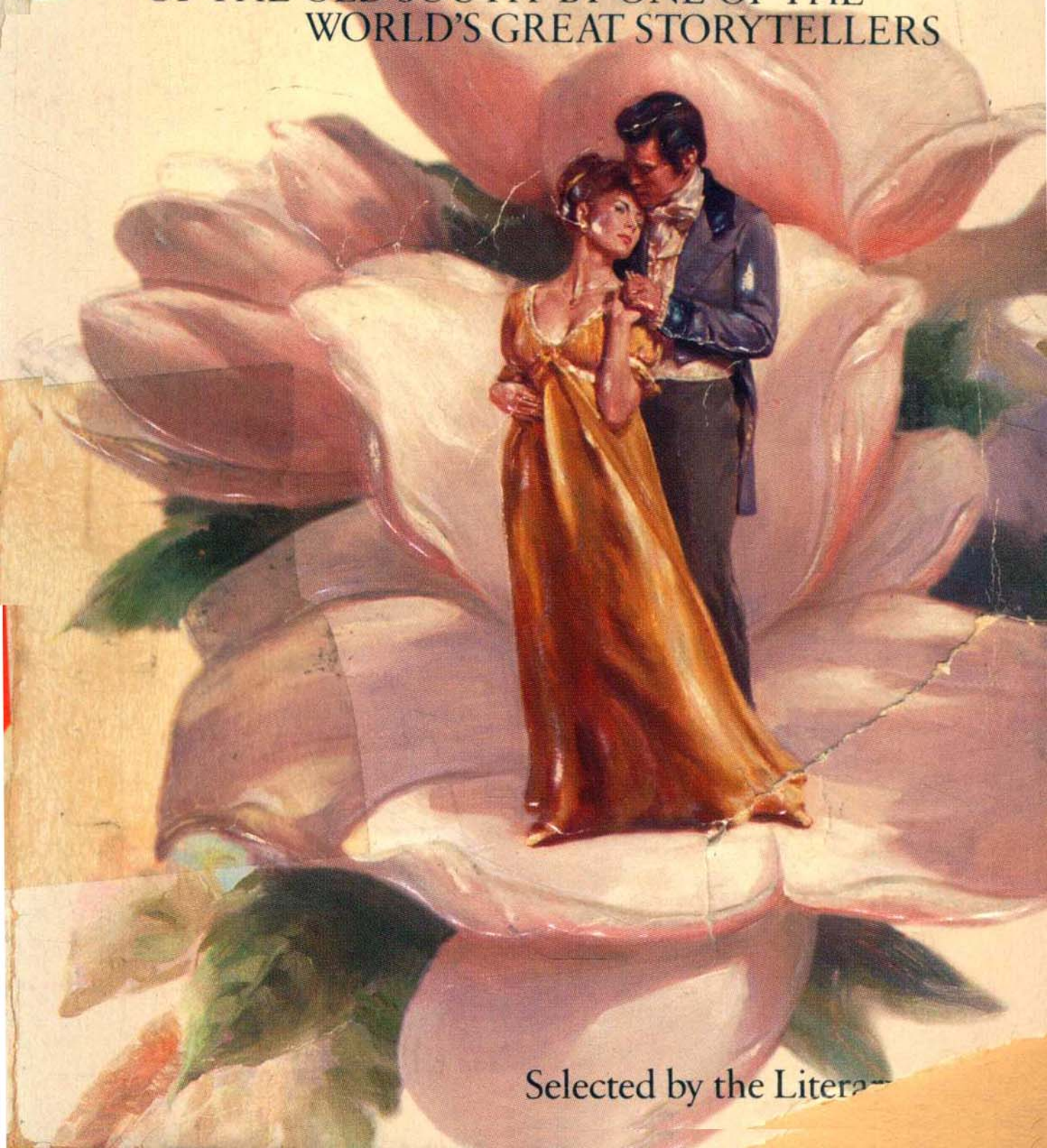


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EUGENIA PRICE SAVANNAH

THE PASSION, THE GLORY, THE SPLENDOR
OF THE OLD SOUTH BY ONE OF THE
WORLD'S GREAT STORYTELLERS



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SAVANNAH

EUGENIA PRICE



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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SAVANNAH

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Part I

1812-1813

ONE

HANDS gripping the rail of the plunging schooner *Eliza*, young Mark Browning, his well-tailored clothes wet and rumpled, stood on deck alone, determined not to be sick. From beneath a fashionable slouch cap, strands of damp chestnut hair clung to his lean face as he struggled for balance against the sea.

Except for trips by boat to and from his Philadelphia home and Yale College, Mark had never sailed. His late father's tales of storms at sea, however graphic, in no way prepared him for this. Even so, his resolve held. Mark was headed for Savannah to build a life, to make his own way. He meant someday to create his own family because the last two other members of the small one into which he was born twenty years ago were now dead. There were friends and connections, but no one mattered anymore back in Philadelphia.

Bearing south, the schooner slid down, then vaulted up and over gray walls of towering Atlantic waves. Mark's slender, strong body, more than adequate to any test he'd ever given it, was no match for this power. The *Eliza* floundered helplessly, inching forward, then seeming to rush back—getting nowhere. There was no visible storm, no rain, no wind, but the sea raged and hurled its weight over the deck—not in a regular motion so that a man might anticipate the next dousing—but with quixotic, uneven force, as though designed to take him off guard, to catch him with his hands momentarily loosed on the railing. There were no women or children aboard and most men were below, as were his cabin mates, too ill to move from their berths. Now and then during the turbulent morning, a

few passengers braved the deck in desperation, unable to endure the smell of sickness in the stuffy staterooms and half-ashamed, as was Mark, that their stomachs churned when, in truth, there was no recognizable storm.

"Mind over matter," he imagined he heard dead Aunt Nassie's voice chide. "You've a strong mind, Mark—a Browning mind. Use it! Just concentrate. You won't be ill. *Concentrate.*"

On what? The sleek, handsome schooner *Eliza*—his only protection from the flailing sea? In fair weather, he was sure she rode high in the water, her bow proud and sharp, cleanly severing the waves, gliding, cradling passengers in safety for sun- and moonlight strolls on her deck, for sound sleep in her small, but adequate, cabins and staterooms.

May 22, 1812, the date of Mark's high-spirited departure from Philadelphia—only two days ago—had been a storybook day for sailing. A spring blue sky, with just the right amount of wind moving white, puffy clouds about, seemed suited to the *Eliza*. Her passengers read on deck; a few played flutes and fiddles brought along to while away the hours. The mainly prosperous gentlemen aboard cooked their meals in relative comfort on their own charcoal stoves or good-naturedly waited their turn in the ship's galley.

On the first day, Mark was drawn to one passenger—a stocky, but graceful, gentleman with a short Brutus haircut, who seemed to enjoy himself immensely. His name, Mark learned, was Robert Mackay, a prosperous merchant from Savannah. The Savannah mercantile world held Mark's interest, but it was the easy charm of Mackay himself that drew him. The moment his two somewhat dull cabin mates announced that they were dining with friends in another part of the ship, Mark invited Robert Mackay to share his meal of salt fish and hominy, which he would prepare himself. Mackay refused with regret because he was dining with the captain; unexpectedly, Mark felt rebuffed. "Thin skin because you're frightened and nervous about going to a strange place," Aunt Nassie would have said. He supposed so. In spite of his excitement and anticipation, he was more nervous than lonely. After all, dining by himself would be no new experience. He had taken his meals alone almost every night of the long year since Aunt Nassie and his father died. He simply wanted to

know Robert Mackay of Savannah and he vowed to find a way.

A gigantic wave swept his feet from under him so that, momentarily, only the frantic grip of his hands kept him from pitching overboard. When the wave sucked back into the sea and his boots were once more firmly on deck, he swallowed a flood of hot fluid forced up by his queasy stomach and shut his eyes against the sting of salt spray.

Without warning, a wall of leaden water struck him with such force that in nightmare tempo he felt his hands wrenched from the ship's rail and his body borne back and down until his head struck a hard object.

Then, nothing.

Sometime later, when Mark regained consciousness, he noticed the quiet first, the heavy water rushing by the ship's hull, then the lulling motion of being safely rocked, then the pain in his head and shoulder. The merest movement of his head on what seemed to be a pillow made him wince.

"Not so fast, son. Take your time. Take all the time you need."

Through the pain, the man's calm, almost musical voice, very close by, lessened some of the tension in his body. Mark took a deep breath and then, as though he'd been asleep for a long time, forced open his eyes. The pleasant, open-featured, middle-aged gentleman smiled at him. A smile Mark could only recognize at first as beautiful: strong, even teeth, a well-formed mouth and dark eyes so large and kind, they seemed to embrace him. It was Robert Mackay of Savannah.

"I apologize for my ship's uncouth treatment, young man," Mackay said. "The *Eliza* is seldom so rough with her passengers. Notice how gently she carries you now?"

"Yes, sir," Mark half whispered. "Has the wind died?"

Mackay chuckled. "On the contrary. The wind rose soon after we carried you down those narrow, steep steps. Lack of wind was our problem. The good ship *Eliza* just needed wind to fill her sails. We're lifted to the tops of the waves now, buoyed along. The wind is going around the clock—steadily."

"I—see."

"Actually, the ship's normally rather like the dear lady for whom I named her—full of charm, agreeable, welcoming. The

Eliza and I deeply regret the uncivil treatment, son."

Mark tried a smile and then, to hide his distress at the pain in his right shoulder, closed his eyes again. "It's—all right, sir. I'm—not a good sailor."

Only when he felt it taken away and a fresh, cool cloth laid gently on his forehead did Mark realize that a compress had been there at all. He sighed. "Thank you, sir. That's—good of you."

"Well, my ship and I have much to make up for," Mackay said.

His eyes still closed, Mark asked, "You own this beautiful schooner?"

"Yes. She's named for my wife. And, as a rule, she is just what you called her—beautiful. As is my wife. Actually, both *Elizas* are more than merely beautiful. They're kind, constant, poised." Mackay's smile was in his voice. "Are you headed for Charleston or all the way to my home city of Savannah?"

Mark opened his eyes. "Oh, all the way to Savannah, sir. From now on, Savannah is my home city, too."

"Is that so?"

Looking around the stateroom, larger than his own, Mark frowned. "How long have I—been here, Mr. Mackay? And, where am I?"

"You're in my stateroom, son, and you've been here for over two hours. I've learned about the conditions in your cabin. If you and I had met before you signed on, I'd have seen to better quarters for you. How you managed in the same crowded space with those two obnoxious fellows, I can't imagine."

"They were pleasant enough, until today." He smiled weakly. "I remember one of them said that just looking at the table swinging on its gimbals made him feel ill."

Mackay made a face. "Ugh. Well, I've ordered the place cleaned up. They'd been sick over every inch of it. But for the remainder of the voyage, you'll be right here where I can look after you."

"Where will you sleep?"

"The captain has an extra berth. Your effects are here already. Most of your trunks were moved to the captain's stateroom along with mine. I took the liberty of selecting what I thought you'd need for the next five days or so until we reach Savannah."

"I'll never be able to thank you."

"The only thanks I need will be a good report after a thorough examination now that you're conscious again."

"There's a doctor aboard?"

Mackay grinned. "Indeed so. The most unusual of doctors. George Jones is president of the Georgia Medical Society, a full-fledged judge and currently the mayor of Savannah."

Mark managed a smile. "Sounds impressive. I'll be glad to have him check me over. But"—the smile came a bit more easily now—"do I address him as Doctor or Judge or—Your Honor?"

Mackay's laugh was as musical as his speech. "Since he'll be checking mainly on what I'm afraid might be a broken collarbone, why not try Doctor? I'll go for him now." At the narrow wooden door of the stateroom, Mackay turned back. "Incidentally, you and I will make it fine as friends. I like your cheerful disposition."

When Mackay's longtime friend, Savannah's mayor, Dr. George Jones, had come and gone—his sartorial elegance as impressive as his careful examination—Mark swung his legs out of Mackay's bunk and sat up. "I think I'll live, sir. Thanks to you."

"At least we know your collarbone is still in one piece, but should you be sitting up yet?"

Mark grinned. "Well, the doctor, the judge *and* his honor, all three, suggested that I might do what I feel like doing. What I feel up to is some common courtesy to you. When Dr. Jones recommended that I take it easy for several days, you tricked me, you know, by asking me before him to stay indefinitely at your home in Savannah."

Mackay laughed. "Of course I tricked you. You're far too well-bred to start an argument with a stranger present. You had no choice but to agree."

"If you think back, sir, I didn't actually agree. I didn't say anything one way or the other. I really can't presume upon you. A good night's sleep and I'll be fit again. But I would appreciate your recommending lodgings in Savannah. Just something clean and reasonably comfortable."

Mackay turned a straight chair backward and straddled it. "Well, now, that gives me as good an excuse as any to talk about the peculiar and partly delightful little city of Savannah.

Once the threat of another war with Britain is past or once the war is over—whichever eventuality may occur—Savannah will indeed have one or two good hotels. Not yet. So, since doctor's orders are for rest and care, your address will be—for as long as you need us—the Mackay house on Broughton Street."

"Surely, there's some sort of inn or tavern—a respectable boardinghouse."

"Well, there is one shabby inn. President Washington stayed there during his memorable visit to Savannah in 1791. And, perhaps because the citizens so exhausted the great man with their celebration of him, he may have slept well. That was more than twenty years ago. As it is today, it will not supply your early impression of Savannah. I forbid it."

A slow smile spread over Mark's lean, even features.

"Did I say something funny?" Mackay asked.

"That phrase 'forbid it' has a history with me."

"Oh?"

"My Aunt Nassie, who reared me, always said to forbid me was the surest way to be sure I did a thing."

"And does that still apply with you?"

Mark was silent for a time. "I don't know. You see, there's so much I don't know about myself. More and more it seems to me that those who presume to—to being cultivated say a lot of things they don't really mean."

"Bull's-eye," Mackay laughed. "So-called cultivated folk seldom say what they mean if anyone of consequence is listening." He laid his hand on Mark's knee. "I did mean it when I said you're more than welcome at my home, son."

"Oh, I wasn't referring to you, sir. I meant—myself. You see, in my anxiety not to impose, I refused your kindness point-blank. And that isn't what I really meant at all. The truth is, I'd give almost anything for a few days with a—real family." He studied his slender, smooth hands. "Family life is one experience I've missed. But you don't know me at all. Are you always so openhearted?"

"No, I'm not. In fact, I'm boringly protective of Mrs. Mackay and our children. Still, I seem to know all I need to know about you."

"How can you?"

"I suppose, in part, because I'm forty years old and have

met numbers of men both here and abroad. Have, in my business as a merchant, had to make quick judgments. For now, I simply know all I need to know about you." To Mark, Mackay's laugh had a safe sound. "After all, Browning, I had a look at your wardrobe, your trunks, your brushes, your razor. You're a gentleman. Your manners, and especially those straightforward gray eyes of yours, are to me most revealing. You're not only a gentleman by birth and breeding, you're good and trusting in your heart. Now, does that answer your question?"

Mark felt himself redden. "You haven't asked about my family—not once."

"I know you're from Philadelphia. I figure you'll tell me more when you're ready."

"My mother died when I was three." He frowned slightly. "I—don't think I really remember her at all. Father's spinster sister, Aunt Nassie, reared me."

"You and your aunt and your father lived together?"

"Not my father. Aunt Nassie and I lived in what is still called the old Browning mansion on Locust Street. Father traveled the world from the day after my mother's funeral. I suppose you'd say he didn't really live anywhere." Mark smiled a little. "Unlike his only child, he was a fine sailor. Spent much of his life traveling at sea. He inherited the family business from my grandfather, who died before I was born. I guess Papa and Grandfather didn't exactly get along, but there was only one son." Mackay, he thought, knows how to listen and for some reason Mark needed to talk. "I don't actually know that they didn't get along, but when he visited me, I could never get my father to talk about Grandfather Browning except to say that they were not at all alike."

"And does it bother you somehow—not knowing about your grandfather?"

The characteristic small frown appeared again and vanished. "I'd have liked knowing what made him so successful. Funny thing, my aunt, who was my best friend, wouldn't talk about him either. Except to say that Grandfather had no time for anything but the business." Mark's eyes filled. "I know this makes us sound like a family of pretty cold fish. That isn't true. Aunt Nassie loved my father as though he'd been her own son. She loved me, too." Blinking back tears, he added,

"I guess it's obvious how much I loved her. Except for my four years at Yale, she was just about my world. I always had more fun with her than with friends my age. I—loved her very much. My father was devoted to her, too."

Mackay was silent for a time, then said, "You speak of your father and aunt in the past tense."

"Yes, sir. Papa died a little over a year ago. Died where he spent so much of his life—on the high seas. He was drowned in a storm off the Bahamas. Aunt Nassie died, too, a month later. As a result of the shock, our doctor said."

Slowly, Robert Mackay got up from his chair and sat beside Mark on the bunk. "I'm sorry, son. I'm truly sorry. But, I'm also *here*. And I will be, from now on."

An unbidden sob shook Mark's body. He was sure Mackay heard it, but equally sure that his new friend would give him time to compose himself.

As months, even years, can unroll with the speed of lightning in the memory, Mark was back in Philadelphia again, a twelve-year-old boy standing beside his father on the corner of Front and German streets, his young heart pounding as it always did during Mark Browning, Sr.'s rare visits. The boy knew that at any moment the tall, golden-haired man beside him would lean down, shake his hand, give him the flashing smile that always seemed to belong to someone else, then swing once more into a rented carriage and vanish for another year or two or three. That day the boy longed so painfully for his father to stay with him that on a public street corner, the longing spilled out in tears. Pretending not to notice, Mark Browning, Sr., mussed his son's thick, dark hair, shook his hand, smiled and was gone.

There had been three more visits but no more tears.

Mackay, still sitting beside him, was waiting with quiet patience and no sense of either haste or idle curiosity. Mark tried to think of something appropriate to explain his long silence, but he could think of nothing. Why had that one visit when he had let his father see him cry come so clearly now, of all times? Why hadn't he remembered the last hours spent with his father? Why not their last good-bye—the theatrical last doff of the fine brushed top hat? Why not any of the earlier visits in which Mark had so reveled as a boy? He had adored every sight of his dashing, golden father, had so enjoyed himself

every moment of each visit that at age seven he had felt sympathy for his young friends who had the same dull father about the house every day giving orders. "I'd rather have my father just once in a while," he'd declare, "than your old-fogy fathers every day! My father tells me by the hour about his travels to the Far East, to Africa, to England, to France and Spain and Italy! China, too, and Japan. My father and I have more real fun in two weeks together than you'll ever know about!"

At this moment, in the creaking stateroom in the company of his new friend, suddenly Mark knew why the unexpected memory had been of that earlier farewell to his parent rather than the last one. What his father had confessed to him on that last visit had been so securely locked away, so firmly pushed to the back of his mind, that not once during the long year alone in the big house, grieving for both his father and Aunt Nassie, had he dared dwell on it. He could tell no one and so he had pushed it aside. Buried it.

Oh, he had accepted what his father had confessed as truth. Facts were facts. What he had buried, he realized, was his own response at the moment his father had confessed. Mark had not doubted that his troubled parent was telling him the truth. Even his imaginative father would never have made up such a thing. The torment—alive to this day—lay in not being able to remember *how* he himself had responded, in having lost forever the chance to ask. His father seemed to have vanished from his life more surely than had Aunt Nassie, because he had been able to visit her grave. Mark Browning, Sr., had no grave. Drowned at sea, the shining, tormented man had simply vanished in all ways.

With his whole heart, once he had been told, Mark had understood why his father had lived his restless life as he did. Once the words were out of the elder Browning's mouth—in a flash following the initial pain at having been so deceived—Mark had understood, had known, deep inside himself, *why* his father had deliberately misled him. With the knowing had come a different pain: His father had needed him at the moment of confession and Mark could not remember one word he himself had said. He could recall—even this minute in the *Eliza's* stateroom—every word his father had spoken, but *not one word of his own*.

He turned his head slightly to look at Mackay, whose brown eyes were calm and expectant. The friendly silence brought an impulse so strong that Mark got quickly to his feet to quell it: If I dared tell Mackay what Papa confessed to me, he thought, maybe I could remember what it was that I said to him that last day. Instead, he stood, silent, his back to Mackay. To babble would show his anxious youth, and more than anything, he wanted Robert Mackay's respect—as a *man* able to make his own way in a strange city.

When the silence grew awkwardly long, Mackay spoke in a quiet, firm voice. "Life has certainly handed you a double blow, son. You've been handed the kind of double blow few mature men are asked by the Almighty to endure. You have my sympathy. Most of all, you have my deepest respect."

Mark stared at him. "Your—respect? How did you know I wanted that above everything?"

"I didn't. But you have it." Mackay stood, too. "And don't forget, I'm here when and if you need to talk more later. Right now, doctor's orders are for you to rest. I have business with the captain, but his stateroom adjoins this one. When you've had a nap and want company again, just knock on the wall. I'll come right back with a pot of tea and some biscuits." With that, Mackay eased Mark down onto the bed, lifted both legs onto it and pulled up the sheet. "Go on and laugh at my mother-hen behavior. But I know even a forty-year-old likes to be fussed over when he's not well. My wife is superb at the art of spoiling me. You can do with a bit of the same medicine."

He gave Mark a smiling salute and strode toward the door. Then he turned abruptly back, his high forehead creased in concentration as though he'd just remembered something. "Was your father's name Mark Browning, too? And did he own the vast Browning World Shipping Company?"

Mark frowned. "Why, yes, sir. You—didn't know him, did you?"

"I've suddenly remembered. We dined together once in Liverpool! And that had to be less than two years ago."

Mark felt as though he couldn't breathe. "Then—you saw him after I did. . . ."

"I recall it was just before I moved my family back to Savannah. We intended to stay in England. My firm has an of-

fice there, but with the trouble pending between our two countries, I felt I had to get my wife and children back here while we could still find safe passage." Mackay spread his hands in amazement. "Now, why didn't I make the connection with the name Browning? I'll never forget the man I dined with that night. Never."

"Why? Why won't you ever forget him?"

Mackay was again seated on the side of Mark's berth. "I'm not quite sure. His appearance, for one thing. A stunningly handsome gentleman—that shock of golden hair, physique like a Greek god. So important in the world of commerce—the owner of the giant among shipping firms—" Mackay frowned. "And yet, he seemed—lost in a way. Oh, nothing he said. Highly entertaining conversationalist, widely read—brilliant, in fact. But—"

"But what?"

"You're not much like him, are you?"

"No, sir. I'm not like him. We looked nothing alike. He always said I was a lot like my Savannah-born mother."

Mackay clapped a hand to his forehead. "Savannah! You go right on startling me! Your mother was born in Savannah? What was her maiden name? I've certainly heard of her family!"

"Cotting."

Robert Mackay thought a minute. "Cotting? Funny, I don't recall hearing that name—ever. Were your parents married in Savannah?"

"Philadelphia. And except to talk endlessly about how lovely she was, how right for him, I now realize that my father told me almost nothing about her. All I know about their courtship is that he vowed he couldn't wait for all the Savannah wedding folderol, so when she came to the ship to say good-bye the day he was to sail back to Philadelphia, he took her by the hand right then and there and stole her away."

"When was that?" Mackay asked. "I didn't come to Savannah myself until 1790."

"I think they left Savannah about three years earlier. My Aunt Nassie, who loved my mother very much, always said she spent the first two years of their married life teaching my mother how to be Mrs. Mark Browning—in Philadelphia."

Mackay grinned. "Not an easy job to be Mrs. Mark Brown-

ing anywhere, I'd think. Least of all in fashionable Philadelphia."

"Papa always told me that my mother was considered the loveliest, most charming young matron in town."

"But surely, he spoke of her Savannah family."

"No. Only about my mother herself. You see, he did begin to travel right after she died. I was only three. I really don't remember actually living with my father. All my life as I was growing up, I just lived for his visits. Aunt Nassie and I didn't dare travel abroad, although she adored Europe. We could never be sure when Papa might visit us. Neither of us would have missed a visit for anything on this earth."

"I see. But your Aunt Nassie must have stayed in touch with your mother's family in Savannah."

Tears stung Mark's eyes. "For a whole year, Mr. Mackay—alone in that big house—I've kicked myself because I never seemed to ask the right questions of anyone. Now, I can't. Mother, it seems, was an orphan when she married my father. If she had brothers and sisters, I was never told."

"Cotting, Cotting . . ." Mackay muttered, scratching his head, trying to make the Savannah connection.

"I probably shouldn't even mention any of this. It only makes me seem dumber, without a shred of normal curiosity all those years."

"Don't kick yourself for not asking. Children are romantics at heart. You just didn't think to ask the hard questions. And evidently they didn't give you any facts—beyond her charm, her beauty."

"That's right. And until the last time I saw Papa, what they did tell me seemed enough." He thought a minute and then, deciding that he had nothing to lose, went on. "There was one night—I was about six years old—when I was roused from a sound sleep by Aunt Nassie's voice downstairs. Ordinarily, she never raised her voice. That night, shaking like a leaf, I crawled out of bed and listened at the top of the big stair because I could tell she was livid with rage at someone. A man. I couldn't see him because the stairway curved. I remember only that I was scared at the way Aunt Nassie sounded. The man kind of mumbled. Looking back, I think he must have been drunk."

"Could you hear what he said at all?"