

## GREAT-GRANDUNCLE SEBASTIAN

BY BEATRICE RAVENEL

PETER FORTUNÉ is not, I believe, a deliberate misleader. He merely weaves spells, and by the time one thing has led to another he has convinced himself, as well as you, that the whole story is authentic.

My life is that of a fairly successful southern business man in a northern city. Every now and then I find myself worried, with the reiterated worry of an imperfect tooth, by a certain homesickness. At least, it sounds more dignified to call it that. Its esoteric name is a hankering after romance. I confess without shame, because I am inclined to think that most people, in this respect, resemble me like brothers. Once I might have turned to some kind woman; but I have had my lesson. Now, I send a middle-aged wire to Peter, saying that I am running down to South Carolina for a few days.

Peter welcomes one like an old shoe—two old shoes—and then leaves me alone. Half the time he forgets that I am on the premises, but is pleased when reminded of the fact. He possesses the beautiful self-sufficiency of a magnolia tree. Oakridge is a good-sized plantation, not far from the coast, once devoted to the culture of rice, but now running mostly to ducks. At one time, after the bottom fell out of the rice business, Peter and his negroes shot ducks for the market, and made a better thing out of it.

Two years ago, however, he sold the superb Fortuné place in the North Carolina mountains, near Grayrocks, and since then he doesn't have to work for a living. He writes. . . . It would astonish anybody, except magazine editors, to learn how many aging gentle-

men, tucked away in odd corners of the South, are dallying with the innocence of love, in the person of the Muse. As a steady thing, they sing about the little birds and flowers, or idealistic political visions; but when they can bring themselves to kicking over the traces and doing a dead heat along the *vers libre* course, it makes them feel real devils, and enormously lengthens their lives.

Because it illustrates both the slackness and the horse sense of his character, I may mention the fact that Peter sank the greater part of the handsome sum he received in an annuity. God may know what became of the remainder, but the annuity, like the celebrated little water-course, is going on forever, because Peter will undoubtedly live that long.

He has guns that I like and one dog that puts up with me, but it is not until evening that I get what I come for. In what would normally be the drawing-room, but is Peter's lair, the long rows of books are drawn up behind us like a sympathetic Prætorian Guard. A kind of bivouac is cleared about the fireplace. There are such charming Adam pilasters and garlands under the mantel that it actually hurts you to put your feet up on it.

You never say, "Tell me a tale of your honorable ancestors, Peter," because that isn't the way. You begin with triggers or subsoils, or anything, and before you know it Peter is in mid-channel or field, if you insist. All of his stories are not for the open. Being excessively numerous, Peter's forbears are of all kinds. Some of them were mirrors of chivalry, while others—well, you know the scurrilous sort of people that used to write memoirs.

The evening I'm telling about, Peter had the manners to push aside the book he was reading and shove the cigars over. He smokes a corncob himself. On the gate-table between our two armchairs reposed a Sheffield waiter (the copper showing through like an island maiden through her insufficient draperies) which contained what a Dickens person might have called "the usual."

"That Madeira," I observed, as the firelight struck it, "is the precise color of the water in the Devil's Yawn."

The Devil's Yawn is a gap in the mountains of North Carolina. Over it runs a particularly nasty little terrace, jutting out of the slope, and enlivening a path that leads into the old Grayrocks property. At the bottom a skulking creek slinks like a guilty conscience. The terrace is about wide enough for two horsemen to pass each other.

"So it is," agreed Peter. "At sunset. Same cairngorm and banked-fire effect. I thought Madeira rather a cheerful color. What made you mention it? . . . Did I ever tell you the story of the Devil's Yawn and my great-grand-uncle Sebastian? He died eighteen thirty-three."

"No," I answered, not too eagerly. It doesn't do to spoil Peter.

"He foolishly left a diary, a kind of log, as you might expect," pursued Peter, as though I knew the man as well as he did. "I burned it. Just as comfortable not to let these things get out of the family." (I am not in the family.) He puffed meditatively. "When my twice-removed uncle Sebastian came home from privateering, after 1812, with the most ravishing young wife he had picked up heaven knows where, and began to spend more money than anybody else, it called for remark. Grayrocks was a rich settlement, too. You know it began really as a South Carolina summer colony. Some lived there all the year around, which didn't in the least make them North Carolinians. Even the church, after it was built, was under our bishop."

"Did he spend doubloons and half-moidores?" I inquired.

"Don't get lyrical. Those went out of circulation years before. No, good gold guineas. But, in spite of his lavishness, the young wife must have found it dismal. Estates were wide apart. A round of morning calls was a journey. When you drove to a ball or treat you must have carried outriders and a mechanic along, in case a wheel came off the coach. He imported a coach, at the cost of a hundred-odd tierces of rice from Oakridge. He owned this place, too. No amount of scenery could have made up for the close little intimate circle the girl must have left. For compensation, wherever she went she was *favorita*, as she would have said, in her pretty foreign way. There isn't any picture of her. He is said to have destroyed them after her death. But tradition has it that she looked like a cross between a tropical lily and a racer. Her head was set that way, and her feet were scarcely set on the ground at all. She danced, when they pressed her, marvelous solo things with scarfs and shawls, but all (as one surviving letter bears witness, written by a neighbor) vastly elegant and ladylike. When it came to her eyes, young men gazed deeply into them once, and then went out into the moonlight and swore."

"Satisfying." I seldom interrupt with more than one word. Two are enough to deflect the current.

"Utterly." Peter poked the fire musingly. "I am glad that she is no ancestress of mine. I can appreciate her memory without any Freudian complications. Well, she didn't get to such functions as there were very often. Uncle Sebastian had reached that age, more than double hers, when he preferred his own effortless society. Besides, he had thrown himself with the passion you find only in the retired seafaring person, into the adventure of landscape gardening. He brought out fine things from England for the house; and the girl looked at the hills through lace and

l lounged on brocade, while others were content with dimity and chintz, but for the grounds he went farther afield. Instead of letting the native rhododendron and catalpa show what they could do, he took all the trouble in life to make things grow that didn't want to. He brought orchids from Honduras, and true yerba plants from Paraguay, and palms from Cuba. One would have sworn that he was trying his 'prentice hand on them in order to learn some way of acclimatizing his own exotic.

"I understand how she felt. I'm miserable myself, too far above tide-water. . . . To see, not the horizon, like the marches between the country of dreams and ours, but the mountain wall, so uncompromising, so *there*—it crushed her, it beat her down to the earth."

"Name?" I queried.

"Lola. Dolores with a Maria in front of it, like all those South Americans. She had got to the staring stage before the neighborhood—none too scattered for gossip—began to preen itself for something to happen. You know, when a woman sits by the window and *stares* her soul through unfocused eyes out of her body. Then—"

"Enter—"

"Exactly. One afternoon Uncle Sebastian was hanging over a round bed of particolored plants, like a painter over his palette, meditating an indefensible scheme. You would have known that he had once owned a quarterdeck and every living thing within hearing. A fine figure of a man, dashed with—call it romance—the quality that had turned him to flowers and the capture of an exquisite young wife.

"Don't make any mistake, because this is important. Plenty of middle-aged men are liable to marry pretty girls, without too much fastidiousness in regard to the type; but the miraculousness of his prisoner was in no wise wasted on Uncle Sebastian. There is a lot of talk nowadays about the reprehensible egotism of considering your

wife quite your most intimate property. Right or wrong, when it came to the sense of 'What's mine's mine,' and the point of honor, no Castilian *hidalgo* had it worse than this South Carolinian.

"That afternoon he raised his eyes, confused with colors, and saw an astounding sight. A young man, wild of eye and disheveled of aspect, was advancing toward him, over the grass. Across his outstretched arms lay Lola, limp and unconscious. After she had been transferred to her lawful protector the explanation was forthcoming. She had been riding, with old Mingo as bodyguard. In spite of his pleading, she had insisted upon urging her horse around the path over the Devil's Yawn. It has a handrail now, as you know, but then it was naked to the world. Just as she reached the farther side a handsome young stranger rose out of the bushes. Selim, her horse, shied—a nervous, high-strung beast—by Mogul out of Lucasta, one of that Charleston bunch owned by—"

"Skip the pedigrees," I groaned. When Peter gets on dead-and-gone Jockey Club history he can run all night.

"All right, if you don't want to know. Selim shied. When two of his feet were over the edge the lady fainted. Fortunately, she swayed in the right direction. The interesting stranger got her out of the saddle, and carried her home."

"And the horse?"

"By some miracle and Mingo's help, he righted himself. But of course, he was ruined as a riding-horse. The young man also appeared much shaken. It turned out that he was their nearest neighbor, but as he had just returned from making the grand tour, this extraordinary call was the first he had paid. Wealthy Carolinians still sent their sons to Eton and Oxford, though less frequently than formerly. Anyway, he arrived at the happy moment."

"Name," I asked again.

"One of those Nugents from St. John's Parish, Berkeley. De Lisle was his

lovely name. He was a good-looking young scamp, of course, and traveled, and glancing about for a flame. And he was a spring in the desert to the drooping spirits of Lola. (I can't think of her as my aunt Dolores, and I don't try.) You may imagine the course of events. Before long he was the tame friend of the house. And the moon, as is well known, shines nearly every night in the mountains. Frequently there is even a day-moon."

"And the husband?"

"There is no doubt that he chafed. He became touchy. It is difficult to ask the man who has saved the life of your spouse to keep out of her drawing-room. But suddenly, for some reason, the visits dropped off; the half-formal relation was re-established. Lola, the relieved husband decided, must, like a discreet and virtuous woman, have given the puppy a lesson. Her own spirits were more equable than they had ever been. So serene was the domestic atmosphere that he took advantage of it to travel down to the coast, where some business transactions would be all the better for his presence. Old Mingo, being his body-servant, and only detailed as the mistress's groom because of the stability and resourcefulness of his character, would ordinarily have gone with him. Because of the sparsely settled countryside, however, Uncle Sebastian decided to leave him behind as a sort of intendant and protector of the household. Mingo had never gone to sea with him, but had, as it were, inherited him, having been servant to Uncle Sebastian's father. . . .

"My uncle Sebastian came home of a late September afternoon, just about sunset. Instead of taking the broad road, he allowed himself to be beguiled into the short cut over the Devil's Yawn. He was impatient to see his wife. Something in the rich wonder of the flushed sky and the goldening woods made her vivid to his mind. As he rode slowly from one side a man came crouching toward him from the other. They met

in the middle, over the darkening void, where the sunset was stirring the air into a queer, rufous uneasiness.

"Well, Mingo," said his master. Except that his face had gone stiff, he expressed nothing of his realization that something must be bitterly wrong. He even kept up his careful gentling of the horse's neck, although the animal stood tractably enough.

"With his head bowed and his hand nervously rubbing the pommel, the old man, in what words he had, told his master the truth. When he ended there was no doubt left in the mind of either, none at all.

"Over the negro's shoulder my uncle Sebastian could see the same treacherous riot of color that had so taken him. Below, the flesh-soft ruddy depths seemed sucking impatiently, like an animal's gullet. His eyes traveled to the brown hand near his knee.

"Where did you say?" he demanded, suddenly.

"The old summer-house, near the Nugent borders of the property? Yes, a good, lonely place, where the servants had no business and seldom passed. The sardonic thought struck him that to conduct an intrigue on a populated plantation took finesse.

"Does anyone else know—suspect?" His voice was thoughtful.

"No, Cap'n; no, Maussa, nobody know. I know 'cause I watch. You say, Mingo, you in charge o' yo' missis. You 'countable to me. You see no harm come to she . . . I watch . . . Nobody know 'tall, 'ceptin' me?"

"You have been a faithful servant, Mingo," said the deadly quiet voice. 'Hold out your hands—both of them.'

"Even through his distress the negro's eyes brightened. His master drew a red-netted purse from his pocket, slipped the rings slowly aside and emptied out a little pile of gold pieces. He turned as if to pour them into the cupped palms which Mingo held at the level of his wrinkled black chin. Instead, my uncle Sebastian's arm shot out in a violent

push. Frantic fingers snatched at the unsupported air as the old man toppled backward. At the savage yell that came from the chasm, reverberating weirdly from the slope, the horse started and reared. After his rider had persuaded him along the terrace and thrown the rein over a branch that overhung the solid ground beyond, both stood for a long minute, shaking and listening. Then Uncle Sebastian came back on foot and peered over the edge. Far below, a mass, too unnatural-looking to be a rock, sprawled in the water. If the fall had not killed Mingo, he would at least be safely drowned. Nothing like remorse or even horror touched the cold purpose of the captain's mind. He had done a thing which had to be done, and he had accomplished it in a workmanlike manner.

"In spite of a curious duality, his brain functioned perfectly. If he rode up to the house a dozen negroes would go scattering in search of the mistress. Turning into the woods, he again dismounted, reasonably near the summer-house. He approached with the discretion of an Indian. Light persisted in the air, the exquisite gold incandescence that takes a long time to fade. He stationed himself behind the curving holly hedge which led to the tiny porch. Lola had pronounced the place gloomy and overhung, but to his sharpened perception it seemed full of a hateful restrained joy, like a hidden glow. Perhaps the late-blooming flowers which had formed their clusters during his absence, created the delusion.

"At last the door opened. Two came out. Then, it was not so much that the man held out his arms and the woman fell into them, as that they threw themselves together. My uncle Sebastian stepped from his ambush and waited.

"They faced him for a second's eternity. The woman dropped on the steps and pressed her face into her knees. One would have said that she was biting them. Nugent stood, braced.

"The curious division in his brain

touched the husband's mood with a grim humor. It occurred to him that the young man was trying to lay hold, in his whirling world, of the proper phrase, the perfect tradition.

"'Mr. Nugent,' he suggested, as gently as a velvet paw, 'you are, of course, about to assure me of the entire innocence—in spite of the oddness of appearances—of the touching scene which I have been so maladroit as to witness.'

"'I do assure you, sir,' the other broke in with passion. 'I swear to you that your wife—'

"'No,' said my uncle Sebastian softly. His hand rose like the most deliberate portent, like finality without appeal. 'Not my wife. . . .'

"There was a moment of stark silence. Lola was on her feet, her eyes wide with shock, the sense of what she had heard soaking into her consciousness.

"'I have no authority, either civil or religious, to detain this lady, if she wishes to exchange my protection for yours. I regret her decision infinitely. . . .'

"The formal, ironical voice trailed away. The girl's gasping breath tried to shape itself into words, her eyes contracted and spat fire. 'It is a lie,' she whispered. It was like a last confession into which the dying put all the life that is left them. She caught Nugent's arm and shook it in her fierce desire to convince. Then her tone rose almost into a shriek. 'Do not believe him! It is a lie!' She panted, her fingers working at her throat, as she picked the English phrases out of the torrent of Spanish that rose to her lips. 'We were married at Puerto San José, in Venezuela . . . Padre Emanuelo married us . . . at the church of Santa Maria Dolores. You know it—you know it!' The long-drawn gasp she launched at her husband was like a curse. 'Do not believe him. You do not know him—him! Privateers they call themselves—*pirates*, we call them. They take our gold, they burn our towns. My guardian was *coman-*

*dante*. He gave me to him to soften his heart because we were afraid. . . . Five weeks—five weeks I had been from the convent when he saw me. He came into the *patio* of my guardian, Don Alfonso Gastone y Calderone. I had thought to be courted like other well-born girls, with flowers, with the guitar, to see him ride up and down the street, in front of my balcony, as is only genteel. But no, he came to my guardian, he came to me, he said, “I will not wait. Give her to me now.” . . . And . . . Don Alfonso was afraid for the town. We are *afraid* of them, down there. . . .’ She threw her small fists out, storm and righteous fury convulsing her. Then she wound her arms around her head, and hid her face against the porch pillar, uttering curious little animal moans.

“‘I cannot but admire the discreet choice of proofs—which cannot be proved,’ observed my uncle Sebastian, conversationally. ‘A town which really was burned by pirates not long ago, including its churches and their records, no doubt. Witnesses, who either perished then or else were scattered to the four winds, because the place has not been rebuilt. There really was such a place,’ he pursued, with middle-aged reasonableness. ‘With none too good a reputation either, even for a seaport, well known to sailor-men, and purchasers of suspicious goods and the like. It is true that I met this lady there.’ It was curious that he spoke only to the young man, and indeed looked only at him. ‘She was known then as the most celebrated dancer of the region—the beautiful Chiquita.’

“The girl thrust herself in front of Nugent, forcing him to look into her burning eyes. ‘You do not believe him,’ she asserted, rather than asked. ‘It is my word against his. I was no dancer, I was a lady. Padre Emanuelo married us.’

“He was trembling ever so slightly, but there was something ardently tender and rather nobly protective in the way

he put her gently behind him. He advanced a pace toward the figure that the gathering dusk made more sinister. I believe her,’ he said. ‘You speak of proofs. Where are yours?’

“As sudden as the whisk of an unsheathed claw the other’s voice rasped out. ‘You are my proof. Do you suppose if this woman were my wife, you would still be alive?’

“‘I am entirely at your service,’ replied young Mr. Nugent, with commendable coldness. He wheeled, and said to the girl, as naturally as possible, ‘Come.’ It was as though he had added, ‘I think all good and no ill of you, but if, by some treason of his, you are free, I claim you.’

“‘Wait,’ said my uncle Sebastian. The menace in his tone might have wakened a strange conjecture in the hearer’s mind. What background of flaming ships had lit the train of such brutal urgency? ‘I have, as I say, no right to keep her. But God forbid that I should be made ridiculous by her. The role of the deceived husband does not appeal to me. If she goes—if she goes—the world shall hear my side of the story. And the world will believe my side of the story.’

“He gave the two in the twilight leisure to digest this, thrusting his head forward to spy more narrowly upon their souls. The girl drew away and drooped against the railing of the porch. All the spirit was gone out of her. She leaned like a rag over the white bar, faded, drained, the embodiment of refusal and negation.

“‘I cannot go,’ she said in a dull whisper.

“‘Lola!’ the young man cried, hurt to the quick.

“Her hands fell helplessly into a gesture that appealed to his intelligence. He must understand. Then she explained, with a fine, childish simplicity, ‘I could have gone with you. A lady may do that. But to be branded as an outcast—a dancer.’ Her shoulders rose wearily. ‘You see that I cannot go.’

She dragged herself forward, along the path that led home, passing her husband as though he had been one of the bushes. As my uncle Sebastian turned to follow, Nugent spoke.

"I shall wait here," he said.

"Very late that night my uncle Sebastian came into his wife's room. She was leaning over, all but into the fire, and she never moved until he had laid upon the logs, under her eyes, a folded document, ornamented with those flamboyant seals affected by Latin-American communities. He held her wild hands until he had watched it burn.

"Lola," he said, heavily. "I should have preferred to hold you by affection, but a desperate man uses what weapons he—has."

Peter Fortuné stopped. He leaned over the fire as the trapped girl must have done so often afterwards; as all baffled and wondering souls gaze into it, seeking some answer, or perhaps only some fellowship of suffering.

"What happened afterward?"

"Nobody knows," answered Peter, absently. "The diary broke off there. The rest is conjecture. One thing that caused a nine-days' wonder, however, was the disappearance of young Nugent that same night. It was supposed that he had left incontinently for parts unknown because of his hopeless *tendre* for a respectable married lady. Somehow," glowered Peter, "I have an extraordinarily vivid ancestral memory—collateral ancestral, anyway—of a duel with Uncle Sebastian's traveling pistols, after the indispensable moon rose. And I rather fancy that the bed of part-colored plants had never been so ensanguinedly brilliant, so crying from the ground, you might say, as during the following season."

"Ugh. And the lady?"

"Life is a damned queer thing," sighed Peter, with vast originality. "Oh, I suppose she settled down, she settled down. Women have, after much worse experiences. But the staring habit grew on her, and she developed little eccen-

tricities. Occasionally—but only when they were alone—she called him de Lisle. I imagine that was when my uncle Sebastian came into enjoyment of his own particular little hell."

I made a long arm and fished Peter's book from under the flotsam. It was quite what I had expected.

"Peter," I began. "I hate to cast aspersions on your family bones, especially when you clothe them just like a book, not leaving out even their inmost psychology. But that yarn is confoundedly like one in some old French memoirs. That cheap skate, de Roque-laure's, to be exact. I have read it."

"So have I," agreed Peter equably. "So had he. That, of course, was where he got the idea. You'll find his name inside the cover."

The faded ink-marks were full of idiosyncrasy, upstrokes like the salute, downstrokes with the heavy slash of a cutlass. It had all the look of the man. . . .

Somewhere in that disillusioning hour of the night when one's circulation is lowest and one's outlook most cynical, I was awakened by an anxious doubt. It refused to accept its clearance papers until they were made out in form. Finally, to get rid of it, I reluctantly felt for my slippers with toes that were all thumbs, took the chased candlestick that had been beaten out of coin by a historic silversmith of Charleston, and started downstairs.

I defy any burglar, even one with a side-taste for interpretative dancing, to make a good job of an old, black-cypress, plantation-house staircase. I could not seem to get the rhythm of it. Each step cracked, and each differently—like the pistol shot that starts a race. Peter called sleepily from his room that the plate was on the sideboard, convenient. I muttered something about matches. Then he added that clean glasses were there too. I hate to have my motives impugned, but it was impossible to justify myself. Besides, I was busy avoiding a warm, live rug on a landing.

The fire in the drawing-room still smoldered, like the heart of a hospitality which I was outraging. Over the barricade of the backlog, as I poked it, the spurt of fat pine-knots aimed at the glasses of the bookcases and hit them. The books looked surprised to see me. The whole thing made me cringe inside.

The passion for truth, however, is a devastating power which has no patience with any obstacle, pious or otherwise. I found the book. I turned to the title-page. Again it was just as I had expected.

The so-called memoirs of de Roquelaure were published in Cologne in sev-

enteen twenty-seven. Uncle Sebastian may, of course, have seen them. But this particular volume which bore his signature—a translation, I regret to say—was not given to the world until long after the middle of the last century.

Great-granduncle Sebastian, as I but too plainly remembered, died in eighteen thirty-three.

The thoroughness of the artist stops at nothing. Peter must have loved to write that autograph, not with any wish to deceive, but simply and solely to bring his story nearer to the heart's desire.

## ON SILENT WINGS

BY MARION COUTHOUY SMITH

**T**HERE is a flock of weary birds, that go  
 Not south, but westward, with the dying days;  
 They fly in silence through the twilight ways,  
 Sounding no call of joy, no cry of woe.  
 One after one, like some thin river's flow,  
 The line goes on, athwart the morning rays,  
 Through the clear noonday, or the stormy haze,  
 Still winging toward oblivion, mute and slow.

No eyes shall follow them with kindling sight,  
 And none shall know the seas where they are tost,  
 When their spent pinions shall at last be furled  
 From the long striving of their hopeless flight;  
 For these are loves denied, and friendships lost,  
 And all the unwanted treasures of the world.