

## CHAPTER ONE - The Face of The Deep

There were slave uprisings the year he was born, the black Africans and the red Irish plotting together to murder their masters and take over the island. So his mother's laying-in was attended by both a midwife and an armed guard, and lighted by torches that burned through the night against attackers. But though his father had cause to fear for his family, there were no killings on that night, only the bloody pains of childbirth and the baby's cries that carried down from the mansion house to the fields of sugar cane below as Stede Bonnet, heir to Upton Plantation, came into the world.

The year was 1688, and in another great house, on another island, there was another heir born: James Frances Edward Stuart, son of His Majesty James II, King of England. And neither the King's Catholic priest nor the slaves' magic man could have foretold how those two birthings, an ocean apart, would come together in both a life and a death.

I was eight years old when I came to Upton Plantation soon after those two heirs were born, not knowing yet how I would share their shared destiny. I only knew that I had been saved from a worse life when Governor Edwyn Stede chose me to be one of two gifts for his newborn godson, the boy to be christened Stede Bonnet in his honor. And though I flattered myself that it was my noble heritage that made the Governor choose me, more likely he was merely ridding himself of a troubling nuisance. It was no doubt the same in the case of the Governor's other gift to his godson: the African slave woman, Jerusha. We were both of us embarrassments, in our ways.

Yet we traveled together to Upton in the same carriage with the Governor, riding like royalty behind four fine horses: I in my new livery and Jerusha in her turban like a crown. I suppose it might have seemed strange for a black woman to ride along with the greatest white man on the island, but Jerusha had been a favorite of Governor Stede's – his most favorite, indeed -- and was accustomed to sharing his coach and other places. But now she was to be a nursemaid to the Governor's godson, as the baby Stede's mother had no milk on account of her fright the night of his birth, while Jerusha's breasts were full from her own recent childbirth, that babe going along with us as well to keep her milk flowing. And I, as a newly made serving boy, did not dare to observe that her infant, his swaddling blankets falling away as the coach joggled over the rutted road, seemed nearly as white-skinned as the Governor himself.

But though I did not speak my thoughts, the Governor eyed me as I eyed the baby.

“What was your name again?” he asked indifferently, for great men did not need to remember names. He was corpulent, brass buttons straining at his satin waistcoat, his round face moist with sweat beneath a powdered wig.

“Nathaniel John Broome, Sir,” I said, “after my father.”

“Ah yes, the Monmouth Rebel. See you do not follow after your father's footsteps, young Nathaniel, warring against the crown. A man who does not know which side to support will find himself with no side to support him.”

“Yes, Sir,” I said with a nod, pretending to understand, for the politics of far-away England, the land of my birth, were like a fairy story to me. I only knew what my father had told me before he died: how he had fought with others of the nobility to put a Protestant king on the throne, and how those nobles had been arrested and shipped off to Barbados to be sold into slavery for ten years as punishment for their plot. But my father’s servitude had lasted less than half the appointed time, as he died before his sentence was finished and I was put into bondage after him to finish out his years.

“And how long do we bear your service?” the Governor said with a sigh, as if my bondage were a burden to him.

“Seven more years, Sir. And then I am free.”

The Governor smiled mildly, the conversation no longer interesting him, and turned his attention to the view from the carriage window: a field of sugar cane as far as the eye could see, and in it a stone windmill, sails turning slowly in the warm island breeze.

It was a view with which I was too familiar, having spent my three years on Barbados living close to such fields, first watching my father as he labored alongside the African slaves, then taking his place in the fields when he fell one steamy afternoon, his heart stopping as he swung the heavy scythe. There was no funeral, my father being accounted a criminal against the crown and of less worth even than a slave. As for my mother, she had died on the long ocean voyage from England, her heart broken by what had befallen us all.

Barbadosed my father had called it, exiled to Hell, and cursed the Catholic king and the courts that had passed down the sentence. For their part in supporting the Duke of Monmouth’s claim to the throne, three-hundred Englishmen had lost their heads on the block, and eight-hundred others were sailed off in shackles as slaves for the West Indies sugar plantations. But we weren’t alone as white slaves on the island. The Irish had been Barbadosed before us, fifty-thousand of them so it was said, when Oliver Cromwell cleared Ireland for the English. We called them Redshanks, red-haired and sunburned until they blistered and scarred and died under that unforgiving tropical sun.

The Africans fared better, their dark-skinned bodies more accustomed to the climate, and thus were more favored as workers for the plantations. They were brought in great slave ships from Guinea and the Ivory Coast, packed five-hundred together as cargo by the King’s Royal African Company, then sold on the square in Bridgetown. The company’s factor in charge of the sales had been Sir Edwyn Stede before his appointment as Governor of the island, which was how the woman Jerusha came into his household, as the factor could choose the two best Negroes in every shipment for his pay. It was he who had named her Jerusha, “possession,” and had the Stag and Lion crest of the Stede family burned into her skin.

But the Governor needed to be rid of her now, for along with his royal appointment came news that his wife would be sailing from England to join him, which had caused great commotion in his mansion house at Fontabelle Plantation. It was one thing for the Royal African Company’s factor to keep a black woman

in his bedchamber, but something else entirely for the married Governor of Barbados to cohabit with a slave.

I knew all of this without knowing, having gleaned it in bits and scraps from the whisperings of the other servants who taught me my duties. For when the Governor learned that his wife would be coming, he had me brought up from the fields and into the mansion house, fearing that the gentle-born Lady Stede would be offended to find a nobleman's young son in the cane.

And then the Governor's godson was born, offering a solution to both of his dilemmas: myself and Jerusha. He would give us away as christening gifts to the Bonnets of Upton Plantation, in honor of their firstborn son being named after himself and the ancient family Stede of Stede Hill in Kent, in the England that I so little remembered. Little England, the white masters called their Barbados, but surely in England there were no slaves such as us.