Fever Hill

Michelle Paver

CHAPTER ONE

The doctors said she had tuberculosis, and blamed it on invisible creatures called 'bacilli', but Sophie knew better.

She was ill because the duppy tree was trying to kill her. The washerwoman's little girl had told her so, and Evie knew all about things like that, for her mother was a witch.

The following year when Sophie was twelve, she recovered. But she still had bad dreams about duppy trees. So one night her brother-in-law took her up into the hills to meet one. Cameron rode his big bay gelding, and Sophie her new pony Puck, and when they reached the great tree in the glade on Overlook Hill they sat on the folded roots, and ate the fried plantain and johnny cake which Madeleine had packed for them. Sophie felt scared, but safe, because Cameron was with her.

And as she sat beside him in the blue moonlight, she watched the little lizards darting up and down the enormous trunk, and the fireflies blinking in the leaves; she listened to the whirr of the mango-bugs and the ringing pulse of the crickets; and Cameron said, 'Look, Sophie, there's a yellowsnake,' and she glimpsed a tail disappearing behind a root.

She thought about all the small animal lives sheltering in the branches above her head, and realized that she must have been mistaken about the tree wanting to kill her. And after that she wasn't scared of duppy trees any more. Instead, she became passionately interested in them, and tried to grow one in a pot.

'Sophie's making one of her about-turns,' said Cameron with a laugh. And Maddy smiled at him, and helped her little sister to find a place for the potted duppy tree on the verandah, where it gradually died.

Then Maddy said, what about growing something which grows on duppy trees, instead? So they bought a book on Jamaican orchids, and Cameron took Sophie into the forest behind the house to find her first specimens.

Thinking of that now as the train rattled through the hill pastures on its way to Montego Bay, Sophie felt a sudden uprush of love for them both - and a tug of concern. She needed to see for herself that they were happy and well. She needed to dispel the vague impression which she'd gathered from Maddy's last letter that something wasn't quite right.

Pushing the thought aside, she turned her head and watched the pastures slipping past. Acid-green guinea grass rippled in the wind, dotted with ambling white Hindu

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cattle. On a dusty red track a black woman carried a basket of yams on her head with easy grace.

I'm home, thought Sophie. She still couldn't believe it. For three years she had dreamed of coming back to Jamaica. She'd been dizzy with homesickness every time another letter arrived from Eden. Then suddenly it all seemed to happen in the blink of an eye. School was over, and she was on her way out from Southampton. Now, here she was on the last leg of the journey. Kingston was far behind them, and Spanish Town and Four Paths. Such well-loved names. The hours she had spent as a child, lying on the Turkey rug in her grandfather's study at Fever Hill, gazing up at the great tinted map.

On the opposite seat, Mr van Rieman cleared his throat. 'According to this,' he said, tapping the journal in his hand, 'the Jamaican sugar planter is fast becoming an endangered species. It says that since the slaves were freed, hundreds of plantations have been turned over to cattle, or simply abandoned.' He regarded Sophie over his wire-rimmed spectacles, his small eyes bright with the pleasure of finding fault. 'I take it, Miss Monroe, that such will not be the fate of your brother-in-law's estate?'

She shook her head and smiled. 'Somehow Cameron always manages to keep Eden afloat.'

'Indeed,' said Mr van Rieman, looking slightly put out.

'Eden,' said Mrs van Rieman brightly. 'What a lovely name.'

Sophie threw her a grateful look, and almost forgave the fact that for most of the journey the Americans' small, baleful son Theo had been surreptitiously kicking her leg whenever his mamma wasn't looking.

The train pulled into Appleton for the lunchtime stop, and they stepped stiffly down into the blaze of the November sun. Jamaica broke over them like a wave. Pickneys raced about between people's legs. Higglers crowded the platform, plying their wares. Butter-dough! Paradise plums! All sort a mango! Paperskin, Christmas, cherry-cheek!

Sophie breathed in the spicy scent of the red dust, and the familiar rhythms of patois. Mrs van Rieman clutched her husband's arm and bemoaned his choice of holiday destination. She'd never seen so many darkies in her life. Mr van Rieman led the way to the Station Hotel with the air of a missionary tackling darkest Africa. Twice he voiced his astonishment that Jamaica possessed no proper guidebook of its own. Plainly any country which lacked its own Baedeker hadn't yet dragged itself clear of the swamp of barbarism.

Luncheon was awkward, with the van Riemans questioning Sophie in ringing tones, while the rest of the dining-room listened with open ears. Sophie swallowed her pride and answered as best she could, for the Americans had been kind to her when they'd met in the ticket office at Kingston - albeit politely appalled at the notion of a young lady of nineteen travelling alone. 'If I have this right, Miss Monroe,' said Mrs

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van Rieman, 'you're ten years younger than your sister, who has two darling little children?'

Sophie's mouth was full of pepperpot, so she could only nod.

'And what about you?' said Mrs van Rieman with an arch twinkle. 'Any sweethearts yet?'

Sophie gave her a fixed smile. 'No,' she replied. A woman at the adjacent table threw her a pitying glance.

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