

THE ORDEAL OF MANSART

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America (*Harvard Historical Studies*, No. 1, 1896)

The Philadelphia Negro (*Publication of the University of Pennsylvania Series on Political Economy and Public Law*, No. 14, 1899)

The Souls of Black Folk (1903)

John Brown (1909)

Quest of the Silver Fleece (*a novel*, 1911)

The Negro (*Home University Library*, 1915)

Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil (1920)

The Gift of Black Folk: The Negro in the Making of America (1924)

Dark Princess (*a novel*, 1928)

Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880 (1935)

Black Folk: Then and Now (1939)

Dusk of Dawn: An Autobiography (1940)

Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace (1945)

The World and Africa (1947)

In Battle for Peace (1952)

The Black Flame

A Trilogy

BOOK ONE

The ORDEAL *of* MANSART

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To Shirley Graham

原书缺页

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Chapter I

COLONEL BRECKINRIDGE PROMISES

IT WAS OCTOBER, 1876. On the Battery, the wide plaza which fronts the sea in Charleston, South Carolina, four persons were about to meet; and in a certain way their meeting was critical for a nation and a world. The sea was shining in the evening sun which hovered red above the shadowed city to the west.

On the white-pillared porch of his home, Colonel John Breckinridge was sitting not far from his wife. He was medium in height and spare, almost handsome in countenance, with a sifting of grey in his hair. He was disturbed and unhappy and angry at himself because he was so moved. The reason was simple. He was about to tell a lie. Colonel Breckinridge was not accustomed to say anything which did not seem to him true. Partly this was moral conviction; partly inherited training; and largely the result of economic independence which made reliance on other opinions or prejudices quite unnecessary to his manner of life. Of course, his frank and arrogant expression of opinion was often curbed by natural kindness and inbred courtesy. It seemed to him quite excusable to tell a devastated beauty that she was still as charming as ever; or to console and assure a sick and elderly friend on his appearance of health.

But today he had been asked to assure a poor white leader that if he would withdraw his voting power from control by the up-state white farmers who were trying to annex and submerge the landed aristocracy of the rich lowlands, that this group would get the political and social recognition to which the poor white farmers now so fiercely aspired. This new group was composed of city artisans and small farmers who had never owned slaves and now hired little or no labor. They resented the piedmont whites only a little less than they hated the Negroes; it had been suggested that by playing on these two motives an alliance might be made which would save the old landed aristocracy of Carolina.

Ordinarily, Colonel Breckinridge would have been the last one to be selected for this delicate negotiation. But the most powerful of

the new white labor leaders, Scroggs, had stubbornly insisted on dealing only with Breckinridge, for Breckinridge was a man of his word. He would not consider Orr, Butler, Gary or even Hampton. It was Breckinridge or nobody. This was at once flattering and annoying. Of course, the Breckinridges were gentlemen and therefore men of their word. But quite as obviously, no Breckinridge was going to promise to recognize artisans or laborers as equals on any level. Hampton used all his charm to persuade the Colonel to assent to meeting Scroggs and offering him alliance; but Breckinridge refused to tell a lie. Yet he knew that he was going to lie in spirit if not in actual word. He was within profoundly uneasy as he awaited Scroggs.

He was expecting his visitor but showed no sign of noticing the man already approaching; he glanced at the papers in his lap and smoked. His wife, too, saw the stranger coming and continued to embroider slowly, occasionally glancing off at Fort Sumter burning in the sun, and Fort Moultrie beyond.

Mrs. Breckinridge was a Du Bignon of Louisiana. She was not a beautiful woman; her face was long and her skin sallow, her mouth and ears large, and her frame tall and almost angular. But she was evidently well-bred and even sat with an air of quiet distinction. Her hands were long and exquisite; her hair piled carefully in a black, shining mass with hardly a silver thread; and her clothes, although evidently not new and in part home-made, had been styled in Paris. It had never occurred to Mrs. Breckinridge that aristocracy was an effort or an ambition. It was simply a fact. Her forebears had been nobles under the Roi Soliel in the 17th century; they had met disaster and even poverty in the 18th, but what difference? They were still aristocrats, and when their fortunes were restored in the New World it was but natural, inevitable. She had been educated partly in Paris and used to visit France almost every other year until this war came. But nothing could permanently change the world nor the people in it.

Colonel Breckinridge, on the contrary, was distinctly English by instinct and descent. His clothes came from London and fitted perfectly, even when old and slightly frayed. The Breckinridges had played their part in English history for centuries. He still had titled cousins on the English countryside. One did not boast of this nor drag it into conversation, but it was a well-known fact. Yet the Colonel was troubled; he did not have his wife's complacency of position. The rough experience of war when he was a youngster in his twenties, and the aftermath, had made him realize

that without effort and even desperate effort the old regime might collapse.

As a boy he had been tutored in the classics by an Oxford Master of Arts and was graduated at Princeton. When the Civil War broke out, without hesitation he followed his father and uncle into the field, emerging in 1864 at the age of 36 orphaned, and with his hereditary fortune sadly impaired. The only reservation in his respect for the English was inability to conceive why the Empire had not wholeheartedly supported the South in the Civil War. He was uneasy at the portents of the future and not so sure of his world as he had been formerly.

With faint surprise, but careful to give no evidence of it as he relighted his cigar, he now noticed another person approaching; a Negro was crossing the Battery from the South and apparently coming to his house.

The colored man, Tom Mansart, was walking along the Battery toward the Breckinridge house. As he neared the imposing white pillared Breckinridge mansion he began to feel inner panic. He walked steadily and firmly on, even straightening his broad shoulders a bit. The panic was first a little thing but it grew and grew. How should he approach the Colonel? He remembered discussing this small but great point in his union. Aunt Betsy, who had walked in uninvited, pooh-pooed the whole thing.

"Crawl," she said, "if you have to, only git what you want."

"Worms crawl, but they only git squashed," replied Forbes.

"Right," answered Jones. "Go to Breckinridge's front door; stand up and talk like a man and not like a slave."

So now he hesitated. Should he walk boldly up the front steps, or should he enter the gate and knock at the side door? Now, so far as Mansart himself was concerned, he had no objection in the world to going around to that side door and going through the traditional ceremony. Yet he was not a slave, he was a member of the legislature of South Carolina. He wanted to make a tentative alliance between the black labor and the white landholders; and back of him stood 10,000 organized workers and voters.

Now the very first step toward this must be not to surrender a principle. If he should go to the side door he would go in the status of a laborer, little better than a slave. On the other hand, if he could face Colonel Breckinridge as a man and talk to him, the first and major part of the battle would be not, to be sure, won but laid out. The principle could not be surrendered out of hand if the battle was to be won. Yet he realized that by some perhaps needless

insistence on his rights he might lose the battle before it was joined. It was an extraordinarily difficult matter to decide.

Colonel Breckinridge was watching with feigned carelessness. He was puzzled and a little alarmed. He was expecting this Poor White; it had all been finally arranged at the club last night. His was the chosen voice of southern aristocracy to make alliance with a newly organized group of poor whites. He hated the assignment but he could not refuse in the face of unanimity. His was, they had said, the natural voice of his class. Moreover—and this was what irked him—he needed this alliance. Unless his class regained control, lowered ruinous taxation, and forced Negroes to work for nothing beyond the cost of their support, he faced financial ruin. His crops were ungathered, his lands were almost worthless, and cotton a dollar a pound! And he a Breckinridge, who never before this unholy war had ever known the meaning of poverty! Was fear of poverty making him a liar, or was he acting from high principle?

Who, now, was this Negro approaching his house, and what did he want, and at this of all times? He was not a servant, as his clothes and carriage showed. He walked firmly and held his head up. He was probably one of those half-educated darkies who were misleading and befuddling the bewildered Negroes. But where was he going? Not, surely to this house and at this time? He could feel the white man glowering in his retreat. This was the time to unify the whites for an end. True, it was also not the time needlessly to antagonize the Negro nor breed suspicion. Was someone trying to crowd him into lying simultaneously to both sides? Was he being forced to bear a double burden of shame? By God, he would never do it! Let Hampton lie to the Negroes if he must. A Breckinridge would never treat a Negro as a man or even promise to.

As these measured steps of some faint doom approached, the Colonel recalled in a flash the fantastic tale of the last decade. The truth was simply unbelievable. It began in 1865, when black soldiers actually marched into Charleston, down Meeting Street to the Battery singing "John Brown's Body." Beginning with 1868, South Carolina, the leading state of Southern civilization, just beginning to reorganize its lost power after the war, had suddenly been handed over to the former black slaves and a rabble of white scoundrels and carpet-baggers. He and his like at first had simply withdrawn in proud refusal to cooperate in any way. The civilized world surely would not let this horror happen. They had simply to wait until this travesty and caricature exploded in its own filth.

A "convention" elected by the illiterate rabble met. A legisla-

ture, composed of black ex-slaves, "crackers" and Northern grafters, actually sat in the seats where Calhoun, Rutledge and Pinckney once had thundered. He had lived in amazement to see a poor white governor; Negroes voting; land given away by a Yankee general; a Supreme Court manned by a Negro, a white Southerner and a white Northerner. Free schools had begun, taxes were increasing; one governor, a white Southerner, had sunk to the bottom of graft and chicanery and another, a Northerner, now led "reform." It was nauseating.

Here now in all probability was one of these impossible rulers of Carolina almost at his steps. The astonishing thing that had driven him out of his retreat was that this caricature and pretense of government had actually begun to function; not effectively, of course, but with a reeling rush forward that was, in a way, more frightening than the awaited collapse. The fools had actually started schools and given paupers, black and white, the vote. This was rank bribery of the illiterate mob. They had begun to distribute charity to the war victims and even to divide up some of the big plantations. This was sheer socialism and a blasphemy against the sacred rights of property.

Of course, the Colonel and his people understood the motivation; the black and white rabble was under guidance of conscienceless leaders, mostly from the North but partially envious local nobodies. There was but one remedy and that was for the Southern aristocracy to reassert their power and seize leadership before it was too late. The need became imperative when the wily Chamberlain came to power and began to reform the state. Here lay the deepest danger: a reformed state, honestly conducted but with the aristocracy despoiled of property, with land distributed among peasants, with the rabble making attempts to educate their children, and above all, with Negroes voting and holding office. Unthinkable. Rather begin the war again.

His friends had begun the conspiracy and he had joined. They had reorganized the pre-war secret societies, encouraged mob violence and made alliance with men like Wade Hampton of Mississippi. They proposed at any cost to make him governor in 1876. For this they must get the following and allegiance of the poor whites. The small up-state farmers had to be admitted to the plan at the price of curtailing the political rights of property and sharing some of the power which had formerly been the sole right of the planters. The upstaters were rough, ill-mannered men, yet they had social aspirations and a few had been admitted to clubs and organi-

zations to which they had not dared to aspire before the war. Indeed, they were not simply admitted to the conspiracy but, led by the military, they took direction and charge. All this Colonel Breckinridge had accepted with poor grace but of necessity.

Finally came a further demand at which he gagged. It seemed that a rift began to appear within the ranks of the poor whites. Over against the merchants and farmers and the idle mob which they dominated, the artisans and laborers were organizing. This fellow, Scroggs, represented this new group. Scroggs had demanded to talk with him and the Colonel declined. He had already dirtied his hands as far as he could. But his friends pleaded.

Hampton especially was solicitous. He did not like Hampton too well; Hampton was too theatrical, and all things to all men. He was not quite a gentleman. But his arguments were strong. This new worker group might be so manipulated as to hold in bounds the white farmers who wanted to be the future aristocrats and rule the state. White workers might balance white capitalists with land and trade. Also—and this was important—they might be the best means of holding black labor in bounds simply because they hated Negroes so bitterly. Yet if organized they were less dangerous than the mob of thieves and murderers now forming the new Ku Klux Klan. So here, today, was Colonel Breckinridge awaiting this emissary of the white artisans, to assure him that the new state in making would treat the white worker right and that he, Colonel Breckinridge, would vouch for this.

The Colonel came back smartly to the present and realized that the Negro actually was slowly but purposely mounting his front steps. Sam Scroggs, lurking yonder in the shadows of sunset, was watching. If the Colonel received this Negro at his front door what would the Poor White think? He came to swift conclusion and arose slowly to his feet. He removed his cigar and looked straight at the Negro.

Tom Mansart paused halfway up and lifted his hat. He began: "I beg your pardon, Colonel Breckinridge," he said, "could I have a word with you?"

He could see the Colonel stiffen; his chin lifted itself a bit and then he said with a low, firm voice, "The door is at the side."

Mansart hesitated; he stood straight and looked at the Colonel. "Colonel Breckinridge," he said, "I am a member of the Legislature of South Carolina . . ."

But the Colonel spoke with cold courtesy. "So far as I am concerned you are a Negro, and no Negro enters my front door."