

Forgotten Faces

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Extract

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Chapter One

One last, painful contraction pushed Isaiah Thomas Strong onto fine linen sheets. Dr Owen, a dapper man in a burgundy waistcoat, the buttonholes of which strained over a spreading waistline, snapped orders at a midwife, two nurses and a wet nurse who hadn't yet taken off her cloak.

Beyond the bedroom door, fifty household servants carried out their duties. Outside, a team of gardeners tended flowers, fruits and vegetables for consumption by the occupants of Marstone Court, a palatial residence of castellated turrets and large windows surrounded by acres of parkland. Two men and two boys, hired from the village, looked after the sheep and deer which kept the grass short beneath the stout oaks and majestic elms.

Those that heard the newborn's cry raised their heads, wiped the sweat from their brows and murmured a swift 'God bless' for the latest addition to the Strong family.

Squalling and wriggling, the baby was snatched by the midwife, bound in red flannel and covered with a soft white shawl.

Horatia Strong arched her back in an effort to endure the fading pains of a long labour, the room around her a blur of opulence and activity. Silk hangings floated from the tester bed but she might just as well have been in a barn or a miserable cottage of damp walls and rotting thatch. All she cared about was that the pain was over. Nothing else mattered.

'A fine boy,' exclaimed Dr Owen, overbearingly attentive and as charming as a courtier. Leaving the babe to the women, he absorbed himself in checking the mother's heartbeat and pulse. She was his most affluent patient, and he had every intention of taking care of her and his income.

Collapsing back on her pillow, Horatia vowed this son would be the last child she ever brought into the world.

‘Would you like to look at him?’

Her eyes flashed open. Of course she would!

She was forty years old and had carried fear as well as a child during this pregnancy. From deep within she found the strength to push herself up from the pillows, her heart thudding with trepidation.

If anything was wrong with him, they’d say so . . .

She looked with relief upon her son’s crumpled face as he mewled like a kitten in the arms of the midwife. Labour had lasted thirty-six hours, twenty hours longer than with her daughter, Emerald. But that was eight years previously and she’d been younger then. This baby had taken his time. Endless pain, endless pushing and the feeling that her body was being ripped in half had left her wanting to sleep for a week. But when the midwife showed her his bundled form, the tension – far more intense than the pain she had endured – left her body. She touched his head with her fingertips. He was dark-haired and there were no unwanted physical characteristics. She was safe. Her arm fell exhausted to her side. The old secret that had so long niggled at the back of her mind, no longer mattered. No one would ever know about Max Heinkel, her father’s chosen heir in the event that she did not marry Tom. He would never be acknowledged and now she would make sure he never would.

‘You must rest,’ said Dr Owen.

‘I intend to.’ Her eyes closed, as fresh linens were applied to stem the bleeding. At the same time, strips of linen were wound around and around her stomach.

‘Tighter,’ she murmured.

The nurses paused and exchanged hesitant glances.

Horatia’s eyes flicked open. ‘Tighter,’ she repeated. ‘I’m not a sow who doesn’t mind a flopping belly. Tighter! As tight as you can!’

To most women, the birth of a child was compensation enough for the loss of a few inches of waistline, but not Horatia. Being swollen with impending childbirth had been bad enough. Hating her bloated body, she had stayed indoors during the latter months of her pregnancy, determined she would not venture out again until her belly and her bloom had returned to normal.

The women carried out her orders and the doctor attempted to soothe her with platitudes – as if she needed any.

‘Leave me to sleep.’

The doctor leaned over her, his words silky. ‘The wet nurse will ensure your son is properly fed.’

‘So she should. That’s what she’s paid for,’ she murmured before falling asleep.

She needed rest, but her sharp mind had not entirely shut down. Released from a secret worry she’d been nursing for months, her mind turned to the subject that was closest to her heart: the Strong Empire. She couldn’t wait to get back to the cut and thrust of city commerce: the sugar, shipping and property interests, a solid base laid down in the eighteenth century on which future business could and would be constructed.

The Bristol sugar trade was not what it was. Horatia had known that for a long time. Thanks to Napoleon’s encouragement, Europe was growing field after field of sugar beet. Transport costs were minimal compared to importing cane sugar from Barbados. The writing was on the wall.

Obsessed with what she would do once she was up on her feet, she gave little thought to her child, safe in the knowledge that he was being properly taken care of and that he was everything she’d hoped he would be. The boy would fill her husband with joy, and would be a bridge between them. Tom would be thrilled when he got back from Barbados, his expression bright with wonder. She remembered that he’d been tongue-tied when he’d first seen his daughter. Emerald had been a little mite with a screwed-up face, her complexion red with anger as she screamed her way into the world. Her fists had been clenched and had reminded Horatia of Tom in the days when he’d indulged in bare-knuckle boxing. But a son? Imagine how he would be with a son!

Isaiah Thomas, the only name she had ever contemplated calling her newborn baby, had been less vocal when he’d been born than Emerald had been, though his skin had seemed redder and his hair, a black thatch, had curled like tiny feathers all over his head. The dark hair had worried her a little. But each time a nagging doubt threatened to rise, she reassured herself again that Tom had very dark hair, that the child’s hair was just like his.

Five days later she was ready to see her son again. Sears, her personal maid, entered with the breakfast tray and beamed when she saw she was awake.

‘You do look well, madam!’

‘I feel well. In fact, I feel quite marvellous.’

Glowing with satisfaction, she pushed herself up against a mountain of crisp linen pillows. She patted her bound stomach and eyed it thoughtfully. She wanted to look her best when her husband returned, to preen like a peacock, all shiny and svelte, bedecked in fine clothes and jewels, having produced the most precious jewel of all. What should she wear for his homecoming? In her mind she ran through the contents of her wardrobe: the silks, the velvets, the linens; the tartan, the cream, the royal blue and the yellow. Mentally, she chose a violet taffeta that fell in velvet-trimmed frills the colour of wild blackberries. Would it still fit her?

‘Sears, my stomach is like a wobbly blancmange. It cannot be allowed to stay that way. I want you to get my corset ready. I want to try it on right away.’

Sears, a thin-faced woman with high cheekbones who might have been beautiful if she wasn’t so gaunt, looked aghast. ‘Madam! You have only just given birth. Surely you should be staying in bed for fourteen days at least.’

Horatia was adamant. ‘Nonsense. Isn’t it true that the washer-woman who comes in from the village had her baby on Monday and was in here at the scrubbing board by Wednesday morning?’

The fingers of her personal maid folded tightly over the breakfast tray on which an invalid’s breakfast of salted porridge, a boiled egg, half a kipper and a glass of milk had been placed. ‘But she’s used to such exertions,’ said Sears, her attention fixed on the job in hand as she set the tray down on the side table. ‘I do believe that was her fifth confinement, if my memory serves me correct.’

‘Hardly a confinement if she was scrubbing my laundry just a few days later,’ said Horatia. ‘Nevertheless, I will get into those corsets. There will be celebrations when my husband gets back. He has a son. We must both look our best.’

‘Indeed, madam.’

‘Every man wants a son. And now he’s got one.’

‘He will be pleased, madam. Judging by his lusty cry, he’s a very bonny baby. No doubt the doctor will allow you to see him today?’

‘I see no reason why not. I am completely recovered. You haven’t seen him yourself?’

‘No, madam. But I have heard him cry. The nursery is only just below my room.’

‘Good.’

Sears dropped a swift curtsey. ‘I’ll be back for the tray in a while.’

Horatia’s thoughts were suddenly elsewhere. When Emerald was born, it had been twenty-four hours before she held her, and over a month before anyone else except the doctor, the monthly nurse, the wet nurse and her husband saw her. It was normal for a child to be secluded during its first months of life. Even so, a mix of impatience and nervousness crept over her as she waited, her eyes fixed on the bedroom door. She began to tap her fingers on the quilt and vowed to give Dr Owen a piece of her mind. Perhaps he was merely being considerate. She had been in labour thirty-six hours – twenty hours longer than with Emerald. But she was impatient to hold him again, to bond with a son who was also a weapon in her war to gain, and even maintain, her husband’s interest. She knew that, deep in his heart, Tom’s affection lay with Blanche Heinkel, with her stone-grey eyes, honey-coloured skin and luxurious black hair. Horatia’s half-sister. In the past, it had been hard to avoid Blanche and her husband Conrad. They had attended the same society events and even if Tom’s acknowledgement of Blanche had not gone beyond the normal niceties, she had felt his passion for her burning like an unseen flame. Now Blanche was a widow and this worried Horatia. Only a son, a legitimate son, she had told herself, would ensure Tom did not stray.

It was no good. She couldn’t wait any longer and the gold tassel of the bell pull was within easy reach. Sears answered it.

‘I want to see the monthly nurse.’

Sears bobbed one of her deep curtseys and went off to tell the nurse she was needed. It was ten minutes before she heard her footsteps and the thud of a fist on her bedroom door.

‘Enter.’

Horatia folded back the silky blue coverlet as the nurse approached. The woman’s reticence annoyed her.

‘Well, come along,’ she snapped. ‘It’s been five days since my son was born, I want to see him. I want to see him *now*!’

The nurse seemed nervous. ‘The doctor said—’

‘Yes! Yes! To wait until he got here. But I’ve waited long enough. Now, give me my child.’

The woman looked perplexed, her breasts rising and falling with the rapidity of her breathing. When she turned to go, her progress across the room seemed unnecessarily slow.

Horatia frowned impatiently. 'What's the matter?'

The nurse had seemed a jolly character before the birth, her cheeks as ruddy as autumn apples, and a crescent smile permanently dimpling her face. Now she seemed pensive, as though she wished she was elsewhere, anywhere except in the presence of a mother wanting to see her son. She opened her mouth to say something then shut it quickly and left the room, returning ten minutes or so later with the baby. Her fat face screwed into a nervous smile, she handed Horatia the child then stepped away from the bed.

Bursting with joy, Horatia turned the corner of the shawl away from the child's face and was instantly aware that something had changed. Her worst fears, the terrible doubt that had clawed at her pregnant body, were now laid bare in this child.

The black thatch of hair was more crinkly than she'd thought. The pink face had turned brown, the colour extending all over his body – except for the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet. Her smile froze as she stared at the rosebud mouth that sucked the air, hoping to be fed.

'I don't understand . . .' she began.

Before she had chance to say more, the door opened. Sears showed Dr Owen into her room. He looked nervous, his deep-set eyes, like buttons in his face, darting about the room as if seeking some way of escape.

Horatia looked up at him and winced when she saw the wary look and the way his mouth moved as though he were trying to form the right words.

Her voice was cold as ice. 'Tell her to go,' she said, her face straying briefly from the doctor to Sears, who was beaming from ear to ear and obviously hoping to linger and catch a glimpse of the new baby.

The doctor nodded at the lady's maid. Her smile dissolved like melted snow. She knew when her mistress meant what she said.

Without any trace of her former joy, Horatia glared at the doctor, her jaw set and her eyes hard. In her silk-edged peignoir and Chinese silk shawl in jade green decorated with flowers and birds of paradise,

her hair hanging loose, she should have looked radiant. Instead she looked as if she'd been carved from rock.

'Go away, woman!' Horatia barked at the nurse who hadn't moved fast enough for her liking. 'Leave us alone!'

The nurse scurried away, her head bowed all the way to the door.

Horatia felt sick. Her heart thudded against her ribcage and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. At last she said, 'This is not the child I saw the other day. This child is dark. Mine was not dark. It was red when I saw it. What is this?'

In her heart of hearts, she knew the truth. The child had African blood. But she wanted it confirmed. She wanted to hear the doctor explain to her that her eyesight was out of focus, that the child was a foundling, that there'd been a mix-up . . . anything but the truth.

The doctor cleared his throat, hitched his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets and frowned thoughtfully as he considered his explanation.

'I find this very difficult, Mrs Strong. But please be assured, you can trust me to be discreet. This is not the first time I have come upon such an occurrence in those families with interests in the West Indies . . .'

She was quick to interrupt. 'He wasn't this colour when he was born.'

Dr Owen rubbed at the nape of his neck. 'Apparently, it's quite usual. They're born quite light but . . . discolour gradually.'

'*Discolour!* Hardly an appropriate term, Doctor. As though he is not quite perfect or has become stained by tea or coffee or even tar!' She realized her voice verged on hysterical, but it reflected how she was feeling.

'He is still your child.'

'Really?'

He was offering her a very reasonable excuse. Many families with interests in the West Indies did indeed have African blood, which did, on occasion, lead to dark-skinned throwbacks.

But what if Tom saw the truth in her eyes? What would she do then?

She decided on attack and outright denial.

'And what do you think my husband will say about that? And other people, my friends, relatives?'

How will *I* cope? she thought. The small form snuggled

contentedly in her arms. The consequences of giving birth to a coloured child appalled her. She dragged her gaze away.

‘He can’t be mine!’

Embarrassed, Dr Owen looked at the floor. ‘The child definitely has African antecedents. As I said, it is not unusual in families with West Indian connections, especially when families are separated . . . white men separated from white wives. Men have needs, and throw-backs have been known to occur, thus reflecting those previous . . . ah, indiscretions. He is your child, though born two weeks earlier than he should have been.’

Horatia felt herself turning cold. ‘You know this?’

‘Of course. The fingernails are the commonest giveaway.’ He went on to explain certain other points, but she wasn’t really listening. Two weeks made all the difference. Two weeks in her life, nine months ago.

Ancestry was the obvious excuse, the one she would have to give Tom. She thought of her father, of her half-sister Blanche, daughter of a former slave. She had accepted Blanche as an error on her father’s part. Men behaving like men, she could understand. And men could get away with having tainted blood, but giving birth to a coloured child? A woman would be ostracized. Tom would be devastated. Could she be sure that he’d accept the doctor’s explanation? Could she chance that he’d accept it?

Imagine seeing this child every day. Imagine how you will feel each time you see him. The child will remind you of what you are and what you have done. Can you really look Tom in the eyes and tell him what the doctor said?

All her dreams crashed earthwards but her mind was made up. A mistake had been made and, regardless of the cost, it had to be rectified.

Placing the child on the bed, she clasped her hands tightly in front of her and stared at the patterns on the bedspread as she considered her options. A host of satin roses danced before her eyes. She imagined the gossip, the cruel remarks and the slurs on her honour. The gossips would have a field day. No matter how much a son would mean to him, she could not, indeed she *would* not, present Tom with a coloured child.

‘I can make arrangements for him,’ said the doctor as if reading her thoughts.

Horatia's nostrils flared and her throat juddered. She took a deep breath and made a conscious effort not to look at the perfectly formed face, the tiny hands and the rosebud mouth, pursed as if waiting to be kissed.

Her son began to cry, a demanding yell of a hungry child coveting his mother's warmth and sustenance. She would not pick him up. If she did, she'd be lost. Emotion would override common sense.

'I cannot keep him. It wouldn't be . . .' She searched for the appropriate words. It wasn't easy, and the word she chose seemed less than adequate. 'Acceptable,' she said, and felt her blood turn to ice.

The doctor paused as he too considered what the most powerful woman in the city wanted him to do. Horatia Strong, although married to an adopted orphan who had become a Strong, had inherited the family fortune in her own right. Her father had recognized that she was his most talented child and had, in his Will, overlooked his sons in favour of his daughter. Horatia was respected by those of influence in the city and known to be as ruthless in business as any man. He could well understand her reasoning. She could not allow anyone to find out that she had given birth to a coloured child, and certainly not her husband.

'Are you quite sure?'

She refused to look the doctor in the eyes, clenched her jaw and closed her heart. Tight-lipped, she said something then that she would regret for the rest of her life:

'I don't want him. Take him away.'

The doctor eyed her speculatively. The Strong's paid well for his services, and he had no intention of losing their patronage. 'Do you want to know where he'll go?'

She shook her head and turned her head away, as the bundle squirmed beside her, his small movements travelling through the bedding in soft little flutters.

'The nurse can be trusted,' the doctor said. 'I'll get her to come with me now on the pretext that there is something amiss with the child, but I will keep his face covered. Luckily the wet nurse has very poor eyesight so is easily deceived. Your servants will learn via a message I send that the child has died. You'll see neither the nurse nor the child again. Will that suit?'

Horatia kept her gaze fixed on the window and the garden beyond.

The trees were swiftly turning green. Spring was coming. Everything was bursting with life. Birds were building nests, lambs were being born; the world was busy renewing itself.

‘I will write to my husband in the West Indies. I will tell him his son did not survive.’

‘He will be disappointed, I take it?’

Horatia nodded and her jaw trembled with the effort of keeping it firm. ‘Very. He wanted a son.’

‘They’ll think him very well dressed, sir,’ said the nurse, as the doctor’s gig rattled down the road towards St Philip’s Marsh.

‘You know what to say?’

‘Yes, sir. That the child is of a good family, but the daughter got involved with a foreigner of Middle Eastern extraction.’

‘Very good, Daisy.’ Dr Owen gave her a few coins. ‘Two sovereigns for your silence. Two sovereigns for the warden of this establishment. They won’t ask any questions.’

‘No, sir.’

The nurse secreted two of the coins in her apron pocket and tied the other two in a corner of the shawl.

The doctor caught hold of her shoulder. ‘And neither will you. Do you understand? No questions. None at all!’

‘Yes,’ she said, nodding vehemently, her eyes never leaving his face. ‘Yes. I mean no, sir. No questions at all, sir.’

Dr Owen pulled his chestnut cob to a halt at the corner of the stony road leading to St Philip’s Workhouse. He watched thoughtfully as Daisy made her way towards the gate. It would have been easier to have pulled the bell and left the child outside, but leaving a little money might help the child survive. The mortality rate of babies left in the Workhouse was exceptionally high. There were few survivors.

Days went by and the parkland surrounding Marstone Court was sprinkled with wildflowers, an abundance of white, yellow, pink and blue. There was emptiness in Horatia’s heart, although she convinced herself she’d done the right thing. But it wasn’t easy to forget. As her strength returned, she reconsidered what she had done and whether she could go some way to improving matters. She was having terrible dreams, and in the morning the pain and regret remained. Her hand

shook when she wrote to Tom. She kept her words plain. It was better that way.

When Dr Owen called to check that she was fully recovered, she gave in and asked him where he had taken the child.

He looked surprised. 'Do you really want to know?'

'I have to,' she said softly. 'It is my guilt, and my family's guilt. Though I would still swear you to secrecy.'

He told her.

'You may go,' she said without giving him chance to examine her, then turned her back on him and looked out on the verdant parkland.

'You have done the right thing,' he said in an obvious bid to reassure her.

She did not answer and he knew better than to pursue the matter.

Once the door was closed behind him, Horatia tore open the lid of her writing desk. After writing the most important note of her life, she sealed it in an envelope, called for a carriage and then sent the butler to call for Sears.

'I need to take some air,' Horatia said to her maid. 'Fetch my walking-out bonnet and my cape. Gloves, too.'

Sears, who usually accompanied her on shopping trips and general carriage rides, immediately fetched Horatia's walking clothes and also brought her own.

'You can hang your things up, Sears. I am going out alone.'

The corners of her maid's mouth drooped downwards and her cheeks sagged.

Sears watched the carriage leave, Horatia stiff and upright, staring straight ahead. The maid's bottom lip trembled. Her mistress was her life.

Sears busied herself tidying the contents of drawers, layering lavender bags between underwear, smoothing dresses and polishing her mistress's shoes and boots, the latter usually collected by an undermaid and cleaned by a boot boy. Filling her time helped keep her from feeling slighted. After all that she'd done! Nothing had ever been too much trouble, she thought as she rearranged shoes into colours and polished the silver knobs on the many bottles of creams Horatia used. Between each task, she got up and peered out of the window in case she had not heard the sound of horses returning.

She couldn't understand why Horatia had gone out alone. No lady of position ever went out without a chaperone. It just wasn't done.

Sears could not help but believe that her mistress had a secret mission and wondered what it was.

She dare not ask, of course. On Horatia's return, Sears fell on her, taking her bonnet, smoothing her cloak, telling her that everything was in order in her room, and that she trusted she'd had a good day.

But Horatia brushed aside her questions and retired to the study with orders that she was not to be disturbed.

Sears ran all the way up to the top floor, hid herself in an end room and burst into tears. Once she had regained her self-control, she went downstairs and waited for the moment when she could ask the only other person who knew where her mistress had been.

Later, when the coachman was rubbing down the horses, she asked him where he had taken Mrs Strong. She felt her face reddening in response to his scornful grin. It was well known that she doted on her mistress.

'Jealous, are you?'

Sears was indignant. 'I just asked you a question. I wondered if she was all right. She's had a baby, you know.'

'We all know,' he said disdainfully.

Sears felt as though she were going to cry. 'And the poor thing died. You can't possibly imagine how sad that makes a woman feel.'

Her ruse worked. The coachman, unwilling to be faced with a grizzling woman, relented. 'If you must know, she went to the Post Office in Bristol.'

Sears looked at him as though he'd just told her he could fly. Her sobs ceased immediately. 'The Post Office? Why would she want to go there?'

'To post a letter?'

That wasn't what she meant, but she wasn't going to bandy observations with a common coachman. The fact was that post at Marstone Court was usually given to a junior footman to take to the Post Office, perhaps once a week. No member of the Strong family ever went to the Post Office in person. It just wasn't done.

As she walked back to the house, her wide skirt bouncing as a result of her small, jerky steps, she decided she would not mention the matter to her mistress. Of course she wouldn't! Losing the baby and having to organize its funeral had upset Horatia. She'd had to do everything by herself and had felt a need to share the event with her husband by letter.

‘It’s only natural, my poor sweet,’ she murmured, and dabbed at her nose, satisfied that she’d guessed correctly.

Horatia’s heart felt more at ease after posting the letter. All she had to do now was lie to her husband. In the meantime she concentrated on regaining her strength, threw herself into business and social matters, and practised in private what she would say when Tom returned: ‘We’ve lost a son, but still have a daughter. Let’s be thankful for that.’