



"Listen to me, she is saying..."

No Known Copyright

Princeton University Library reasonably believes that the Item is not restricted by copyright or related rights, but a conclusive determination could not be made.

You are free to use this Item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use.

Princeton University Library Disclaimer

Princeton University Library claims no copyright governing this digital resource. It is provided for free, on a non-commercial, open-access basis, for fair-use academic and research purposes only. Anyone who claims copyright over any part of these resources and feels that they should not be presented in this manner is invited to contact Princeton University Library, who will in turn consider such concerns and make every effort to respond appropriately. We request that users reproducing this resource cite it according the guidelines described at <http://rbcs.princeton.edu/policies/forms-citation>.

Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

"Listen to me, she is saying..."

1 folder

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:15:59 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/xw42nd48z>

Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark—weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more—but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth. I need to explain. You can call what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog's profile plays in the steam of a kettle. Or when a corn husk doll, sitting on a shelf is suddenly splayed in the corner of a room and ^{the}wicked of how it got there is ^{plain}clear. Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read? If a pea hen refuses to brood I read it quickly and, sure enough, that night I see my mother standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron. Other signs need more time to understand. Even

now it is difficult—too many signs, or a bright omen clouding up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much like not reading the garden snake crawling up to the door saddle to die. Let me start with what I know for certain.

The beginning begins with the shoes. When a child I am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes, anybody's shoes, even on the hottest days. My madre, frowning, is angry at what she says are my prettified ways. Only bad women wear high heels. I am dangerous, she says, but she relents and lets me wear the throwaway shoes from Senhora's house, pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn, and a buckle on top. As a result, Lila says, my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires. True. Lila is correct. I have the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady. So when I set out to find you, she and Mistress give me Sir's boots that fit a man not a girl. They stuff them with hay and oily corn husks and tell me to hide the letter inside my stocking—no matter the itch of the sealing wax. I am lettered but I do not

read what Mistress writes and Lila and Sorrow cannot. But I know what it means to say to anyone who stops me.

My head is light with the confusion of two things, hunger for you and scare if I am lost. Nothing scares me more than this errant and nothing is more temptation. From the day you disappear I dream and plot. To learn where you are and how to be there. I want to run across the trail through the maples and white pine but I am asking myself which way? Who will tell me? Who lives in the wilderness between this farm and you and will they help me or harm me? What about the boneless bears in the valley? Remember? How when they move their pelts sway as though there is nothing underneath? Their smell belying their beauty, their eyes knowing us from when we are beasts also. You telling me that is why it is fatal to look them in the eye. They will approach, run to us to love and play which we mis-read and give back fear and anger. Giant birds are nesting out there too bigger than cows, Lila says, and not all natives are like here, she says, so watch out. A praying savage neighbors call her, because is once churched yet she bathes herself every day

and Christians never do. Underneath she wears cheerful beads and dances in secret at first light when the moon is small. More than fearing loving bears or birds bigger than cows, I fear pathless night. How, I wonder, can I find you in the dark? Now at last there is a way. I have orders. It is arranged. I will see your mouth and trail my fingers down. You will rest your chin in my hair again while I breathe into your shoulder in and out in and out. I am happy the world is breaking open for us, yet its newness alarms me. To get to you I must leave the only home, the only people I know. Lila says, from the state of my teeth I am maybe seven or eight when I am brought here. We boil wild plums for jam and cake eight times since then, so I must be sixteen. Before this place I spend my days picking okra and sweeping tobacco sheds, my nights on the floor of the cook house with my madre. We are baptized and can have happiness when this life is done. The Reverend Father tells us that. Once every seven days we learn to read and write. We are forbidden to leave the place so the four of us hide near the marsh. Madre, me, her little boy and Reverend Father. He is forbidden to do this but he teaches

us anyway watching out for Virginians and Protestants who want to catch him. If they do he will be in prison or pay money or both. He has two books and a slate. We have sticks to draw through sand, pebbles to shape words on smooth flat rock. When the letters are memory we make whole words. I am faster than madre and her baby boy is no good at all. Very quickly I can write from memory the nicene creed including all of the commas. Confession we tell not write as I am doing now. I forget almost all of it until now. I like talk. Lila talk, stone talk, even Sorrow talk. Best of all is your talk. At first when I am brought here I don't talk any word. All of what I hear is different from what words mean to my madre and me. Lila's words say nothing I know. Nor Mistress'. Slowly a little talk is in my mouth and not on stone. Lila says the place of my talking on stone is Mary's land where Sir does business. So that is where my madre my mother and her baby boy are buried. Or will be if they ever decide to rest. Sleeping on the cook house floor with them is not as nice as sleeping in the broken sleigh with Lila. In cold weather we put planks around our part of the cowshed and wrap our arms together un-

der pelts. We don't smell the cow flops because they are frozen and we are deep under fur. In summer if our hammocks are hit by mosquitoes Lila makes a cool place to sleep out of branches. You never like a hammock and prefer the ground even in rain and Sir offers you his house. Sorrow still sleeps there by the fireplace. The men helping you, Will and Scully, never live the night here because their master does not allow it. You remember them, how they would not take orders from you until Sir made them? He could do that since they are exchange for land leased from Sir. Lila says Sir always has a clever way of getting without giving. I know it is true because I see it forever and ever. Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. Madre my mother, begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, the daughter, she says. Me. Me. Sir agrees and changes the balance due. As soon as the tobacco is hanging to dry Reverend Father takes me on a ferry, then a ketch, bundles me between his boxes of books and food.

When I arrive here I believe it is the place Reverend Father warns against. The freezing in hell that comes before the everlasting fire where sinners bubble and singe forever. But the ice comes first, he says. And when I see knives of it hanging from the houses and trees and feel the white air burn my face I am certain the fire is coming. Then Mistress smiles when she looks at me. So does Lila who wraps me for warmth right away. Only Sorrow is not happy to see me. She flaps her hand in front of her face as though bees are bothering her. She is ever strange and Lila says she is once more with child. Father still no known and Sorrow does not say. Will and Scully each deny. Lila believes it is Sir's. Says she has her reason for thinking that. Mistress is not pleased. Neither am I. Not because our work is more, but because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I can not hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand.

The man moved carefully over pebbles and sand to shore. Fog, Atlantic and reeking of plant life, blanketed the bay and slowed him. He could see his boots sloshing but not his satchel nor his hands. When the surf was behind him and his soles sank in mud, he turned to wave to the sloopmen but because the single mast had disappeared, he could not tell whether they remained anchored or risked sailing on—hugging the shore and approximating the location of wharves and docks. Unlike the English fogs he had known since he could walk, or those way North where he lived now, this one was sun fired, turning the world into thick, hot gold. Penetrating it was like struggling through a dream. As mud became swamp grass, he turned left, stepping gingerly until he stumbled against wooden planks leading up beach toward the village. Other than his own breath and tread, the world was soundless. It was only after

reaching the live oak trees that the fog wavered and split. He moved faster then, more in control but missing too the blinding gold he had come through.

Picking his way with increasing confidence, he arrived in the tacky village sleeping between two huge riverside plantations. There the hostler was persuaded to forgo a deposit if the man signed a note: Jacob Vaark. The saddle was poorly made but the horse, Regina, was a fine one. Mounted he felt better and rode carefree and a little too fast along beach fronts until he entered an old Lenape trail. Here there was reason to be cautious and he slowed Regina down. In this territory he could not be sure of friend or foe. Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes—whether freedmen, slaves or indentured—had waged war against local aristocrats led by members of that very class. When the “people’s war” lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done—which included the slaughter of opposing tribes, running the Carolinas off their land—reinforced a thicket of laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel, bearing

arms for blacks only; by granting license to any white to kill and black for any reason; by compensating owners for slave maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. Any social ease forged before and during that rebellion by gentry and laborers crumbled beneath a hammer wielded in the interests of the gentry's profits. Lawless laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue.

In short, Virginia was a mess and even with the relative safety of his skin, solitary traveling required prudence. He knew he might ride for hours with no company but geese careening over inland waterways, and suddenly, from behind felled trees a starving deserter with a pistol might emerge, or in a hollow a family of runaways might cower, or an armed felon might threaten. Carrying several kinds of specie and a single knife, he was a juicy target. Eager to be out of this colony into a less precarious but personally more repellant one, Jacob urged the mare to a faster pace. He dismounted twice, the second time to free the bloody hindleg of a young raccoon stuck in a tree break. Regina munched trail side

grass while he tried to be as gentle as possible, avoiding the claws and teeth of the frightened animal. Once he succeeded, the raccoon limped off, perhaps to the mother forced to abandon it or more likely into other claws.

Gallop along, he was sweating so heavily his eyes salted and his hair matted on his shoulders. Already October and Regina was drenched and snorting. No such thing as winter down here, he thought, and he might as well have been in Barbados, which he had considered once, although its heat was rumored to be more lethal than this. But that was years ago and the decision was null before he could act on it. An uncle he had never met from the side of his family long dead died and left him one hundred and twenty acres of a dormant patroonship in a climate he much preferred. One with four distinct seasons. Yet this mist, hot and rife with gnats, did not dampen his spirits. Despite the long sail in three vessels down three different bodies of water, and now the hard ride over the Lenape trail, he took delight in the journey. Breathing the air of a world so new, so modern in its openness to possibilities never

failed to invigorate him. Once out of the warm gold of the bay, he saw forests untouched since Noah; shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking. The lies of the Company about the easy profit awaiting all comers did not surprise him. In fact it was hardship, adventure that attracted him. His whole life had been a mix of confrontation, risk and placating. Now here he was, a ratty orphan become landowner, making a place out of no place, a temperate living from raw life. He relished never knowing what precisely lay in his path, who might approach with what intention. A quick thinker, he flushed with pleasure when a crisis, large or small, needed invention and fast action. Rocking in the poorly made saddle, he faced forward while his eyes swept the surroundings. He knew the landscape intimately from years ago when it was still the old Swedish Nation, and he was an agent for its Company. For years he had traveled the South River into the bay, disembarked at Christiana and negotiated native trails on horseback, mindful of their fields of maize, careful through their hunting grounds, politely asking permission to enter a small village here, a larger one there. He watered

his horse at a particular stream and avoided threatening marshland fronting the pines. Recognizing the slope of certain hills, a copse of oak, an abandoned den, the sudden odor of pine sap—all of that was more than valuable; it was essential. During and after the contest between Sweden and the Netherlands, there had never been much point in knowing who claimed this or that terrain; this or another outpost. Other than the Lenape, to whom it all belonged, from one year to another any stretch might be claimed by a church, controlled by a Company or become the private property of royal's gift to a son or a favorite. In such ad hoc geography, Jacob simply knew that when he came out of that forest of pine skirting the marshes, he was, at last, in Maryland which, at the moment, belonged to the king. Entirely.

Upon entering this privately owned country, he feelings fought one another to a draw. Unlike colonies up and down the coast—disputed, fought over and regularly re-named; their trade limited to whatever nation was victor—the province of Maryland allowed trade to foreign markets. Good for planters, better for merchants, best for brokers. But the

palatinate was Romish to the core. Priests strode openly in its towns; their sinister missions cropped up on the edge of native villages; their vulgar temples took center place in its squares. Law, courts and trade were their exclusive domain and over-dressed women in raised heels rode in carts driven by ten year old Negroes. He was offended by the lax, flashy, cunning of the papists. "Abhor that arrant whore of Rome." The entire class in the children's quarter of the poor house had memorized those lines from their primer. "And all her blasphemies/ Drink not of her cursed cup/ Obey not her decrees." Which did not mean you could not do business with them and he had out dealt them often enough, especially here where tobacco and slaves were married, each currency clutching its partner's elbow. By sustained violence or sudden disease, either was subject to collapse, inconveniencing everybody but the lender.

Disdain, however difficult to cloak, must be put aside. His previous dealings with this estate had been with the owner's clerk while sitting on ale house stools. Now, for some reason, he had been invited, summoned rather, to the planter's house—a plantation called Bliss. A trader asked to

dine with a gentleman? On a Sunday? So there must be trouble, he thought. Finally, swatting mosquitoes and on the watch for mud snakes that startled the horse, he glimpsed the wide iron gates of Bliss and guided Regina through them. He had heard how grand it was, but could not have been prepared for what lay before him. The house, honey colored stone, was in truth more like a place where one held court. Far away to the right, beyond the iron fences enclosing the property and softened by mist he saw rows of quarters, quiet, empty. In the fields, he reckoned, trying to limit the damage sopping weather had wrought on the crop. The comfortable smell of tobacco leaves, like fireplaces and good women serving ale, cloaked Bliss like balm. The path ended at a small brick plaza, announcing a prideful entrance to a veranda. Jacob stopped. A boy appeared and, dismounting a bit stiffly, he handed over the reins, cautioning the boy.

"Water. No feed."

"Yes, sir." said the boy and turned the horse around, murmuring, "Nice lady. Nice lady," as he led her away.

Jacob Vaark climbed three brick steps, then retraced them to stand back from the house and appraise it. Two wide windows, at least two dozen panes in each, flanked the door. Five more windows on a broad second story held sunlight glittering above the mist. He had never seen a house like it. The wealthiest men he knew built in wood, not brick, riven clapboards with no need for grand pillars suitable for a House of Parliament. Grandiose, he thought, but easy, easy to build in that climate. Soft southern wood, creamy stone, no caulking needed, everything designed for breeze, not freeze. Long hall, probably, parlors, chambers...Easy work, easy living, but Lord, the heat.

He removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his hair line with his sleeve. Then, fingering his soaking collar, he re-mounted the steps and tested the boot scraper. Before he could knock, the door was opened by

a small, contradictory man: aged and ageless, deferential and mocking, white hair black face.

"Afternoon, sir."

"Mr. Ortega is expecting me." Jacob surveyed the room over the old man's head.

"Yes, sir. Your hat, sir? Mr. D'Ortega is expecting you. Thank you, sir. This way, sir."

Footfalls, louse and aggressive, were followed by D'Ortega's call.

"Well timed! Come, Jacob. Come." He motioned toward a parlor.

"Thank you, sir," said Jacob, marveling at his host's coat, his stockings, the cunning wig. Elaborate and binding as those trappings must be in the heat, D'Ortega's skin was as dry as parchment, while Jacob continued to sweat. The condition of the handkerchief he pulled from his pocket embarrassed him as much as his need for it.

Seated at a small table surrounded by graven idols, the windows closed to the boiling air, he drank sassafras beer and agreed with his host about the weather and dismissed his apologies for making him endure it to come all this way. That said, D'Ortega got to business. Disaster had struck. Jacob ^{had heard} ~~knew~~ all about it, but listened politely with a touch of compassion to the version this here client/debtor recounted. D'Ortega's ship had been anchored two hundred feet from shore for a month waiting for a vessel, due any day, to replenish what he had lost. A third of his cargo had died of ship fever. Fined five thousand pounds of tobacco by the Lord Proprietarys' magistrate for throwing their bodies too close to the ay; forced to scoop up the corpses—those they could find—(they used pikes and nets, D'Ortega siad, a purchase which itself cost two pounds, six) and ordered to burn or bury them. He'd had to pile them in two drays (sixteen s.), cart them out to low land where saltweed and alligators would finish the work.

Does he cut his losses and let his ship sail on to Barbados? No, thought Jacob. A sloven man, stubborn in his wrong headedness like all of the Roman faith, he waits in port for another month for a phantom ship from Portugal carrying enough cargo to replenish the heads he has lost. While waiting to fill his ship's hold to capacity, it sinks and he has lost not only the vessel, not only the original third, but all, except the crew who were unchained, of course, and four unsalable Angolans red-eyed with anger. Now he wanted more credit and six additional months to pay what he had borrowed.

Dinner was a tedious affair made intolerable by the awkwardness Jacob felt. His rough clothes were in stark contrast to embroidered silk and lace collar. His normally deft fingers turned clumsy with the tableware. There was even a trace of raccoon blood on his hands. Resentment bloomed. Why such a show on a sleepy afternoon for a single guest well below their station? Intentional, he decided; a stage performance to humiliate him into a groveling acceptance of D'Ortega's wishes. The meal began with a prayer whispered in a language he could not de-

cipher and a slow signing of the cross before and after. In spite of his dirty hands and sweat limp hair, Jacob pressed down his annoyance and chose to focus on the food. But his considerable hunger shrank when presented with the heavily seasoned dishes: everything, except pickles and radishes, was fried or over cooked. The wine, watered and too sweet for his taste, disappointed him and the company got worse. D'Ortega's wife was a chattering magpie, asking pointless questions—How do you manage living in snow?—and making sense-defying observations, as though her political judgment was equal to a man's. Nothing transpired in the conversation that had footing in the real world. They both spoke of the gravity, the unique responsibility this untamed world offered them; its unbreakable connection to God's work and the difficulties they endured on His behalf. Caring for ill or recalcitrant labor was enough, they said, for canonization.

*as
The sons were silent
as tombs
and*

"Are they often ill, madam?" asked Jacob.

"Not as often as they pretend. Scoundrels . In Portugal they would never get away with such trickery."

"They come from Portugal?" Jacob wondered if the serving woman understood English or if they cursed her only in Portuguese.

"Well, the Angola part of Portugal," said D'Ortega. "It is the most extraordinary, beautiful land."

"Portugal?"

"Angola. But, of course, Portugal is without peer."

"We were there for four years," added Mrs. D'Ortega.

"Portugal?"

"Angola. But, mind you, our children were not born there."

"Portugal, then"?

"No. Maryland."

"Ah. England."

As it turned out, D'Ortega was the third son of a cattleman, in line for nothing. He'd gone to Angola, Portugal's slave pool, to manage shipments to Brazil, but found promises of wealth quicker and more generously met further abroad. The kick up from one kind of herding to another was swift and immensely enriching. For a while, thought Jacob. D'Ortega did not seem to be making a go of his relatively new station, but he had no doubt he would prevail somehow, as this invitation to dinner was designed to prove.

They had six children, two of whom were old enough to sit at table. *Stone quiet*
~~Silent~~ boys, thirteen and fourteen, wearing peri wigs like their father as though they were at a ball or a court of law. His bitterness, Jacob understood, was unworthy, the result of having himself no survivors—male or otherwise. Now that Patrician had followed her dead brothers, there was no one yet to reap the modest but respectable inheritance he hoped to accumulate. Thus, tamping envy as taught in the poor house, Jacob entertained himself by conjuring up flaws in the couple's relationship. They seemed well suited to each other: vain, voluptuous, prouder of their

pewter and porcelain than their sons. It was abundantly clear why D'Ortega was in serious debt. Turning profit into useless baubles, unembarrassed by sumptuary, silk stockings and an over-dressed wife; wasting candles in mid day, he would always be unable to ride out any set back, whether it be lost ship or ruined crop. Watching the couple, Jacob noticed that neither husband nor wife looked at each other, except for a stolen glance when the other looked elsewhere. He could not tell what was in those surreptitious peeks, but it amused him to divine the worst while he endured the foolish talk and inedible dishes. They did not smile, they sneered; did not laugh, giggled. He imagined them vicious with servants and obsequious to priests. His initial embarrassment about the unavoidable consequences of his long journey: muddy boots, soiled hands, perspiration and its odor, was dimmed by Mrs. D'Ortega's loud perfume and heavily powdered face. The only, if minor, relief came from the clove-smelling woman who brought the food.

His own Rebekka seemed ever more valuable to him the rare times he was in the company of these rich men's wives. From the moment he saw her struggling down the gang plank with bedding, two boxes and a heavy satchel, he knew his good fortune. He had been willing to accept an ugly maiden—in fact expected one, since a pretty one would have several local opportunities to wed. But the young woman who answered his shout in the crowd was plump, comely and capable. Worth every day of the long search made necessary because taking over the patroonship required a wife, and because he wanted a certain kind of mate: an unchurched woman of child bearing age, obedient but not groveling, literate but not proud, independent but nurturing. And he would accept no ~~less~~. Just as the report described her, Rebekka was ideal. There was not a shrewish bone in her body. She never raised her voice in anger. Saw to his needs, made the tenderest dumplings, took to chores in a land completely strange to her with enthusiasm and invention, cheerful as a canary. Or used to be. Three dead infants in a row, followed by the accidental death of Patrician, their five year old, had unleavened her. A

kind of invisible ash had settled over her which vigils at the small graves in the meadow did nothing to wipe away. Yet she neither complained nor shirked her duties. If anything, she threw herself more vigorously into the farm work and when he traveled, as now, on business, trading, collecting, lending, he had no doubts about how his home was being managed. Rebekka and her two helpers were as reliable as sunrise and strong as posts. Besides, time and health were on their side. She would bear more children and at least one, a boy, would live to thrive.

Dessert, apples and pecans, was an improvement and when he accompanied D'Ortega on the impossible-to-refuse tour of the place, his mood had lifted slightly, enough to admire the estate honestly. The mist had cleared and he was able to see in detail the workmanship and care of the tobacco sheds, wagons, row after row of barrels—orderly and nicely kept—the well made meat house, milk house, laundry, cook house. All but ~~the~~ the last white washed plaster, a jot smaller than the slave quarters but, unlike them, in excellent repair. The subject, the purpose, of the meeting had not been approached. D'Ortega had described with

minute attention to detail the accidents beyond his control that made him unable to pay what he owed. But how Jacob would be re-embursed had not been broached. Examining the spotted, bug ridden leaves of tobacco, it became clear what D'Ortega had left to offer.

Jacob refused. His farm was modest; his trade needed only himself. Besides having no place to put them, there was nothing to occupy them.

"Ridiculous," said D'Ortega. "You can sell them easily. Do you know the prices they garner?"

Jacob winced. Flesh was not his commodity.

Still, at his host's insistence, he trailed him to the little sheds where, their half day's rest interrupted, ^{D'Ortega} ~~D'Ortega~~ ^{and} ordered some two dozen or more to assemble in a straight line, including the boy who had watered Regina. The two men walked ^{the} ~~to~~ row, inspecting. D'Ortega identifying talents, weaknesses and possibilities, but silent about the scars, the wounds like misplaced veins tracing their skin. One even had the facial

brand required by local law when ⁶⁻slave assaulted a white man a second time. The women's eyes looked shot-proof, gazing beyond place and time as though they were not actually there. The men looked at the ground. Except every now and then, when possible, when they thought they were not being evaluated, Jacob could see their quick glances, sideways, wary but, most of all, judging the men who judged them.

Suddenly Jacob felt his stomach seize. The tobacco odor, so welcoming when he arrived, now nauseated him. Or was it the sugared rice, the hog cuts fried and dripping with molasses, the cocoa Mrs. D'Ortega was giddy about? Whatever it was, he couldn't stay there surrounded by a passel of slaves whose silence made him imagine an avalanche seen from a great distance. No sound, just the knowledge of a roar he could not hear. He begged off, saying the proposal was not acceptable—too much trouble to transport, manage, auction; his solitary, unencumbered proficiency was what he liked about trade. Specie, bills of credit, quit claims were portable. One satchel carried all he needed. They walked back toward the house and through the side gate in the or-

nate fence, D'Ortega pontificating all the while. He would do the selling. Pounds? Spanish sovereigns? He would arrange transportation, hire the handler.

Stomach turning, nostrils assailed, Jacob grew angry. This is a calamity, he thought. Unresolved it would lead to years in a law suit in a province ruled by the king's judges disinclined to favor a distant tradesman over a local Catholic gentleman. The loss, while not unmanageable, struck him as unforgivable. And to such a man. D'Ortega's strut as they had walked the property disgusted him. Moreover, he believed the set of that jaw, the drooping lids hid something soft, like his hands that, accustomed to reins, whips and lace, had never held a plow or felled a tree. There was something beyond Catholic in him, something sordid and overripe. But what could he do? Jacob felt the shame of his weakened position like a soiling of the blood. No wonder they had been excluded from parliament back home and, although he did not believe they should be hunted down like vermin, other than on business he would never choose to mingle or socialize with the lowest or highest of

them. Barely listening to D'Ortega's patter, sly, indirect instead of straight and manly, Jacob neared the cook house and saw a woman standing in the doorway with two children. One on her hip; one hiding behind her skirts. She looked healthy enough, better fed than the others. On a whim, mostly to silence him and ^{CERTAIN} ~~suspecting~~ D'Ortega would refuse, he said, "Her. That one. I'll take her."

D'Ortega stopped short, a startled look on his face. "Ah, no. It is impossible. My wife won't allow it. She can't live without her. She is our main cook, the best one."

Jacob drew closer, ^{and} recognizing the clove-laced sweat, ^(over)

"You said 'any'. I could choose any. If your word is worthless, there is only the law."

D'Ortega lifted an eyebrow, just one, convinced that on its curve an empire rested. Jacob knew he was struggling with this impertinent threat from an inferior, but he must have thought better of returning the insult

felt sure there was more than
cooking D'Ortega stood to lose.

with another. He desperately wanted this business over quickly and he wanted his way.

"Well, yes," said DOrtega, "but there are other women here. You've seen them besides this one is nursing."

"Then the law it is," said Jacob.

D'Ortega smiled. A law suit would certainly be decided in his favor and the time wasted in pursuing it would be to his advantage.

"You astound me," he said.

Jacob refused to back down. "Perhaps another lender would be more to your liking," he said and enjoyed seeing the nostril flare that meant he had struck home. D'Ortega was notorious for unpaid debts and had to search far outside Maryland for a broker since he had exhausted his friends and local lenders refused what they knew would be inevitable certain default. The air tightened.

"You don't seem to comprehend my offer. I am not forfeiting my debt. I am honoring it. The value of a seasoned slave is beyond adequate."

"Not if I can't use her."

"Use her? Sell her!"

"My trade is goods and gold." said Jacob Vaark, landowner. And he could not resist adding "But I understand how hard it is for a papist to ^{accommodate} ~~understand~~ certain kinds of restraint."

Too subtle, wondered Jacob? Not at all, ^{apparently,} for D'Ortega's hand moved to his hip. Jacob eyes followed the movement as the ringed fingers curled around a scabbard. Would he? Would this curdled, arrogant fop really assault his creditor, murder him and, claiming self defense, prerogative, rid himself of both debt and social insult even though it would mean complete financial disaster considering his coffers were as empty as his scabbard? The soft fingers fumbled for the absent haft. Jacob raised his eyes to D'Ortega's, noticing the cowardice of unarmed ~~at~~

^{gentry}
~~istocracy~~ confronted with a commoner. Out here in wilderness dependent on paid guards nowhere in sight this Sunday. He felt like laughing.

Where else but in this disorganized world would such an encounter be possible? Where else could class tremble before courage? Jacob turned away, letting his exposed, unarmed back convey his scorn. It was a curious moment. Along with his contempt, he felt a wave of exhilaration.

Potent. Steady. An inside shift from careful negotiator to the raw boy ^{ONCE provoked only town and country} that ~~ran~~ the lanes of ~~home~~. He did not even try to mute his chuckling as he passed the cook house and glanced again at the woman standing in its door.

Just then the little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet were a pair of way too big woman's shoes. Perhaps it was that feeling of license, a newly recovered recklessness along with the sight of those little legs, rising like two bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes that made him laugh. A loud, chest-heaving laugh ^{at the comedy, the hopeless vulgarity of the situation.} that confirmed ~~his victory~~. His laughter had not subsided when the woman cradling ^{the}

small boy on her hip, came forward. Her voice was barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking its urgency.

"Please, sir. Not me. I am still breast feeding. Take her. Take my daughter."

Jacob looked up at her, away from the child's feet, his mouth still open with laughter, and was struck by the terror in her eyes. His laugh creaking to a close, he shook his head, thinking, God help me if this is not the most wretched business.

"Why yes. Of course," said D'Ortega, ^{ing}trying to shake his earlier embarrassment and ^{trying to}re-establish his dignity. "I'll send her to you. Immediately." His eyes widened as did his condescending smile, though ^{he} he still seemed ^{highly}agitated.

"My answer is firm," said Jacob, thinking, I've got to get away from this substitute for a man. But thinking also, perhaps Rebekka would welcome a child around the place. This one, here, swimming in ^{horrible}shoes,

appeared to be about the same age as Patrician, and if she got kicked in the head by a mare the loss would not rock Rebekka so.

"There is a priest here," D'Ortega went on. "He can bring her to you. I'll have ^{them} board a sloop to any port on the coast you desire...."

"I said, no."

Suddenly the woman smelling of cloves knelt and closed her eyes.

They wrote new papers. Agreeing that the girl was worth twenty pieces of eight, considering the number of years ahead of her and reducing the balance by three hogsheads of tobacco or fifteen English pounds, the latter preferred. The tension lifted, visibly so on D'Ortega's face.

Eager to get away and re-nourish his good opinion of himself, Jacob said ^{abrupt} ~~hurried~~ goodbyes to Mrs. D'Ortega, the two boys and their father. On his way to the narrow track, he turned Regina around, waved at the couple and once again, in spite of himself, envied the house, the gate, the fence. For the first time he had not tricked, not flattered, not manipulated, but gone head to head with rich gentry. And realized, not for the

first time, that only things, not bloodlines or character separated them.

So mighten it be nice to have such a fence to enclose the headstones in his own meadow? And one day, not too far away, to build a house that size on his own property? On that rise, in back with a better prospect of the hills and the valley between them. Not as ornate as D'Ortega's.

None of that pagan excess, of course, but fair. Nor would it be compromised as Bliss was. Access to a fleet of free labor made D'Ortega's leisurely life possible. Without a ship load of enslaved Angolans he would not be merely in debt; he would be eating from his palm instead of porcelain and sleeping in the wilds of Africa rather than a four post bed. Jacob sneered at wealth dependent on a captured work force that required more force to maintain. This^{^N} as they were, the dregs of his kind of Protestantism—church of England not the brutal Mather—recoiled at whips, chains and armed overseers. He was determined to prove that his own industry could amass the fortune, the station, D'Ortega claimed without trading his conscience for coin.

He tapped Regina to a faster pace. The sun was low; the air cooler. He was in a hurry to get back into Virginia, its shore, and to Pursey's tavern before night, sleep in a bed if they weren't all packed three or four abreast. Otherwise he would join the other patrons and curl on any surface. But first he would have one, perhaps two, drafts of ale, its bitter, clear taste critical to eliminating the sweetish rot of vice and ruined tobacco that seemed to coat his tongue. Jacob returned Regina to the hostler, paid him and strolled to the wharf and Pursey's tavern. On the way he saw a man beating a horse to its knees. Before he could open his mouth to shout, rowdy sailors pulled the man away and let him feel his own knees in mud. Pursey's was closed, as he should have known, so he went to the one always open on Sunday. Rough, illegal and catering to hard boys, it nevertheless offered good and plentiful food.

On his second draft ^{insert fr. p. 37}

tk

Seated at a table cluttered with the remains of earlier meals, he listened to the talk around him, which was all sugar, which was to say, rum. Its price and demand becoming greater than tobacco's now that glut was ruining that market. The man who seemed to know most about kill-devil, the simple mechanics of its production, its outrageous prices and beneficial effects was holding forth with the authority of a mayor.

tk

Jacob decided he would look into it.

p. 34
A fiddler entered for their merriment and their money and, having played less well than himself, raised Jacob's spirits enough for him to join in the singing. (over)

After a leisurely meal of oysters, veal, pigeon, parsnips and suet pudding restored his taste buds, he reserved bed space with just one man in it and, strolling outside, thought about the disappointing day and the disgust of having accepted the girl as part payment. He knew he would never see another farthing from D'Ortega. One day, soon maybe, the

When

Two bawds entered,

The men called ^{out} their names with drunken glee.

The women flounced a bit before choosing
a lap to sit ^{years ago} in. Jacob demurred. He'd had
enough of disorderly houses kept by wives of sailors at sea.
Whores in brothels and the

The boyish recklessness that flooded him at Bliss
did not extend to the sweet debauchery
he'd enjoyed as a youth.

Stuarts would lose the throne to everyone's relief, and a Protestant rule. Then, he thought, a case against D'Ortega would succeed and he would not be forced to settle for a child as a percentage of what was due him. He knew he had excused the bargain by thinking Rebekka would be eager to have her, but what was truer than that was another thing. From his own childhood he knew there was no good place in the world for waifs and whelps other than the generosity of strangers. Even if bartered, ^{seduced,} given away, apprenticed, sold, swapped, ^{tricked} for food, labored for shelter or stolen, they were less doomed under adult control. ^(over) He refused to be sentimental about his own orphan status, the years spent with children of all shades stealing food and cadging gratuities for errands, ^{a stint in the poor house then} the luck of being taken on as a runner for a law firm. The job required literacy and led to his being signed up by ^{the} a Company. So he felt a disturbing pulse of pity for orphans and strays remembering well their and his own sad teeming in the markets, lanes, alleyways and ports of every region he traveled. Once before he found it hard to refuse when called on to rescue an unmoored, unwanted child. A decade ago now, a sawyer

Even if they mattered less than a milch cow ^{to} without an adult, parent or master

They froze to death on stone steps
floated wasted up on banks
..... and shoals
in canals,

asked him to take off his hands a sullen, curly headed girl he had found half dead on a river bank. Jacob agreed to do it, provided the sawyer forgive the cost of the lumber he was buying. Unlike now, at that time his ^{really did need} farm ~~needed~~ more help. ^{Rebekka was pregnant but no other son had lived. His farm} It was sixty cultivated acres out of one hundred and twenty, after all, and belonged to a traveling man who knew very well that it was not wise to have male labor all over the place during his long absences. His preference for steady female labor over dodgy males was based on his own experience as a youth. A frequently absent master was invitation and temptation—to escape, rape or rob. In the right environment, women were naturally reliable. He believed it now with this ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away, just as he believed it a decade earlier with the curly haired, goose girl, the one they called Sorrow. And the acquisition of both could be seen as rescue. Only Lila had been purchased outright, but she was a woman, not a child.

Walking in the warm night air, he went as far as he could, until the ale house lights were amber points in darkness and the voices of ~~a few~~ carousing men were lost to the silk-rustle of surf. The sky had forgotten

completely its morning fire and tricked out cool stars on a canvas smooth and dark as Regina's hide. He squatted and placed his hands in the water. By and by the detritus of the day washed off including the faint trace of coon's blood. Returning to the inn, nothing was in his way. There was the heat, of course, but no fog, gold or gray impeded him. Besides a plan was taking shape in his mind. ^{short coming} ~~Knowing his limit as a farmer~~ - in fact his boredom with farming* ^{was} plan as sweet as the sugar on which it was based. Right, he thought, looking at the sky. Clear and right. The silver that glittered there was not at all unreachable.

The heat was still pressing; his bed partner over-active, yet he slept well enough. Probably because his dreams were of a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog.

* he ^{had} found commerce more to his taste. Now he fondled the idea of an even more satisfying enterprise. And the