



THE AURIGNACIAN

YOKE OF WIND

Excerpt

On Saturday at midnight the mansion was silent and dark and cold and Jonah and Whiteoak were sleeping after spending the evening besotted on whiskey. With her Bible in hand and with her crucifix festooned around her neck, Eloise skulked down the steps into the kitchen and out the door. The sky outside was cloudless and limpid and the color of deep and rarefied purple and the slivered moon provided only enough light to reveal the shape of things--but not their details. After checking to see if anybody was following her, Eloise walked to the well and waited until someone appeared hesitantly and even reluctantly from the forest, wearing a dark mask over his face with holes cut for his eyes.

“Come,” he said flatly, almost disdainfully.

“To where?”

“Come,” he said.

They walked behind the slave quarters then along the margins of the fields until they swerved into the forest, their feet rustling through the thick, crackling mulch of leaves. Like the swooping and gentle hand of God, the breeze at times stirred the desiccated leaves in the trees while the limbs groped upward like ancient and chilblained fingers toward the heavens. In the distance, above the wan, clarion cascade of the river, she heard other noises becoming distinguishable as shouts, mumbles, shrieks—some great tumult of noise—coming louder as they moved. Soon through the shafts of the trees came the glow of light.

“Wait,” said her guide.



THE AURIGNACIAN

He walked ahead into the forest and moments later returned with a boy she recognized from around the plantation, who seemed excited but unable even to look at her. Together they proceeded into the hollow by the river where she saw what appeared to be a shelter made from quilts tied onto trees, designed to contain the noises within. While light filtered through the sides which looked like the skein of ghosts, the top was open, funneling some great torrent of energy—of fire, smoke, sparks and noise—into the heavens.

Eloise heard that some inside the tent were speaking words of praise—but above that she heard other, stranger noises that resembled birdcalls—squawks, tweets and piercing shrieks. Frightened she grabbed the arm of her guide unknowingly then walked closer and peeked through the crack in the quilts which were dripping with water. In the middle of the tent was the fire, sparks whizzing through the air, flames leaping toward the quilts, smoke roiling the darkness above, casting huge shadows that flickered around like nervous ghosts. The tent was crammed with Negroes, many dangerously close to the flames, some pacing about on their feet and squatting at times, others sitting on the ground rocking back and forth—as though all of them were trying to expurgate their bodies of their anguish. But standing on a stump and rising above them all was the strange Negro they called Shaka who was known to be unusually and even excessively silent and docile around whites. But now his presence was beatific, rage and euphoria mixed on his face while he glanced at the Bible he held in his hands pretending to read.



THE AURIGNACIAN

“Rise up, brethren, from your binds and soar with Jesus.”

“Rise up, oh brethren,” chorused the congregation.

“Rise up from your persecutors.”

“Rise and see the light.”

“Rise,” shouted Shaka, “with your soul as light as wings and soar, my brethren.”

Birdcalls—everything from the calls of mockingbirds, whippoorwills, to hawks—pierced the room. Shaka then turned around to face the crucifix towering above him and Eloise noticed, gasping, that some bird was strapped onto the crossbeams with this long and thin beak that darted and stabbed about as though trying to impale something while its wings extended the length of the crossbeam and struggled against its bindings.

“Jesus suffered so that we might soar to the heavens.”

Shaka then pulled a blade from his belt, turned toward the bird and began to cut the fetters away from its legs then its wings until the bird fell to the ground and stumbled and flopped around.

“Rise, brethren, rise,” shouted Shaka. “Break your bonds and soar to the heavens.”

Shaka raised his arms like wings and shrieked. Mimicking him the congregation also rose to their feet and called and shrieked like birds and flapped their arms around the fire while building in intensity until the bird, after stumbling around on the ground, outstretched its own wings at last and with one leap launched into the air, soared above the flames of the fire, becoming occluded momentarily in the puffs of smoke



THE AURIGNACIAN

before vanishing into the darkness.

“Rise up, brethren, and witness the nigger Jesus,” shouted Shaka messianically.

All the slaves collapsed back to the earth, some sitting while others sprawled across the leaves looking entirely vacuous and spent, not moving except for the heaving of their chests.

“Lord help me,” whispered Eloise, aghast.

She wanted to flee away but could not defy the trust of her father again, nor retreat from her mission. Was that the spirit of Christ in there, she wondered? But even if they were tricked by the devil, she must try to protect them and steer them toward the light. She stepped away from her guide into the space between the quilts, brandishing her Bible before her. Seeing her first Shaka bolted out of the tent, running straight through the quilts which were not tethered to the ground, shouting, “Run, brothers, run,” while some of the others followed him.

But most of them turned their heads toward her without making any attempt to flee, looking so dazed that they were not even capable of understanding the gravity of her presence. Some remained in their trances while squirming around the fire, mumbling and whimpering.

“Shut them niggers up,” somebody shouted.

A child stood from the morass and threw cups of water over those still in their trance, awakening them, so that they stared at Eloise, mouths agape, eyes squinted, until all was silent except for the crackle and sizzle of the fire.



THE AURIGNACIAN

“What the hell’s she doing here?” someone asked angrily.

“I come bearing the Word,” said Eloise while holding her Bible before her chest.

“Caint hear you.”

“I come bearing the Bible,” proclaimed Eloise, her voice now louder but quaking.

“Whities use that Bible to beat niggers over the head.”

“I come in the name of my father, the Reverend at the Church of All Men. I thought you knew I was coming.”

In the back of the room, another man with wild, graying hair stood above the others, saying, “I told them you was coming. But they aint believe me. They said they aint want any whities about and for long Shaka done took hold of they minds and they went deaf and blind.”

“Don’t be afraid,” said Eloise.

“She comes with Christ,” confirmed the man. “She’s our friend.”

“We all bound for the whipping post now,” someone shouted.

“No,” said the man. “She aint gonna turn you to the gibbet.”

Eloise gazed around at the faces, hoping to see understanding and acceptance. Instead she saw anger and distrust and in some the possibility of belief. Still frightened, feeling the tension in the room mounting, she held her Bible outward from her chest shieldlike and while retreating from them, said, “You’ll see that I won’t betray your cause.”

Once outside the tent she proclaimed, “Let it be said now, when you gaze upon the mansion, that the spirit of Christ is inside and alive even in that tomb of sin.”



THE AURIGNACIAN

She turned and panicked ran as fast as she could through the woods back toward what she thought was the direction of the mansion, tripping at times and rising and tripping again while imagining some flock of Negroes chasing behind her, shrieking, coming to snatch her from the night like some small, wounded rodent in the clutches of their talons. Before long she was lost in the forest and not until dawn was she able to find her bearings and skulk back into the mansion unnoticed.