terrible situation and do not know where to find help. But you should come yourself” – and when De Ville shook his head gently, he continued pleading – “you must come, Sois, please come! I promised my poor wife that you will come. You don’t know how much we suffer. I’ll do everything to make your journey pleasant and comfortable. I know you that you are still suffering from your wounds; I’ll have a special big car ready for you, and De Roubaix will of course come with you. He can obviously also help.”

He held both of our hands and looked at us pleadingly. It was simply impossible to refuse his request.

“Now, hold on” said De Ville, “and tell us everything. You must remember that we know absolutely nothing. If you tell us we would at least be able to judge if such a visit to your farm would be necessary.”

“And that is exactly not what I want to do” Van Niekerk answered. “The trouble is of such a nature that you must first experience it before I could tell you about it. I do not want to put you under any suggestion before your visit to Avonduur. If I tell you now you will either not believe me, or (if I am under any false impression) there is the danger that you will become party to the same illusion, even before your arrival at Avonduur. I think there is a chance that you would not believe me and that would be equally undesirable.”

...He persuaded us. It was simply impossible to resist his serious pleading. Sois de Ville still suffered from the pain of his wounds and I already instructed him to avoid any unnecessary fatigue; but we had to promise that we would visit his farm Avonduur and prepare ourselves for a stay of at least two weeks or a month.

It was at the beginning of winter, or rather the end of summer, that we arrived at Avonduur in a comfortable car, and under the direction of Boy van Niekerk. The farm is situated at the edge of the Highveldt on the northern ridge of a series of mountains which divide the Highveldt from the Bushveld. To the north is an endless view across the dark shadow of the Bushveld up to the transparent blue of the Waterberg mountains. To the south is a rocky edge through which a man-made gateway gives entrance to the farm. Avonduur has an old-fashioned lay out with expansive fruit orchards, ploughed fields, poplar and bamboo forests and around the house big oak and other shadowy trees. The house is a comfortable old farmhouse with wide veranda, a high stoep on the one side and extensive wings. It is surrounded by the usual outside buildings. In front of the house is an attractive flower garden with a hedge to prevent the life-stock from entering, while one part of the veranda is covered in a thick granadilla bush as an impenetrable curtain.

At the steps of the veranda we were met by Boy's youthful wife, Marie de Villiers, and just behind her was the pretty miracle of a baby in the arms of a young coloured servant girl, so light in complexion, though, that I, at first glance, thought she was a particularly dark white brunette and nearly greeted her with the hand.

Mrs. van Niekerk was a very attractive woman; a bit sad, but very pretty with thick golden hair cut short and beautiful skin in need of no make-up. She greeted us with a friendly smile and welcomed us.

"I'm so very, very glad you could come, Col. de Ville, and also you, Dr. de Roubiac. How glad I cannot express. I already feel a great relieve. "Oh, Col. de Ville," she continues suddenly in a more serious tone, "we went through a terrible time. I shudder when I think about it."

"Well then, darling," she is interrupted by her husband, while he greets her with a kiss "do not try. Now at least everything is safe. Sois de Ville and Dr. de Roubiac will clear up everything in a short time – that I know for certain, and then we would be able to laugh at all our fears."

But I could see that his utterance of hope was made chiefly to reassure his young spouse and that a shadow of fear still hides in his eyes. What on earth could it be that frightens this fearless hero of hundreds of rugby-fields? I must admit that I entered these surroundings of Avonduur with the greatest curiosity and astonishment.

We were ceremoniously introduced to the marvel of an infant, who – unaccustomed to strange people – concealed her head timidly against the breast of the young servant girl. She was apparently as proud of the little Marie as the mother and father themselves, and it was during this meeting that my attention was first drawn to the young servant girl. I estimated her to be about twenty-two or twenty-three years old. She was apparently descended from a white father and black mother or the other way around, and I think that both De Ville and me stood amazed by her exceptional beauty. I must admit that I have rarely seen a more beautiful woman than Juanita Perreira as we later learned was her name. She had the peculiar yellow brown skin with an undercoat of rose-pink as is so often the case with a Portuguese mulatto. Her features had nothing of the native. The mouth and lips were delicate and the nose straight like the authentic Greek type. The hair was black and naturally curled. Her proud smile, while she endeavoured to present the baby properly, was as attractive as anything one could wish for. I noticed that the relationship between her and our host and his wife was far more intimate, and from her side, less subservient than one usually expect between master and servant. We heard that it was due to her history and education. Her mother was the daughter of an old native who has been working for two generations already on the Van Niekerk's farm. This daughter of old Radoni eloped with a Portuguese trader and returned a few years later with her child. Her old father welcomed her back and immediately developed a fondness for his half-caste child, which still continued at the time of our visit. The old patriarch, Radoni, was still alive, but her mother died long ago.

There was one peculiar turn in the life story of the young maidservant which deserves mention, if it is only because of its peculiarity. Her roaming and good-for-nothing father of course was Roman Catholic and saw to it that his little girl was properly baptised according to the doctrines of the Catholic Church. For a number of years he left both mother and daughter in the care

of a Catholic monastery, where eventually the daughter adopted this faith – it happened when she was approximately eight or ten years old – and after her father’s death, when she and her mother returned to Avonduur and old Radoni. She could read and write and she had the education of a civilised white girl of the same age. It is said that the nuns were infatuated with her and did everything in their power to have her admitted to the order. But here unexpectedly the mother showed the determination of a lioness. Nothing could separate her from her child. She took her daughter back to the mud hut of old Radoni and here the little girl lived her life in the following years as an ordinary native child.

I’m focussing on these details purely to show the peculiar character structure which such changes possibly would bring about. Until her tenth year in an environment as refined and civilised as is conceivable, and then until fifteenth –when the character is most susceptible for outside influences– in the mud hut of a native, between natives as an ordinary daughter of a native. The contrast is hardly intelligible.

At the age of fifteen she came under the notice of Boy van Niekerk’s mother. As I already said her grandfather was old Radoni, the faithful servant of Avonduur, and after her mother’s death rumours reached the house which convinced Mrs. Van Niekerk that the daughter needed better care than what old Radoni could offer. Juanita was brought as the personal servant of Mrs. Van Niekerk to the large house where for the second time she returned to the civilisation. It then became apparent that old Radoni (already of a very high age) adored his coloured grandchild in the way a grandfather often does with an only grandchild. He felt this minor separation that was brought about by this move of Juanita, so deeply and lamented it to such an extent that Mrs. Van Niekerk was compelled to make sure that Juanita visit her grandfather nearly every month for a few days. It is remarkable that the young daughter had no objections to this arrangement. She loved her old native grandfather as much as he loved her, and he always eagerly looked forward to her visit.

With reference to these visits Mrs. Van Niekerk in the course of time observed a particular consequence which I would like to cite for the already mentioned reason. As soon as she arrived at the kraal she was inclined to put aside all signs and evidence of civilisation and for the duration of her stay became a complete native woman. In her dress, her language and habits she was not to be distinguished from other natives while she stayed in Radoni’s kraal. Unnecessary to say that this undesired change of nature was disliked intensely by Mrs. Van Niekerk. Juanita had the gift to endear herself and there were soon a stronger bond between her and her mistress than is usual between a coloured servant and white lady in our land. Mrs. Van Niekerk did everything in her power to prevent this “going native” of Juanita without cancelling the monthly visit, which would have caused Juanita and the old native unnecessary pain. She built Juanita a special little house in the kraal, supplied with “civilised” furniture and strictly forbid her to wear any native clothing during her stay in the kraal. But to no avail. As soon as she arrived in the village, she did away with her shoes, stockings, dress and sun-bonnet; she was proud to appear before her grandfather in a beaded apron and, in the winter appeared in a leopard-skin kaross. Her bed was a mat and the usual wooden neck cushion of native woman. No orders, no persuasion had the least effect on her. All the administrations of her mistress she waved aside with a playful smile.

And then, as soon as she returns to the house, she became in all aspects a young white girl again – with all the emotions and behaviour associated with a high degree of civilisation.

This singular doubling of personality was above the experience and comprehension of Mrs. Van Niekerk, and eventually she was obliged to let her be.

I'm going out of my way to describe this singular person, firstly – as I've said already – because it is so exceptional in our country and secondly because she was one of the persons – how subservient her role might have appeared – in the drama which we became acquainted with that afternoon at Avonduur.

I think that Mrs. Van Niekerk and Boy gave us this detailed account of Juanita's life story as an excuse for the unusual intimacy which existed between servant and master – which they knew – we would immediately notice. Mrs. Van Niekerk added: "You must remember that Boy and Juanita grew up almost as brother and sister in this house. Avonduur in those days was more isolated than today, and neither the one, nor the other had any playmate than Boy on the one side and Juanita on the other. And Boy's mother, during her last years, became so attached to Juanita that she considered her almost a daughter after she – just before her death – became helpless and constantly dependent on Juanita."

We were five adult persons in this house when this strange drama unfolded on Avonduur. There was still somewhere in the background a native woman working in the kitchen, who appeared every now and again, but so rarely and so unnoticed, that she hardly made any impression on my memory.

Now for the most difficult task – to give you an impression of the atmosphere which De Ville and me immediately observed. I have already told you that I wondered what it could be that made Boy van Niekerk so nervous during his first interview with us. Here at Avonduur my astonishment increased with each experience. There was an atmosphere of anxiety, of fearful expectation which constantly manifested itself: On the enormous veranda a full compliment weaponry was exhibited. Against the wall there was no less than four double-barrelled guns and from the front veranda beam hung a range of knobkerries made of the heaviest wood and considered in the native wars a main weapon. Why all of this? We did not ask Boy directly, because we could see that he and his wife were not prone to talking. When we sat that night at the table (with Juanita as brisk servant behind the chairs and the native woman carrying things from the kitchen), Marie van Niekerk herself touched on the shunned topic. She turned herself nearly exclusively to De Ville.

"You know, Colonel," she said, "that my husband thinks that we should not tell you anything of what happened here on Avonduur the last few months. I agreed with that. You and the doctor must see for yourselves first...then we will tell everything... Oh, Colonel De Ville, you cannot dream...You cannot know the constant agony hanging over this house like a dark cloud. I can assure you that we never know from which side the next blow will come from. Every door, every dark corner, our bedroom at night – everywhere death might hide – and in what terrible form!... And, Doctor," (she says turning to me) "I can assure that I'm not afraid for myself or for Boy. But when I think that my lovely little angel is exposed to this hideousness, then I can simply grab her and run away...!"

Here, to our surprise, Juanita, who were behind her chair, lay her hands on the shoulders of Marie.

“Missie! Missie!” she said softly and reassuringly, “you know that small Marie is safe. How could anything happen to her? I often told you that she is safe. I don’t think any of us is in great danger – but the little mistress least of all. You scare me, Mistress (Nonnie), if you are going on like this about the little nonnie, as I must not be scared if I want to protect her.”

“You see,” said Mrs. Van Niekerk to us, “how things are here... I know that you are right Juanita” (she continues with a sigh), “but I cannot help it...How can I help it, or hide my anxiety completely? You are scared now... Even you are scared!” She says with a tone of accusation.

“But it is you, Nonnie, who scares me! The master doesn’t do it...It weakens all of us.”

It is Boy who made an end to this turn in our conversation at table.

“You will soon comprehend, Sois, why the women are in such a state...but you have to experience it yourself, otherwise you will possibly not be able to help us – if you only depend on our story... Juanita, go to the back!”

The servant girl immediately disappeared in the passage to the kitchen and this evening we did not see her again. One thing, though, did I notice which made a big impression on me: just when she turned to leave the dining room, I saw a sudden fleeting expression of envy, of anger on her face, but – and that surprised me most - it was not directed to Boy who ordered her, but to Mrs. Van Niekerk whom just before she embracingly tried to reassure. With head held high and with the walk of a queen she left the dining room, without looking at us once.

I think that I have more or less made it clear what the atmosphere was like that that prevailed that day at Avonduur. The state of our host and his spouse was speedily carried over on us. We felt that there was something threatening, that a dark shadow rested on Avonduur, which was all the more nerve-wracking as we had no idea what it was or from where it might appear. We almost considered it a matter of honour not to ask, despite our curiosity. When we went to sleep that first evening De Ville sat for an hour or more in my room discussing the case, but the outcome of his brooding was: “I cannot think what it could be...Boy said sorcery...but it could be anything...Well, we will see.”

And then at last something had to happen to make it impossible to sleep the first night at Avonduur. Just before we parted for the night, there was a soft knock at the door. It was Boy who entered and whispered. “I do no want to scare my wife unnecessarily. She should not know that I visited you.”

In every hand he had a double-barrelled gun which he apparently fetched from the veranda. “I would be glad,” he continued in his secretive whisper, “if each of you would keep one of these loaded guns next to your beds. It is not necessary to ask you not to use it in any unnecessary and dangerous way.” Then he placed one of the guns carefully next to my bed and handed the other to De Ville.

I do not believe that I slept one hour that night, but nothing happened. Avonduur was shrouded in the deepest silence that night, with the exception of a jackal choir that was heard from the mountains every now and again.

And now I have to tell you of our first experience of the “sorcery.” It was the evening of our second day. We visited this day the orchards and cultivated land under the guidance of Boy. We could not walk far or fast, because De Ville still struggled with his wounded legs. The evening we were at the cattle kraal and the cowsheds to see the live-stock return home and just before dinner we went to sit on the veranda where Juanita served each of us with a tot of Avonduur brandy. The double-barrelled guns – I noticed – were back on the veranda. We sat in the corner of the veranda which was nearly covered by granadilla. We three men were grouped on the one side and in the corner, in a big arm-chair, Mrs. Van Niekerk sat, leaning backwards, with her hands folded behind her head. The sun was just going under, but it was still quite light. Marie did not drink with us. I could not help to notice that Boy was very restless – a state which he tried to hide from us through a series of forced jokes and quick talking, and the only consequence was to make us more nervous. He spoke about everything except about the one thing which brought De Ville and myself to Avonduur. So forced, though, was our conversation that the inevitable silence fell over the small group. I could not see Marie’s face clearly, because her back was turned to the little light of the Western sky beaming through the granadilla. Her face was therefore in the shadow. But her silent bearing gave me the impression that she was the most composed of the four of us.

It was during the silence between that it happened. Boy suddenly uttered a horrible anxious cry as if someone unexpectedly was pressing on his throat. So quick was his next movements that I can hardly recall their order properly. At the same time as his shriek he hurled his glass on the floor where it splattered in a hundred pieces. He straightened out of his chair; with the one hand he grabbed the stretched out arm of his wife and with the other one of the guns behind him against the wall. With such violence he jerked Marie from the arm chair that she would have crashed on the floor behind him if I didn’t catch her with an arm around her waist and pressed her against me.

“Look! Look!” he shouted, with one finger pointing to the corner with Marie’s empty chair. Across the back of her chair hangs her shawl which she earlier brought from the house with the comment that soon it would become so cold that she would need it here on the veranda. As I told you the corner was thickly overgrown with the granadilla creeper covering the lattice of the veranda on the one side. The last light from the red coloured western sky was still visible through the dark green foliage of the granadilla in spots and beams. For the rest the corner was covered in dark shade.

I would like to tell you now exactly what I saw, but you will understand that I had a great fright. We all had a terrible fright. We were already worked up in a state of extreme anxiety because of the mysterious atmosphere of our surroundings. Boy and Marie’s mental condition of course contributed to that, and the increasing darkness, the silence of the evening around us, brought the state of condition to a crisis even before anything happened, and then Boy’s actions fell on us like lightning from the blue heaven...What did I see? Then listen...

In the thick foliage of the granadilla, where Boy pointed, I saw a slow, horrible nerve wrecking movement. What it was, I couldn’t determine. The thing itself, causing the movement, was dark and it was covered in the darkness of the granadilla to such an extent that it was

impossible to determine the shape or form. I imagined seeing a black face which through cunning movements tried to push a peep-hole open through the leaves of the granadilla. It was the first and last impression I had. And then there was a violent eruption – a deafening explosion nearly pulling me from my feet. Boy pulled the trigger of both barrels at the same time, and blew a smoking hole in the granadilla about four inches above the place where the moving thing appeared.

Immediately after the shot he threw the gun down, grabbed one of the knobkerries and insanely began hitting the granadilla in pieces under a stream of swearwords and abuse. When after a while he came to his senses again he was out of breath and his face shining with sweat. The object of his anger disappeared. The three men grabbed and ran around to prevent the escape of this sly visitor. But in the garden we could neither see or hear anything. Everything was dead quiet. Our stalker disappeared without trace.

During our search, Boy excited, repeated the same question again and again: “Did you see? Did you see?” But this is just what didn’t happen. We did see, but none of us knew what we saw.

When we met a few minutes later in the dining room, he continued his investigation in a more composed manner: “Tell me, Sois, exactly what did you see?” he asked De Ville.

“It is simple enough,” was the answer, “I didn’t see anything at all. I imagined that I heard a stir in the leaves, but I was not sure at all. It might have been a gust of wind.”

“And you, Paul?” he asked me. I briefly told him what I described already. “I imagined seeing a part of a dark face – like the face of someone trying to peer through the leaves. But it was all very quickly and unclear.”

“And you, Marie – did you hear nothing before I gave the alarm?”

Marie was still pale from the fright. Her lips still quivered and apparently at pains to speak calmly about the incident.

“I heard rustling in the leaves at various times, but it hardly caught my attention; I can hardly remember hearing it. I naturally ascribed it to the wind and hardly paid any attention to it.”

Our host offered each of us a tot of brandy and also drank one himself, after which we went to sit at the table to discuss the incident once again.

I remember that De Ville at this occasion urged Boy to tell everything that he suspects. But he had – very politely and amicably, but at the same time resolutely – requested us to abandon this until we have undoubted proof of what is happening at Avonduur.

“You see we are still at the same point where we were when I consulted you in the city. None of you have any evidence of the truth which I have to tell you, and without personal experience it would be difficult to believe our story in all its details, and unless you believe the story, you would not be able to help us. I ask you as old and faithful friends to be patient. It will soon happen again – that at least I can promise you.” And then he laid his hand on De Ville’s shoulder and continued in deep earnestness: “Sois, you know me from childhood, and although we haven’t seen each other for

many years, I'm sure that you know me well enough to realise that I would not be superstitious. At least I'm not a child anymore and possess the normal amount of common sense. I don't think I'm more of a coward than most people, but I promise you that something is happening here on Avonduur that beats my apprehension, which is beyond all my experience. Do you know how desperate I was just before consulting you? I decided to give up on Avonduur – to sell the old family farm, to which I'm very attached, at any price and to face a life of poverty and continuous struggle – because that would undoubtedly be the outcome if I have to leave Avonduur now against the slight price I would get for my land now – that is how serious it is with us! We are surrounded by an embittered, envious animosity, which is continuously on the watch and ready to kill us and we do not know from where it is coming... You know that I spoke of witchcraft... well yes, you will see for yourselves.”

I remember that during the absence of his wife he quickly added in a whispering voice: “One thing I ask you to observe and to remember...the danger – if there was danger tonight – was more particularly directed against Marie. That is to say, if an attack occurred before I jerked her from the chair she would have been the victim... Remember it and compare this fact with what you yourself will experience at Avonduur and compare it also to incidents which we will describe to you later...”

“What do you mean with this, Boy? That at least you can explain to us.”

“I only mean this,” was his solemn answer, “that this dark and mysterious animosity is directed against my wife and nobody else on Avonduur. All they are looking for is to take her life away.”

I know, for certain, that our second night at Avonduur was more restless and nervous than the first, and me and De Ville hardly slept. The suggestive power of everything we experienced and heard had an inevitable effect on our state of mind. We both felt that we were moving in a cloud of secrecy, that we could be called at any moment to fight a danger which threatens us from the dark. We had the same feeling which you experience going through dark bushes at night where shortly before lions roared from all sides and were still breathing.

The next morning an unexpected new guest arrived at Avonduur. It was an old gentleman, Dirk Brink of whom we often heard, but never met before. It was his fate to play a peculiar role in the drama of Avonduur. Therefore it is essential to describe this strange character in greater detail. The old gentleman at that time was about seventy years old. He was never married and devoted his whole life to the study of animals. He had the wonderful gift to tame all wild animals in a very short time and to create confidence in the shyest not only to see him as protector but as close friend. During this visit to Avonduur he was living on a lonely and isolated little farm deep in the mountains. Boy van Niekerk was his closest – and indeed his only – neighbour and speedily there developed a bond of intimacy between the old gentleman and the family on Avonduur which gave him the status of a beloved relative at Avonduur. Never was anyone more welcome than Oom Dirk, although his visits were mostly short and rare. On his little farm he tamed a multitude of wild birds of all kinds which he had to feed every morning on his veranda. Also there were little klipspringers, dassies, rock-hares and many other animals who enjoyed the freedom of his home and visited him at all the hours of the day and the night. His visits could never be long, as his animals needed his care – that was always his excuse.

I don't think I ever met a more amiable person than Oom Dirk Brink – as soon as you understood all the small changes in his personality. But what I admired most about him was his extended knowledge of nature. His intimate intercourse with wild animals during a long life gave him a knowledge and understanding of their behaviour and spiritual life which many learned people would have envied.

He was a strong, forcefully built man with a snow-white beard and hair and a constant smile on his face.

I could immediately see that the old gentleman was disappointed to find us at Avonduur. He was a lonely old recluse and I think that he would have preferred to be alone with Marie and her husband during his visit. And it was also soon evident that the baby – small Marie – was the great attraction. It was ridiculous to see all the excuses that the old man had to hold the baby! He had in Juanita Perreira a laughing and teasing opponent, because she quickly discovered his weakness and it gave her the greatest pleasure to tease the old man by keeping small Marie out of his reach through a variety of pretensions. He tolerated a lot from the young servant girl, because although he regularly scolded her and attacked her verbally, it was clear that she also charmed Oom Dirk. Often we heard her gay laughter and the grumbling of the old gentleman in between where she was busy worrying or laughing at him.

Here now were collected all the characters who were predestined to participate in the small drama of Avonduur.

I cannot state that the first part of our stay at Avonduur was pleasant. The environment and the family of which we were part were agreeable, but the horrible atmosphere of mystery and the apparent state of incessant fear of Boy and his wife, combined to make our first days and nights on Avonduur unpleasant and tense. To be frank without hiding behind words: we were both pretty scared. The nights especially were unpleasant. We were soon in such a state of tension that any sound at night wakened us with fright, and rarely did a night pass without me visiting De Ville's room a number of times to discuss some or other unusual sound.

Two days after the incident on the veranda, certain incidents happened which I would like to describe here, because they had a certain effect on the unravelling of the plot.

In the first place we heard that the old gentleman Brink found the environment so unpleasant that he decided to leave us the next day, and Boy van Niekerk knew him well enough not to try and convince him to stay longer. Boy told him nothing about the mysterious danger. He knew him sufficiently to know that he would ridicule and laugh at their fear and that he consequently would be more of a hindrance than a source of help. Therefore they did not try to prevent him when one morning he flatly announced that he would return the next day to his birds and game.

We arranged this day, De Ville, Oom Dirk and myself, to take a stroll in the mountain behind the house on Avonduur. We could not go far and we had to walk slowly due to De Ville's still troublesome wounds. Boy was hindered due to some or other urgent commitment to join us. It was a glorious morning of radiant sunshine and a cool wind from the mountain making the unclouded sun more than agreeable.

The mountain commenced one mile from the house. It sloped gradually to such an extent that we hardly noticed it until we were quite high between the rocks. The bottom of the mountain was strewn with enormous rocks which crashed down in the previous centuries from the high krantzies, and each pile up of rocks was densely overgrown with wild plums, wild peach and other mountain shrub which created here a natural rockery of great beauty. Between the majestic rocks there are many foot-paths made by animals leading into the heights, and it was one of these meandering paths which we followed. Within a few paces we were out of view from the house, because the fallen rocks formed a real maze which every now and again hid the whole landscape.

We walked slowly for about half an hour when we unexpectedly came across a small flat area with four native huts in a circle against the rock face at the back. It was an idyllic little paradise, cut off and protected from the world by a wilderness of piled up rocks. Straight in front of us there was quite a big and neatly constructed house surrounded by a dense reed fence so that at first we could only see the roof of the house. From behind the fence a blew smoke spiral ascended into the quiet sky, because here between the majestic rocks was no sign of the cool wind which we could still hear roaring above us.

All three of us stopped amazed at the entrance of the pass. But it was not only the sudden spectacle, but the astonishing beauty of the surroundings which surprised us. It was something completely different which brought us to a listening standstill. From inside the fence we heard the singing voice of a person accompanied by some or other stringed instrument. It was undoubtedly a woman singing in a beautiful, clear soprano voice. I think that the environment contributed to the glorification for us of the song of the invisible singer: the bright, cool morning, the green cultivated plain around us, the isolation of wild piled up rocks and the silence and loneliness of the multiplied mountains, all added to transform the beautiful voice and strange song into something fairytale like. After listening a while amazed, I was the first to walk to the entrance of the fence; I had to see which native woman it is who could sing so beautifully and which song and what language it was that she used.

Never will I forget the sight which surprised us here. As we entered the fence there was immediate silence. Our arrival startled the singer as much as she astonished us. In front of us were two quite big wattle-and-daub houses instead of the usual huts we expected – one much bigger than the other, but both in the same style. Next to the door of the house on the ground with stretched out legs there sat an old native, so old that his head was white and he observed us with half-closed eyes. He only wore a shirt with a kaross of jackal skin around the shoulders and a collection of leather and skin pouches on the chest attached to a thick copper necklace. He was apparently an old native doctor who still remained faithful to the traditional customs and beliefs of his race and office. Few paces away, against one of the densest rock piles of the natural protecting wall was our wonderful singer. How will I describe her to make the amazing image vivid. It was a young native woman we saw in front of us. She sat on a soap-box or an object of this nature, with an African guitar in the hand. Her instrument was simple enough: it was made from a paraffin tin and twirled string of sinew. Her body above the hips was completely naked, except for a leopard skin which was slung around her shoulders. Around the hips was a cowhide apron reaching down to her knees. Her complete costume was adorned with glittering beads and around the neck, arms and ankles were the usual collection of copper and iron bangles. She stared at us for a while bewildered, and I don't think that ever in my life I saw something so beautiful and fitting to the wild natural surroundings. Her skin colour was a peculiar yellow brown, so light that the blush which, simultaneously with our

entry, glowed through her satin smooth skin. Her appearance was European with no remembrance of her native descent visible. The trace of her bust, arms and legs was exceptionally beautiful. We did not know her – me the least of the three of us – until De Ville called her name with surprise: “Juanita! What are you doing here?”

If we expected signs of timidity or shame about the more than exposed body, we were disappointed. There was undoubtedly a little blush, but nothing more than could be expected with any young girl after a sudden meeting. There was no movement to cover her breasts; there was in this the complete shamelessness of any ordinary native woman. Her deportment, her gestures, the emphasising sounds accompanying her words, was that of an ordinary native woman.

The amazement which this change and contrast evoked with us, will soon be comprehended. Until the previous night we still saw and knew Juanita Perreira as a well-educated, wee-dressed young European girl, beautiful enough to draw the attention of any young man, and here she was – as if by the touch of the magic wand – transformed into a native!

She answered De Ville’s exclamation with a shrill laugh of which the sound alone was enough to classify her as a native. It was curious to observe such a change which manifested itself even in the voice and smallest gestures. Juanita was a young native woman so perfect that a rival of her make up would be sought in vain in any scene on the world.

“I’ve come to visit my grandfather,” she said, and with a gesture pointed to the old native next to the door, who still mumbling gaped at us with half-closed eyes.

Mrs. Van Niekerk told us about these visits and periodical transformations which date from the time of Boy’s deceased mother. But a change of this nature was not expected by any of us. Actually I think that De Ville was more embarrassed and demurred by this interview than Juanita!

But, Juanita!...how...why...” he continued stuttering. I think he wanted to ask her why she dressed and behaved like that, and he was suddenly too embarrassed to formulate his question!

Juanita laughed shrilly again with a biting click of the tongue.

“The baas knows that I’m a native,” she said with emphasis and no sign of diffidence. “This man is my grandfather who looked after me when my mother died here. We are the only two remaining. He is already so old that he cannot think clearly anymore and he grieves like a child when I don’t visit him. And I also love him, because he is my grandfather and I cannot come and stay here with him with the dress of the white man and the white man’s language.”

“Yet it was a European language in which you sung just now,” De Ville said. “It was surely a European language...We overheard your song, Juanita. It was very beautiful.”

Every answer of hers was accompanied by the usual meaningless, shrill laughter.

“Sir, should know that my father was Portuguese, and since I was very small, Portuguese nuns looked after me and educated me. My mother also learned to speak Portuguese. It was the first language I could speak. At the beginning I learned English as a strange language among the nuns

and much later Afrikaans when the deceased old lady Mrs van Niekerk – Boy’s mother – adopted me. The nuns taught me many Portuguese songs. They have many beautiful folksongs, and even now when I make a song, then it is natural for me to do it in Portuguese...It is a very beautiful language, Sir. You know it possesses all the beauty of Spanish, French and Italian – related languages.”

I remembered two things that I observed as peculiar during her conversation in her native dress: firstly that she always spoke of Boy van Niekerk as “Boy” without any appendix of respect, and secondly the astonishing momentary manifestation of sentences and expressions reflecting her high-level of education and delicate civilisation immediately.

“Was it a song you made yourself, Juanita?” De Ville asked softly as if he is scared to frighten her and make her disapprove of his object.

“Oh! Sir ...it is one I made two or three months ago to sing small Marie asleep. I often make short lullabies. I also know a number of lullabies in Portuguese – but this one is my own. Boy and nonnie Marie made me sing it to them as they liked the tune. The words they obviously could not understand.”

Then, on request of De Ville, sang the song, and when she was finished, he asked her politely to write the words for him in his pocket- book, which she did immediately. With her help we translated the poem there and then in Afrikaans. Most of the rhyme and rhythm was naturally the work of Juanita, who of course had to see that the rhythm of the words fitted the musical rhythm. Here then is the song (which played such an important role in our drama) as Juanita finally changed and improved it two or three days later after her return to Avonduur:

Oh, Deep River, Oh, dark stream,
 How long did I wait, how long did I dream,
 The blade of love in my heart turning?
 - In your embrace ends all my grief
 Extinguish, Oh Deep River, the flame of hate.-
 The great yearning which does not me forsake.
 I see from far the gleam of steel and gold,
 I hear the soft rumbling of water deep and cold;
 I hear your voice as whispering in a dream,
 Come swiftly, Oh Deep River, Oh Dark Stream

(Translation of the song of Juanita Perreira).

On our request – at least on the request of De Ville and myself – she sang the song again in Afrikaans. A part was a kind of recital, exceedingly sad and full of unsatisfied desire. I remember the greatest impression which her bearing made on me when she stood next to De Ville to follow over his shoulder the words of the song in the pocket-book. In the glow of the sunlight which irradiated her, the smooth bronze of her skin, with the pure outlines of her body, made the impression of an aristocratic statue. The deep gloomy tune of her song and the soft changes of her voice left the conviction that it was a deeply burdened heart found expression in the music. But her posture and conduct belied this posture. She ended the song with merry laughter.

“It is difficult to represent in a different language what one really means,” She said to us in general.

“And what does it actually mean, Juanita?” De Ville asked in a soft voice, “what is the Deep River you were singing about so mournfully?”

“Do you ask her what it means?” the old gentleman Brink interrupted sarcastically? – and more seriously to Juanita: “Are you not ashamed to appear like this in front of men? Do you get pleasure in acting like a native, you who have the education and know the ways of a white woman?”

It made Juanita laugh to such an extent that she could not answer for a while. Again I noticed that her laugh, accompanied with the peculiar reflexes of her torso, embodied all the signs of the native.

“Listen to the talk of the old Sir. Am I then not a native? Look at the colour of my skin!” and stretches her exposed arm next to the hand of the old gentleman: “That is my grandfather” – pointing to the old black man – “and what will he think and how will he feel if I visit him in the dress and with the customs of a white girl? I will never associate with him in that way. No, old sir,” she continued in a sudden pitch of bitterness, “I’ll never forget that I’m a native. If I have forgotten it sometimes the white people quickly brought it to my attention. I had to stay in my place. I had to be careful never to really love a white person – it is not allowed. Therefore I take care to be separate from my darling little one. Even my love for small Marie has limits; after that I have to be careful! Whatever I feel I never dare to show. I love small Marie as if it is my own child: but you must have noticed that I never show such love. We with black blood in our veins are supposed to think differently from white girls and I always try to live accordingly, because I know to break this white man’s law will plunge me in the deepest unhappiness.”

There was now no sign of any sadness. Her mind was suddenly governed by a proud bitterness, which De Ville immediately tried to soften.

“But you haven’t yet told me what your song means, Juanita,” he said mildly.

“Do you not see, Sir,” was her answer, “that as soon as someone asks the meaning of a little poem, then it is impossible for him to ever understand it. I cannot explain it in ordinary words and if you did not understand it of its own accord, then my explanation will not help at all.”

There the case ended for the moment.

“Everything pure nonsense,” grumbled old Dirk Brink – and when we left the fold, he continued: “Don’t you see that the girl has a kink? She would never otherwise have disfigured herself like this. It does not belong to nature. And if she has a kink then you ask in vain the meaning of her utterances. If I was Boy and Marie I would take extra precautions about how she is allowed to associate with the baby.”

And so we continued to go and sit and rest a few hundred yards higher than the last rocks. There was a wonderful view from here over the beautiful, sunlit panorama of Avonduur. The wind quieted down, and except for the soft whispering of a cool breeze now and then, we were in the middle of the deepest silence.

Wonderful how the smallest and most insignificant events sometimes have the greatest effect on the course of events of which the onlooker during the incident never even dreamt of. It later appeared to me – when I thought about the case –that everything was predestined: that the old gentleman Dirk Brink came to visit Avonduur just at this time and took us for this stroll.

It was undoubtedly the deep silence of our surroundings and the endless landscape beneath us which brought us to silence. Immediately in front of us was Avonduur as a measured map: Fifty miles further is the Bushveld, from here visible only as a shadow on the plain; and a hundred mile from here is the first vast mountain range of the north, so transparently blue that it is hardly visible.

We discussed for some time Juanita's song. I remember that De Ville said: "I do not agree with Oom Dirk that it is the expression of an insane person – without any meaning for a normal person. I think that there is more in it than meets the eye – that she wants to acknowledge something which could hardly be expressed in normal language. That is why she resorted to poetry and music, as has happened often in human history."

We were quiet for some time when we were suddenly shocked by a strange sound. It was an empty clatter across loose stones which reminded me of the sound of an empty native sledge being pulled across a mountain path. We could hear the sound was coming in our direction, but we could see nothing.

"What on earth is it?" De Ville asked in a voice of indignation, which also echoed my own state of mind.

"Wait!" old Dirk Brink whispered to us pressing, "everyone sit quietly, then I will show you something very funny."

We both sat nervously looking towards the approaching noise, when suddenly from behind a small rock, just beneath our feet, there appeared a big mountain tortoise. We could immediately see that he was in a state of great excitement. He stumbles and slips across loose stones in his way with a clatter and noise which he could have avoided easily if he chose a better way, but he was in such a hurry that he would not turn out for any stone in his way. Over every stumbling block he bungled with unnecessary waste of energy which occurred to me to be ridiculous.

"Now you will see something," Oom Dirk continued, "which will solve one of the greatest secrets of nature for you if you contemplate it...which I doubt!...Did you ever thought about the question of how a tortoise or a chameleon – to name but two –in the state of nature find a mate – how it propagates its species. You know that both – in our time at least – are rare animals and always alone and that both move very slowly with their bodies over the ground or through the mountain shrub. If their meeting with a mate depended on pure chance, then both a tortoise or a chameleon would need at least a thousand years to enter into matrimony. How protected they might be, these two animal species would not be able to survive. But nature provides as it always does in these cases. Take notice!"

We had to get up to follow the tortoise for a distance up into the mountain. "But it is close to the object of its grand search which up to now lasted maybe a month," Oom Dirk told us, and then suddenly the tortoise came to a standstill against the edge of a flat rock that is hollow at the bottom

but too low to allow him entry into the cave. He immediately moved a few inches backward and then with the greatest speed crashed with his shell against the edge of the rock. This he repeated continuously until our patience were nearly exhausted, then Oom Dirk showed with his finger, and underneath the rock we saw the shell and front feet of a second tortoise appearing.

“There is the beloved he was searching for such a long time,” the old gentleman said.

For me – and also for De Ville – it was something completely new in the history of nature. I must admit that I never thought about it, but now witnessing it myself, it was an astonishing spectacle. And now the old gentleman started to explain: Most animals are dependent on smell, not alone to bring about the sexual receptiveness, but also to enable the one sex to locate the other sex over great distances. The female sex of most vertebrate animals has a certain gland which isolates (secretes) a certain scent which becomes active in the mating season, and following this secretion the male is capable of following the female over great distances and to eventually find her. He is lucky if he doesn't arrive at the same time as a rival. When that happens, then there is a violent struggle, at the end the beauty becomes the plunder of the strongest. Nature is never sentimental. Right never supplies the least preference. If it were different, the main function of natural selection would not exist.

After the old gentleman Dirk Brink gave us this lesson in the natural sciences, we both found it very interesting, and our discussion about the matter lasted until we reached the house just before sunset, but none of us ever dreamt that this little incident would have such a big effect on the drama of Avonduur. Who could have thought that without this meaningless event we would not have been able to save the various lives on Avonduur, who were then living in much greater danger than we realised.

The next morning Oom Dirk Brink left, and again we four whites and Juanita were the only residents of Avonduur. For three days nothing happened and life continued in its usual monotonous way on Avonduur without us acquiring any explanation for the restless atmosphere and fear.

It was the night of the fourth day of our stay that we came for the first time in direct contact with the threatening mystery.

We four – Boy, his wife, De Ville and me – sat at the table with Juanita serving us. There was a further three native women in the kitchen and the hindquarters of the house, but they so seldom appeared that I would hardly recognise them from seeing.

The baby – small Marie – already slept in the bedroom of Boy and his wife. I think that De Ville and myself by then were more reassured and felt that nothing would happen while we were on Avonduur. Then suddenly there was the blow, completely unexpected. There was suddenly a fierce and persistent hysterical scream. We heard the fall of bare feet in the passage way in the direction of the bedroom, and entering gushed two young native women with hands up, and eyes strained wide with all the signs of extreme horror. I could only hear two words of their screaming clearly: “Wana! Wana! the Noga! the Noga!” – “The baby! the baby! – the snake! the snake!”

All four of us jumped up simultaneously, and stormed with Juanita into the passageway. When we came to the door of the bedroom, I noticed for the first time that boy had a double barrelled gun

in his hands. Where he got it, I did not know, but he probably kept one somewhere in the corridor. In the door the five of us came to a standstill with the two servants behind us. Never will I forget the terrible spectacle that confronted us in the dimly lit bedroom. There was one big double bed in the room, with a baby bed next to it. But Baby Marie was on the big bed - probably only temporarily – sleeping. I could see her little face clearly with her petite lips half-open and the appearance of a smile on her elfin mouth. She was in the middle between the sleeping places of her mother and father, indicated by the night-clothes placed on each of the cushions for the night. On Marie van Niekerk's place, on her cushion, where her embroidered folded nightgown is, we see the most terrifying snake I ever came across in my life. I think the imposing environment added to exaggerating the animal in our imaginations and in making its brutal and threatening appearance more repulsive. It was a black mamba, about twelve feet in length. He was curled up in two circles on Marie's nightgown with the rest of its body aloft in the air, which gave it a height of about six feet above the bed. The bended neck, with an open mouth turned into our direction. We could immediately see the glistening of its eyes and its fangs. It swung slowly from side to side, which every time brought it's head directly above the sleeping child.

Boy, with a terrible curse, pushed the gun between us, apparently with the purpose to take aim, but he was prevented by De Ville, who took hold of the barrel with both hands and called out: "Wait, wait, your child will die of fright...give me a kierie! give me a kierie!" he shouted to the servants.

I needed all my power to hold Marie to prevent her from storming her child, which without doubt would have caused her death, maybe without saving the child.

For a number of minutes it was a terribly confused situation, and I do not know myself what the real sequence of events was, but two things I remember clearly: the noise we made at the door apparently drew the attention of the snake and made it more excited, and – what was more terrible – the baby started to move and showed signs of waking up.

And in the midst of the general uproar Juanita came forward with dominating determination. I did not notice her before this. I saw first how she pressed through us without saying a word. With one hand she jerked from Marie's shoulders a white shawl – the same shawl which was on the chair the night when things happened on the veranda. She walks into the room with the shawl in the one hand, and when she came to the bed, she fanned it with both hands in front of the snake. Her behaviour petrified us all temporally. I think we all had the feeling that she was in possession of knowledge which put her temporally in control of the situation. Slowly the giant snake crumpled up in one fold on another, and just when the last circle laid down on the cushion, Juanita covered it with the shawl. She grabbed the cushion with the nightgown and the snake in one bundle and walks to the window which was open. With one movement she threw the whole lot through the window and closed the window-frame quickly. And still she was the first to pick up the child from the bed and to embrace her. For some time there was a struggle between her and the mother, but Juanita did want to let go of the baby until she covered its face with kisses. After that there was general embracing; I remember seeing how Boy took the servant girl into his arms and kissed her a number of times on the cheeks with the exclamation: "Juanita, you saved my child! You risked your life!" So great was the stir that we completely forgot about the snake that evening!

It was hours before the household calmed down again, and late night when we were together again in the dining room, with all windows and doors to the house carefully locked, for the first time, did Boy tell us about the witchcraft on Avonduur.

“I must tell you first that there has never since I have laid out this farm appeared a mamba on Avonduur. I have never before seen a black mamba. The nearest mambas to Avonduur are more than a hundred miles to the north. South of this latitude they have never been seen. And now – about three months ago – two of my cattle herders came to tell me that they found an unknown black snake in the veldt; one of them with some luck threw a stone at the snake and broke its neck. I asked them to bring the snake to the house the next day and the next day it was identified by many of my labourers as a mamba. And then one thing happened after the other. The first was our unlucky old washing maid. She was busy spreading out Marie’s clothes at the washing place when a big mamba bit her in the back of her neck. Two other servants were present and none of them saw the snake before he attacked the old woman. She hardly lived for twenty minutes and died here on our veranda. Notice, Sois, that the old woman was busy to wash Marie’s clothes when she was attacked.

“For nearly a month nothing further happened, and then one morning early we had a third meeting with a mamba. Marie has a great interest in botany and she discovered a rare euphorbia at the bottom of the ridge about half a mile from the house going down to the fields. She had the habit to visit the plant every now and then to make sure she would see it flower. On a certain morning, quite early, we were on the veranda; I had the baby on the knee. All the servants were busy when Marie decided to visit her euphorbia. It was so close to the house that I did not bother accompanying her. Obviously she always stayed in my view. I continued playing with the baby and she left. I saw her stoop over the plant and did not look up again until she was about a hundred yards from the house on her return. The grass was wet from the dew, and I could clearly see her tracks from the ridge as a dark line. And then suddenly I saw something shining on her trail apparently following her with some speed. Just when I saw that, the snake suddenly lifted its body and I saw that it is a black mamba. Luckily I then already kept a loaded gun on the veranda. I put baby Marie down on the ground, and grabbed the gun and ran towards Marie. The snake was less than twenty yards away when I reached her. Just when it lifted its body again, I shot it through the middle. It was a black mamba, twelve feet long, and I was delighted thinking that it was the same satan which killed our poor old servant.

“In any case the death of this snake made us perfectly calm again. We never dreamt that there could be more than one great black Mamba on Avonduur, but our disillusionment came quickly. On a certain day Marie was working on a dress. She sat in the shadow of a big marula tree in the garden. I was busy writing in the living room. Somewhere in the house the baby started crying and Marie placed the dress she was busy with on the chair to come into the house to attend to the baby. Juanita was on a visit to her grandfather. When Marie returned with the child in her arms I heard her shriek. On the dress on the chair, which she just left a few moments ago, was a black mamba rolled up with its head raised about one foot. I shot him on the chair. It was the second one I killed. This one was ten feet long.

“After this I killed four more on the veranda and in every case the snake was linked to something of Marie: a garment or a chair she was sitting on shortly before. You now have seen two cases for yourselves and in each case Marie was the object of the snake. Do I imagine things, Sois? What do you think? I did not exaggerate or add anything. Everything happened just as I told it to

you. Is it possible that something like this can happen? Can a deadly snake be used to pursue only one person? No other inhabitant of the house was ever in any danger, except for the old washing woman, and in her case, you will remember, she was busy with Marie's unwashed clothes and the snake was on one of her petticoats when it bit her. What do you think of all this, Sois? Will the danger continue? Is there something that can be done, or must I leave Avonduur? Things cannot continue like this – that you will see for yourselves.”

The strong world-famous rugby player was in a state of depression which moved me deeply. During his recounting of the story Marie held his arm and followed it with a pale face.

What could be done, what could be said? It seemed to me to be an accidental coincidence of events which could easily be seen as intended, but De Ville apparently had something else in mind.

“There are a few things I would like to ask you first,” he said, and to everybody's surprise he started to ask questions about Juanita.

“You were for many years with Juanita in the house before your wedding and your mother's death?” He asked Boy.

“That is so,” was the answer. “My poor old mother was very fond of her and eventually treated her more like a child in the house than a servant.”

“And what about your relationship with her, Boy? I expect you to be open about it if you wish me to help you. You must hide nothing, Boy, including you Marie. Do you see the trend in my questions? I must know everything.”

Boy kept quiet for a while looking at his wife with questions in his eyes, and it was after she nodded that he shyly continued stuttering:

“The way in which my mother treated Juanita – more like a white girl – more as if she was a daughter than a coloured servant, undoubtedly also had an effect on the relationship between me and her. I must admit that a fair amount of intimacy developed between us. You must remember that we were the only two young people in the house and there was daily contact between us. There was never...how shall I...never actually any feeling...at least not from my side...but concerning Juanita...”

And then he stopped talking. It was Marie who intervened.

“Let me tell you,” she said, “a woman usually has more insight in these matters than a man. Let me shortly say what Colonel De Ville apparently likes to know. There can be no doubt that Juanita was in love with Boy, and when I married him, she was deeply moved and without doubt jealous of me. I must admit that she never showed it to me through any spite or malevolence or anything of this nature, but you know that a woman can feel these things instinctively. How long this continued – this jealousy – is difficult to say, but her attitude and behaviour changed with the birth of small Marie. It seemed as if her smothered love found an outlet in her worship of the baby.”

“That is all I wanted to know, Mevrouw”¹ says De Ville quickly as if he realises that the story is unpleasant for Boy and his wife. “There is still something else I would like to know: Was Juanita at any time absent from the farm; where did she go and when was her last absence from Avonduur?”

“About four months ago,” Marie answered, “she was visiting the Catholic mission station where she was educated. She is still very attached to the nuns who looked after her as a child.”

“And where is the station?” asked De Ville.

Boy named and indicated the place. It is in the Lowveld, about two hundred mile from Avonduur.

“It is evidence of how much the native there is still in her,” he added uncalled for, “that she undertook the whole journey – there and back – by foot with two older native women who were sent by the nuns to Avonduur for this purpose.”

“Now my curiosity regarding Juanita is satisfied,” De Ville said with a smile. “Now I would like to have an interview with the young lady herself – but I think it would be best if only Dr. Roubaix and me are present – if you don’t mind,”

I could see that Boy and Marie were astonished and inquisitive, but both apparently considered it proper not to ask any question until De Ville himself offers a clarification.

But I was not inhibited by a similar reserve! While De Ville and me awaited Juanita’s arrival in the dining room I seized the opportunity immediately.

“What does it all mean, Sois? Do you suspect the girl of witchcraft?” I asked with some ridicule, “or do you think that she brought one mamba after the next to bite her rival in love.”

The question sounded funny enough to make us both laugh.

“No, not quite,” De Ville answered, “but I definitely think that she could explain the mystery if I could persuade her. Do you know what gave me the key to the secret? – It was in the first place in Juanita’s song “The Deep River”, and then, in the second place, in Oom Dirk’s tale about the tortoise. I’m just surprised that you did not come to the same conclusion. You would come to the same realisation if you reflect a bit.”

But I have to admit that De Ville’s elucidation made the case more incomprehensible – as far as it concerns me – than it was before, if it is possible.

Every detail of the interview is clearly chiselled in my memory and will possibly only disappear with my death. The interrogation of Juanita that morning by François de Ville was one of the most remarkable stretching on the psychological rack I ever witnessed. Coupled with that was the exceptional character we had to deal with: her incredible doubling of personality, her sparkling beauty and the undeniable sexual attraction beaming from her whole constitution; all together with

1 Mistress, Mrs

her tragic unfortunate circumstances – everything added to make this cross-examination by a practised and cunning detective a matter of deep interest to any psychologist.

A princess waiting on the tributes of her vassals, could not have entered the room in a more elegant way than the way in which Juanita approached the dining room. With her head held high, a sparkle in her in her magnificent dark eyes and a delicate smile on her pomegranate lips, she left us voiceless, with a hardly visible bow of the torso, she greeted us. I remember that I was convinced that no Greek artist from olden times ever designed a more beautiful fontanel for the casting of his bronze Aphrodite.

De Ville addressed her in a friendly manner: “Juanita, I want to consult you about a few things; You will be more at ease if you sit down.”

“Thank you, Sir, I would rather stand.”

“But it might take long.”

“That is no problem. I’m used to standing and will feel more at ease like this.”

“That’s fine, Juanita...I firstly want to know if you thought of any explanation about the terrible things we witnessed on the veranda or last night in the bed room?”

“What explanation is necessary, Sir? All that happened is that a snake came into the house; it often happens on lonely farms.”

“Yes, but never yet so often as on Avonduur – where a Mamba has never before appeared.”

“Why do you think that I would be able to give an explanation, Sir, if learned people, like you and Dr. De Roubiac, know of no explanation?”

“You know there are rumours of witch-craft. I thought that you might know something of such things, seeing that your grandfather is a famous healer.”

“You do not believe in such childish things as witchcraft, Colonel De Ville?”

“No, I do not quite believe in it, there might be something, though, which passes for witchcraft but has a natural explanation.”

“I have heard that you have dealt with natives so often as a detective and you are so familiar with all our habits – better than me – that you know hundred times more about these things than I have ever heard of. Amongst natives –as you know– the woman never come in contact with these things.”

“Do you think it would be worth consulting your grandfather?”

“Oh! Colonel de Ville, you saw him yourself. He is so old that he is nearly senile. He won’t understand anything if you talk to him.”

“Have you ever saw a mamba before?”

“Yes, when I was a child there were mambas killed at the missionary station a number of times – never afterwards.”

“Have you ever seen them as often as now here at Avonduur.”

“No, never in my life.”

Suddenly De Ville came close to Juanita with a little notebook in his hand: “Listen, Juanita:
Oh, Deep River, Oh, dark stream,
How long did I wait, how long did I dream,
The blade of love in my heart turning?
- In your embrace ends all my grief

What is the Deep River – the Dark Stream?”

“You asked me about this before in the same words, Colonel de Ville. My answer again is that everybody should interpret it in an own way. It depends on everybody’s sensitivities.”

“But what is your feeling and interpretation, Juanita? The River was a symbol for you – of what? Did the Deep River and the Dark stream refer to death, Juanita?”

“Yes, you could say death, Colonel de Ville. It is good if you think in this direction.”

“But how can Death satisfy your deep desires, extinguish the flame of hate, withdraw the dagger of love from your heart?”

“Does death not give everything we desire?”

“But all the lines about love, Juanita – have you ever been in love? Have you ever had a lover?”

“It is prohibited to us, Colonel de Ville.”

“What do you mean, Juanita?”

“How could I have a lover or think of love? A white would despise me and I despise a native. I’m standing on the tip of two abysses. Therefore love is something prohibited to me. You see, Colonel de Ville, it is the black blood in my veins. The white blood does not count. Maybe the black blood in my veins is the Dark Stream which the song mentions!”

“Do you know how snakes call on one another in the veldt, Juanita?”

For a moment she looked straight at him with questions in her eyes.

“No, Colonel de Ville, I don’t know. You tell me.”

“ I also don’t know from my own experience. I thought that you, who grew up in the veldt, would know such things.”

“Were you never in love with a white boy, Juanita?”

“I already told you, Colonel de Ville, that such things are prohibited to make. Do you get pleasure from hurting me?”

Now there was a dangerous sparkle in her eyes, and I could see how she clasped her little hands; but she continued presenting an immovable front to her torturer.

Suddenly De Ville asks: “Were you ever in love with your employer, Boy van Niekerk?”

There was a sob in her voice when she answered: “Have you, in the presence of God, the right to ask me that, Colonel de Ville?”

“No right in the least. And if you refuse to answer I will stop immediately.”

“And that will create the conviction with you that I dare not answer...But what is the purpose of all the questions, Colonel de Ville? Do you seek to torture me or to make me angry? What are you looking for?”

“Now you are cross-questioning me, Juanita! The understanding was that I alone will ask the questions.

“Is there still something deeper in my heart that you want to tore out, Colonel de Ville?”

Her eyes swam in tears when she asked this question, and I could not control my impatience and unhappiness with De Ville any longer.

“I really think that you have gone far enough now, Sois,” I said with a bitter tone which brought my friend immediately to reflection.

With a smile towards me he beckoned Juanita backwards: “It is enough for now if you all are becoming agitated! We will take the case further later, Juanita.”

With a scornful jerk of her head she turned around and quickly left the room. I’m sure that she only waited to be out of the door to burst in tears. I felt angry enough to insult De Ville there and then. But he anticipated it by putting his hand amicably on my shoulder. “I know everything that you feel, Paul,” he said softly, “but you are wrong. We are stirring in a dark affair where the lives of loved ones are in the greatest danger. When it is about life and death, then our tears don’t count.”

“I hope though that it is the end,” I said. “Thus far you have achieved nothing.”

“On the contrary my dear friend,” he answered, “I learned everything I wanted to know. I am now within tangible distance to the truth. Soon you would have to admit that my rough method was justified.”

I must admit that I could not avoid the feeling that it was nothing but a mere promise from Sois, purely to sooth my dissatisfaction. He was never a braggart, but this I could not believe that he really would confirm his words. Little could I imagine how close we were already to the end of this mysterious case.

All four of us were hardened bridge players and since the first day of our visit had the habit of playing a few rounds every evening before going to bed. We usually played in the dining room, but on this particular hot night, and on the suggestion by De Ville we decided to play on the veranda which was lightened by a big movable lamp. Juanita was given the task to bring out the table and to place the necessary chairs. According to habit she placed the table in the corner of the granadilla. All four of us were on the veranda while Juanita was busy with this work, and the other three of us were hardly terrified when De Ville suddenly and pressingly during the absence of the young servant girl whispered to us: "Don't let her notice that we are in the least aware of her, but when I call out for help, then I pray to you to do what I say without hesitating for a moment. Remember that your lives depend on it if my suspicion is correct – and I do not doubt anymore."

We were so close to the corner that we had to make way to allow Juanita to place the table in its position. On the side closest to the granadilla she placed Marie's easy-chair. De Ville was busy with a lively argument about the latest development of bridge in America, which was apparently just for this occasion. He was sideways turned to Juanita, but I could see that he kept her in view from the corner of his eye. She seemed in a hurry and nervous. I could see her hands shake when she straightened the table cloth. There were still signs of recent tears around her eyes. Her last assignment was to place a large leather cushion and a dark stuffed feather quilt over Marie's chair. Just when she finished this and came past us again De Ville suddenly grabbed her one arm. He intended seizing both her arms, but his wounds slowed him down considerably and Juanita moved with great agility.

"Grab her other hand! Grab her other hand!" he called out repeatedly, while he was wrestling with the young servant girl. Boy was so surprised that he looked on the struggle without moving. It was me who seized the wrist of her left arm just when she took hold of De Ville's throat. She was incredibly strong and agile, and for a few minutes she resisted with the utmost violence. She uttered no words, but on her face was the expression of insane anger and in her dark eyes was the flame of animal cruelty. We two men though were too strong for her, and just as vehement as her resistance, just as sudden and unexpected was her surrender.

"It is enough, Colonel de Ville," she said gasping, "do with me what you want."

"Hold both her arms, Doctor," was his order, "I do not trust her."

She responded with a bitter laugh and held her arms out to me. With the precision of a practised detective De Ville stroke with his hands over her body as if looking for some or other hidden weapon. In front and at the back he repeated the action without any results while Juanita viewed him with derision. The he suddenly stooped and moved the seam of her dress through his fingers. Nearly immediately he had some or other object between his fingers.

“Take the knife from my waistcoat pocket, Boy,” he asked, without letting go of the object. With a single cut he loosened it from the seam and showed us a little square packet, fastened in rough cloth.

It was Juanita who uttered the first words. Through her panting she started to utter stuttering fragmented sentences: “You won Francois de Ville...I see that you know. Don’t torture me anymore...I’m ready to die...What do I care? ... What is there left in life for me? I am not ashamed...I am proud...I always loved Boy... and there was a time when he also loved me...I know...A woman always knows. But I have black blood in my veins, and then he was taken away from me...But I could not give him up – I could not give him up.”

And then she started sobbing, while she tried with a jerk of the head to shake the tears from her eyes, because I was still holding onto her arms.

“Let her go,” said De Ville in a softer tone. “She is harmless now; but get away from the dark corner; it is there where she set her murderous trap.” And to Juanita: “You can go now unfortunate one. There will be no further punishment. You have already undergone your punishment and on your conscience (if you have one) will eternally rest the blood guilt. You will never forget that you sent the innocent washing woman to a terrible death.”

She looked pleadingly at Boy for a considerable time as if she expected of him to act, then she slowly walked into the house.

On the table De Ville placed the little cloth packet. He shows us when he shakes it a little how a grey powder like smoke is emitted. “Do you know what it is?” he asked me. But I still had no idea. “It is the dried dust which is separated by the female mamba. Juanita of course learned this from her grandfather. When old Brink told us about the tortoise I remembered hearing about Native doctors who enticed snakes over enormous distances this way to a particular place or person. All that is necessary is to pull such a parcel through the veldt. The males will follow such a track for over a hundred miles, and the smell stays effective for months. It also has the effect of bringing the affected snake to a condition of extreme agitation. Juanita brought the parcel into use when she returned from her visit to the mission station...It was the story of the tortoise which provided me with the key and Juanita’s song The Deep River. I suspected that her Dark Stream was something symbolical and linked to her feelings, and it suddenly occurred to me that her Dark Stream was a mamba. And then suddenly the full tragedy of her life unfolded in my imagination. I could understand the story of her unhappy love quite easily; I could understand what might develop in such a stormy soul; and above all the exceptional doubling of personality which the unfortunate creature had to endure, a condition which complicated her frame of mind.”

I must still add this: Two days later the corpse of Juanita was found in the poplar bush with two snake marks on her shoulder. She was in her native dress and she still had a parcel with the glandular dust in her possession. That is how she eventually waded herself through her Deep River.

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The Afrikaans writer, Eugène Marais, was born on 9 January 1871 in Pretoria. He worked as a clerk in a lawyer's office and then as journalist at the *Transvaal Advertiser*. At the age of nineteen he became the editor and later the owner of *Land en Volk* (Country and Nation) in which he published some poems and articles in Afrikaans. He became a morphine addict in 1894. In 1896 he moved to Europe where he studied law and immersed himself in the occult. In 1902 he left Europe on a secret expedition to smuggle weapons to the Boer forces during the Anglo-Boer War. On the way his expedition heard that peace was concluded. Back in South Africa he worked as a journalist and advocate. In 1907 he moved to the Waterberg where he made a study of the behaviour of baboons, eventually published as *The Soul of the Ape* (1969) and *Burgers van die Berge* (1938 Comrades of the Mountains). Other important publications of his, in English and Afrikaans, are *Dwaalstories* (Stories of Wandering 1927), *The Soul of the White Ant* (1934), *Versamelde Gedigte* (Collected Poems 1933), *Die Huis van Vier Winde* (The House of Four Winds 1938) and *Leeus van Magoeba* (Lions of Magoeba), and *The Road to Waterbert and Other Essays* (1972). He committed suicide in 1936.