A Respectable Trade

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Extract

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Chapter One



Mehuru woke at dawn with the air cool on his outstretched body. He opened his eyes in the half-darkness and sniffed the air as if the light wind might bring him some strange scent. His dream, an uneasy vision of a ship slipping her anchor in shadows and sailing quietly down a deep rocky gorge, was with him still.

He got up from his sleeping platform, wrapped a sheet around him and went quietly to the door. The city of Oyo was silent. He looked down his street; no lights showed. Only in the massive palace wall could he see a moving light as a servant walked from room to room, the torch shining from each window he passed.

There was nothing to fear, there was nothing to make him uneasy, yet still he stood wakeful and listening as if the coop-coop-coop of the hunting owls or the little squeaks from the bats which clung around the stone towers of the palace might bring him a warning.

He gave a little shiver and turned from the doorway. The dream had been very clear – just one image of a looped rope dropping from a stone quayside and snaking through the water to the prow of a ship, whipping its way up the side as it was hauled in, and then the ship moving silently away from the land. There should be nothing to fear in such a sight but the dream had been darkened by a brooding sense of threat which lived with him still.

He called quietly for his slave boy, Siko, who slept at the

I daresay his lordship might say – it is a 'Respectable 'Trade with Good prospects.

You will be Concerned as to the House you would occupy as my wife. You saw Only my 'Warehouse apartment and I assure you that I am moving Shortly, with my Sister who will remain living with Me, to a Commodious and 'Elegant house in the best 'Part of town, namely Queens Square, which his lordship may know.

As to Settlements and 'Dowry – these certainly should be Arranged between his lordship and myself – but may I Assure you that you will find me Generous if you are Kind enough to look on my 'Proposal with favour.

I am Sensible of the Honour you would do me, Madam, and Conscious of the Advantage your connexion would bring me. 'But may I also hope that this 'Proposal of mine will 'Preserve you from a lifetime of employment to which your 'Delicate talents and Aristocratic Connexions must render you unfit?

I remain, your most obedient servant,

Josiah Cole.

Josiah sprinkled sand on the letter with a steady hand and blew it gently away. He rose from his chair and went to the high window and looked down. Below him were the wharves and dark water of the Redclift dock. The tide was in and the ships were bobbing comfortably at the dockside; a steady patter of sound came from their rigging, rattling in the light freezing wind. There was a heap of litter and discarded bales on the Coles' empty wharf, and mooring ropes were still coiled on the cobbles. Josiah had seen his ship *Daisy* set sail on the dawn tide. She should be at sea by now, with his hopes

riding on her voyage. There was nothing that he could do but wait. Wait for news of *Daisy*, and wait for the arrival of his second ship, the *Lily*, labouring slowly through the seas from the West Indies, heavy with a cargo of sugar and rum. His third ship, the *Rose*, should be loading off Africa.

Josiah was not by nature a patient man, but the job of a merchant in the Trade with only three little ships to his name had taught him steadiness of purpose and endless patience. Each voyage took more than a year, and once a ship had sailed from his dock he might hear nothing from her until she returned. He could do nothing to speed her, nothing to enrich himself. Having provisioned and ordered *Daisy* and watched her set sail, there was nothing to do but wait, gazing down at the rubbish slopping on the greasy water of the port. The distinctive smell of his ships – fearful sweat and sickness overlaid with heady alcohol and sugar – hung around the dockside like an infected mist.

Josiah's own clothes were lightly scented; the hair of his wig and his hands were impregnated. He did not know that throughout Friday's interview with Miss Scott she had been pressing her handkerchief to her face to overcome the acrid smell of the Trade, overbearing in his little room above the warehouse and never stronger than when a ship was in dock.

He glanced at the letter in his hand. It was written very fair and plain, as a man of business writes when his orders must be understood and obediently followed. Josiah had never learned an aristocratic scrawl. He looked at it critically. If she showed it to Lord Scott, would he despise the script for its plain-fisted clarity? Was the tone too humble, or was the mention of the Queens Square house, which he had not in any case yet bought, too boastful?

He shrugged. The stubborn ambition that had brought him so far would carry him farther – into social acceptance by the greater men of the city. Without their friendship he

could not make money, without money he could not buy friendship. It was a treadmill – no future for a man. The greater men ran the port and the city of Bristol. Without them Josiah would forever cling to the side of the dock, to the side of the Trade, like a rat on a hemp rope. Miss Scott and her uncle Lord Scott would open doors for him that even his determination could not unlock . . . if she so desired.

Frances opened Josiah's letter and re-read it for the tenth, the twentieth time. She tucked it into the pocket of her plain gown and went down the vaulted marble-floored hall to his lordship's study. She tapped on the door and stepped inside.

Lord Scott looked up from his newspaper. 'Frances?'

'I have had a reply,' she said baldly. 'From the Bristol merchant.'

'Has he offered you the post?'

She shook her head, pulling the letter from her pocket. 'He makes no mention of post or pupils. He has offered me marriage.'

'Good God!' Lord Scott took the letter and scanned it. 'And what do you think?'

'I hardly know what to think,' she said hesitantly. 'I can't stay with Mrs Snelling. I dislike her, and I cannot manage her children.'

'You could stay here . . .'

She gave him a quick rueful smile, her pinched face suddenly softening with a gleam of mischief. 'Don't be silly, Uncle.'

He grinned in reply. 'Lady Scott will follow my wishes. If I say that you are our guest then that should be an end of it.'

'I do not think that I would add to her ladyship's comfort, nor she to mine.' Her ladyship and her three high-bred daughters would not welcome a poor relation into their house, and Frances knew that before long she would be fetch-

ing and carrying for them, an unpaid, unwanted, unwaged retainer. 'I would rather work for my keep.'

His lordship nodded. 'You're not bred to it,' he observed. 'My brother should have set aside money for you, or provided you with a training.'

Frances turned her head away, blinking. 'I suppose he did not die on purpose.'

'I am sorry, I did not mean to criticise him.'

She nodded, and rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. Her ladyship would have fluttered an embroidered handkerchief. Lord Scott rather liked his niece's lack of wiles.

'This may be the best offer I ever get,' Frances said abruptly.

He nodded. She had never been a beauty, but now she was thirty-four and the gloss of youth had been worn off her face by grief and disappointment. She had not been brought up to be a governess and her employers did not treat her with any particular consideration. Lord Scott had found her first post, but had seen her grow paler and doggedly unhappy in recent months. She had replied to an advertisement from Cole and Sons thinking that in a prosperous city merchant's house she might be treated a little better than in a country house of a woman who delighted to snub her.

'What did you think of him as a man?' he asked.

She shrugged. 'He was polite and pleasant,' she said. 'I think he would treat me well enough. He is a trader – he understands about making agreements and keeping them.'

'I cannot write a contract to provide for your happiness.'

She gave him her half-sad rueful smile. 'I don't expect to be happy,' she said. 'I am not a silly girl. I hope for a comfortable position, and a husband who can provide for me. I am escaping drudgery, I am not falling in love.'

He nodded. 'You sound as if you have made up your mind.'

She thought for a moment. 'Would you advise me against it?'

'No. I can offer you nothing better, and you could fare a lot worse.'

Frances stood up and straightened her shoulders as if she were accepting a challenge. Her uncle had never thought of courage as being a woman's virtue but it struck him that she was being very brave, that she was taking her life into her own hands and trying to make something of it.

'I'll do it then,' she said. She glanced at him. 'You will support me?'

'I will write to him and supervise the contract; but if he mistreats you or if you dislike his life I will not be able to help you. You will be a married woman, Frances, you will be his property as much as his ships or his stock.'

'It cannot be worse slavery than working for Mrs Snelling,' she said. 'I'll do it.'

Mehuru, dressed very fine in a long embroidered gown of indigo silk and with a staff in his hand carved with Snake, his personal guardian deity, strolled up the hill to the palace of Old Oyo with Siko walking behind him.

It was yet another full meeting of the council in two long months of meetings. The Alafin – the king – was on his throne, his mother seated behind him. The head of the military was there, his scarred face turning everywhere, always suspicious. The council, whose responsibility was for law and enforcement throughout the wide federation of the Yoruba Empire, was all there; and Mehuru's immediate superior, the high priest, was on his stool.

Mehuru slipped in and stood at the priest's shoulder. The debate had been going on for months; it was of such importance that no-one wanted to hurry the decision. But a consensus was slowly emerging.

'We need the guns,' the old soldier said briefly. 'We have to trade with the white men to buy the guns we need. Without guns and cannon I cannot guarantee the security of the

kingdom. The kingdom of Dahomey, which has traded slaves for guns, is fast becoming the greatest of all. I warn you: they will come against us one day, and without guns of our own we cannot survive. That is my final word. We have to trade with the white men for their armaments, and they will take nothing from us but slaves. They will no longer buy gold nor ivory nor pepper. They will take nothing but men.'

There was a long thoughtful silence. The Alafin, an elected monarch, turned to the head of the council. 'And your view?'

The man rose to his feet and bowed. 'If we capture our own people, or kidnap men from other nations, we will be ruined within a generation,' he said. 'The strength of the kingdom depends on its peace. A nation which trades in slaves is in continual uproar, making war on individuals, on other nations. And we will never satisfy the white men's need for slaves. They will gobble us up along with our victims.'

He paused. 'Think of our history,' he continued persuasively. 'This great nation started as just one town. All the other cities and nations have chosen to join with us because we guarantee peace and fair trading. We *have* to keep the peace within our borders.'

The king nodded, and the queen, his mother, leaned forward and said something quietly to him. Finally he turned to the chief priest, Mehuru's superior. 'And your final word?'

The man rose. His broad shoulders, thickened by a cape of rich feathers, obscured Mehuru's view of the court and their serious faces. 'It is a sin against the fathers to take a man from his home,' he began. Mehuru knew that his vote was the result of months of meditation and prayer. This was the single most important meeting that had ever been held. On it hung the future of the whole Yoruba nation, perhaps the future of the whole continent of Africa. 'A man should be left free with his people unless he is a criminal. A citizen should be free.'

Mehuru glanced around. The faces were grave, but people were nodding.

'It is a sin against the Earth,' the chief priest pronounced. 'In the end it all comes back to the Earth, the fathers, the ancestors, and the gods. It is a sin to take a man from his field. I say we should not take slaves and sell them. I say we should protect the people within our borders. They should be safe in their fields.'

There was a long silence. Then the king rose to his feet. 'Hear this,' he said. The old women who had the responsibility for recording decisions of the council leaned forward to hear his words. 'This is the decision of the council of the Yoruba kingdom and my command. Slave trading with white men of any nation shall cease at once. Kidnap of slaves within our borders is forbidden. There shall be no safe passage for white men or their agents when they are on slaving hunts. Other trade with the nations of white men such as gold, ivory, leather goods, brassware and spices is allowed.'

There was a murmur of approval and the king seated himself again. 'Now,' he said with a rueful smile, 'we have the policy – all we have to do is to enforce it while black slavers hammer at our western borders and white men's ships cruise up and down our coastline in the south.'

Mehuru leaned forward and whispered to the high priest. The man nodded and rose to his feet. 'The Obalawa Mehuru has made a suggestion,' he said. 'That we of the priesthood should send out envoys to the country and the towns to explain to the people why it is that we are turning away from this profitable trade. Already some cities are making handsome fortunes in this business. We will have to persuade them that it is against their interests. It is not enough simply to make it illegal.'

The king nodded. 'The priests will do this,' he said. 'And we will pass the orders down to the local councillors, from

our council down to the smallest village.' He shot a little smile at Mehuru. 'You can organise it,' he said.

Mehuru bowed low and hid the look of triumph. He would travel to the far north of the Yoruba kingdom, he would speak in the border towns and convince people that slaving was to be banned. He would serve his country in a most important way, and if his mission was successful he would make his name and his fortune.

'I am honoured,' he said respectfully.

Chapter Two



Whiteleaze,
nr Bath,
Somerset.

Thursday 25th September 1787

Dear Mr Cole,

I am Honoured and deeply conscious of the Compliment you pay me in your kind letter and your Proposal.

I was indeed Surprised at the Abrupt termination of our interview before you had explained my Duties or introduced my Pupils; but now I understand.

It gives me great Pleasure to accept your Offer. I will be your wife.

My Uncle, Lord Scott, will Write to you under a separate cover. He tells me he will Visit Bristol shortly to give himself the Pleasure of your Acquaintance, and to Determine the Marriage Contract, and date of the ceremony.

Please convey my Compliments to your Sister Miss Cole.

Your obdt servant,

Frances Scott.

Josiah tapped on the door of the parlour and entered. His sister was seated at the table, the company books spread before her. A small coal fire was unlit in the grate, the room was damp and chill. Her face was pale. Only the tip of her nose showed any colour, reddened by a cold in the head. She was wearing a brown gown with a black jacket and little black mittens. She looked up, pen in hand, as he came in.

'I have a reply from Miss Scott.'

'She has assented?'

'Yes. His lordship himself is coming to Bristol to draw up the marriage contract.'

'I hope it serves its purpose,' Sarah Cole observed coldly. 'It will cost a great deal of money to keep a wife such as her.'

'She will have a dowry,' Josiah pointed out. 'If nothing from her father then her uncle, Lord Scott, is likely to dower her with something.'

'She will need a larger house, and a carriage and a lady's maid.'

Josiah nodded, refusing to argue.

'Her tastes will be aristocratic,' Sarah said disapprovingly.

'It is a venture,' Josiah replied with a small smile. 'Like our others.'

'In the Trade we know the risks. Miss Scott is a new kind of goods altogether.'

Josiah's quick frown warned her that she had gone too far. As his older sister, responsible for him throughout their motherless childhoods, she still retained great power over him; but Josiah could always call on the prestige of being a man. 'We must take care not to offend her,' he said. 'She will find our business very strange at first.'

'She was prepared to come here as an employee,' Sarah reminded him.

'Even so.'

There was a brief irritated silence. Brother and sister waited for the other to speak.

'I'm going to the coffee house,' Josiah said. 'I shall see if anyone is interested in coming into partnership with us for the *Lily*. She is due home at the end of November; we need to buy in trade goods and refit her.'

Sarah glanced at the diary on her desk. 'She set sail from Jamaica this month, God willing.'

Josiah tapped his large foot on the wooden floorboards for luck. The modest buckle on his shoe winked in the light. 'You have the accounts for the *Lily*'s last voyage to hand?'

'You had better seek a partner without showing them. We barely broke even.'

Josiah smiled. His large front teeth were stained with tobacco. 'Very well,' he said. 'But she is a good ship and Captain Merrick is usually reliable.'

Sarah rose from her desk, crossed over to the window and looked down. 'If you see Mr Peters in the coffee house we are still waiting for his money for the equipping of the *Daisy*,' she said. 'The ship sailed two weeks ago and he has not yet paid for his share. We cannot extend credit like this.'

'I'll tell him,' Josiah said. 'I will be home for dinner.' He paused at the door. 'You do not congratulate me on my engagement to be married?'

She did not turn from the window, and her face was hidden from him. He did not see her look of sour resentment. Sarah's marriageable years had slipped away while she worked for her father and then for his heir, her brother, screwing tiny profits out of a risky business. 'Of course,' she said. 'I congratulate you. I hope that it will bring you what you desire.'

Siko was unwilling to leave the city of Oyo. He was a city boy who had sold himself into slavery with Mehuru when his parents died. He had thought that with a young man whose career was centred on the court he would be safe from the discomfort of farming work and rural life. He was deeply reluctant to venture out into the countryside, which he

regarded as a dangerous place inhabited by wild animals and surly peasants.

'For the last time,' Mehuru said abruptly. 'Finish packing and fetch the horses or I shall sell you to a brothel.'

Siko bowed his head at the empty threat and moved only slightly faster. He was confident that Mehuru would never ill-treat him, and indeed he was saving money to buy his freedom from his young master as they had agreed.

'Should we not take porters and guards?' he asked. 'My brother said he would be willing to come with us.'

'We will be travelling along trading routes,' Mehuru said patiently. 'We will be meeting porters and guards on the trading caravans all along the way. If there is any danger on the roads we can travel with them. I am on an urgent mission, we are travelling at speed. You would have us dawdling along the road and stopping at every village.'

'I would have us stay snug in the city,' Siko muttered into a saddlebag. Aloud he said: 'We are packed, sir, and ready to leave.'

Mehuru nodded to him to load the bags and went into his room. In the corner were his priestly things, laid out for meditation. The divining tray made out of beautifully polished wood indented with circular cups filled with cowrie shells, the little purse filled with ash, a cube of chalk, a flask of oil. Mehuru picked them up one by one and put them into a soft leather satchel, letting his mind linger on them and calling for vision.

Nothing came. Instead he saw once more the prow of a ship, rocking gently on clear tropical waters. He could see a shoal of small fish nibbling at the copper casing of the wooden hull, something he had never seen in waking life. Again he smelled the heavy sickly smell of sugar and sepsis.

'What does it mean?' he whispered softly. 'What does it mean?'

He shuddered as if the day were not pulsing with heat, as

if he could feel a coldness like death. 'What does it mean, this ship?' He waited for an answer but he could hear nothing but Siko complaining to the cook about the prospect of a journey and the chattering of a flock of glossy starlings, gathering on the rooftop, their deep blue feathers iridescent in the morning sun.

He shrugged. No ship could endanger him; his journey lay northwards, inland. To the north were the long rolling plains of savannah country, an inland river or two, easily forded or crossed by boat, and then even further north – at the limits of the mighty Yoruba kingdom – the great desert of the Sahel. No ship could be a threat to him, he was far from the coast. Perhaps he should see the ship as a good omen, perhaps it was a vision of a slaving ship which would no longer be able to cruise casually off the coast of his country and gather in his country's children as greedily as a marauding hyena.

Mehuru picked up his satchel of goods and slung it over his shoulders. Whatever the meaning of the vision, he had a job to do and nothing would prevent him. He bundled his travelling cape into a neat roll and went out into the brilliant midday sunshine. The horses were waiting, and the great city gates set deep into the mighty walls of the famous city of Oyo had been open since dawn.

'So!' he said cheerfully to Siko. 'Off we go!'

The quayside coffee shop was on the opposite side of the river from Josiah's dock, and so he took the little ferryboat across and tossed the lad who rowed him a ha'penny. The coffee shop was the regular meeting place for all the merchants of Bristol from the finest men to the smallest traders. When Josiah pushed open the small door his eyes smarted at the strong aromatic smell. The place was thick with tobacco smoke and the hot familiar scent of coffee, rum, and molasses. Josiah, with his hat under his arm, went slowly

from table to table, seeing who was there. All of the merchants were known to him, but only a few did business with him regularly. At the best table, farthest from the damp draughts from the swinging door, were the great merchants of Bristol, in fine coats and crisp laundered linen. They did not even glance up when Josiah said 'Good day' to them. Josiah was not worth their attention.

He nodded politely in their direction, accepting the snub. When he was nephew by marriage to Lord Scott they would return his greeting, and he would be bidden to sit with them. Then he would see the cargo manifests which were spread on their table. Then he would have a chance at the big partnerships and the big trading ventures. Then he would command their friendship, and have access to their capital for his own ventures. They would invite him to join their association – the Merchant Venturers of Bristol – and all the profits and opportunities of the second-greatest provincial city in Britain would fall open to him.

'Josiah!' a voice called. 'Over here!'

Josiah turned and saw a table crowded with men of his own class, small traders who shared and shared again the risks of a voyage, men who scrambled over each other for the great prizes of the Trade and yet who would be wiped out by the loss of one ship. Josiah could not reject their company. His own father had been an even lesser man – trading with a fleet of flat-bottomed trows up and down the Severn: coal from Wales, wheat from Somerset, cattle from Cornwall. Only at the very end of his life had George Cole owned an ocean-going ship and she had been a broken-down privateer which had managed one voyage for him before she sank. But on that one voyage she had taken a French trading ship, and claimed all her cargo. She had shown a profit of thousands of pounds and the Cole fortune had been made, and the Cole shipping line founded. George Cole had put up his sign 'Cole and Sons', and bequeathed the business to

his son and daughter. They had made it their life's work to expand yet further.

Two men seated on a bench moved closer to make space for Josiah. Their damp clothes steamed slightly in the warmth and there was a prevailing smell of stale sweat and wet wool.

'Good day,' Josiah said. He nodded at the waiter for coffee and the boy brought him a pot with a cup and a big bowl of moist brown lump sugar.

'You did well on the *Daisy* then,' the man who had called him commented. 'Prices are holding up for sugar. But you get no tobacco worth the shipping.'

Josiah nodded. 'It was a good voyage,' he said. 'I won't buy tobacco out of season. I'll only take sugar. I did well on the *Daisy* and we turned her around quickly.'

'Do you have a partner for your next voyage?' the man opposite him asked. He spoke with a thick Somerset accent.

'I am seeking a partner for the *Lily*. She will be in port within two months.'

'And who commands her?'

'Captain Merrick. There is no more experienced master in Bristol,' Josiah said.

The man nodded. 'D'you have the accounts for her last voyage?'

Josiah shook his head, lying with easy fluency. 'They are with the Excise men,' he explained. 'Some trouble over the bond last time. But the *Daisy* is a better example in any case. She was fresh into port and showed a profit of three hundred pounds for each shareholder. You won't find a better breeding-ground for your money than that!'

The man nodded. 'Could be,' he said uncertainly.

Josiah dropped two crumbling lumps of thick brown sugar into his coffee, savouring the sweetness, the very scent of the Trade, and signalled for a glass of rich dark rum. 'As you wish,' he said casually. 'I have other men that should have

the offer first, perhaps. I only mentioned it because of your interest. Think no more about it.'

'Oh no,' the man said quickly. 'What share would you be looking for?'

'A quarter,' Josiah replied coolly. He looked away from the table and nodded a greeting at another man.

'And how much would that be?'

Josiah seemed to be barely listening. 'Oh, I couldn't say . . .' He shrugged his shoulders. 'Perhaps a thousand pounds each, perhaps nine hundred. Say no more than nine hundred.'

The man looked rather dashed. 'I had not thought it would be so much . . .'

Josiah turned his brown-stained smile on him. 'You will not regret it being so much when it shows a profit of twenty or thirty per cent. Eh?'

'And who will be the ship's husband? You? You will do all the fitting and the orders?'

'Myself,' Josiah said. 'I always do. I would trust it to no other man. But I should not have troubled you with this. There is Mr Wheeler now, I promised him a share in the *Lily*.'

'No, stay,' the man protested. 'I will take a share, Josiah. I will have my share in her.'

Josiah nodded easily. 'As you wish, Samuel.' He held out his hand and the other grasped it quickly. 'Come to my warehouse this afternoon, and bring your bond. I will have the contract for you.'

The man nodded, half-excited and half-fearful. He rose from the table and went out. He would be busy from now until the afternoon scouring the city for credit to raise his share.

'I had not thought he had nine hundred pounds to outlay,' one of the others remarked. 'You had best see your money before you sign, Josiah.'