

Dark River

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Preface

“There in the lowcountry, before the Civil War, great rice plantations existed, and families of enormous wealth and power developed over generations. Sixty miles north of Charleston, All Saints Parish, Georgetown District, was the most productive area along the ‘rice coast,’ and there also existed the highest concentration of slaves in the state—nine blacks to each white.”¹ So begins *Down by the Riverside*, a comprehensive history of a South Carolina slave community on the Waccamaw River.

The rice plantations are no more, and gone too are the rice planters, black and white. Where thousands of Africans once labored to the rhythm of work songs in humid, blistering heat, there is silence. Only memories remain of their masters who once lived in baronial splendor. The rivers—rising and falling with the tides—are as they ever were, but the swamp has slowly spread fecund arms around the fields to reclaim its own.

Land the swamp has repossessed was cleared by African slaves starting near the close of the seventeenth century. Until African slave trade became illegal in 1808, more blacks were brought into South Carolina than any other area of the United States. They were needed to clear the densely wooded freshwater swamps and marshlands. And they were needed to grow rice.

The Africans, not their European masters, knew how to cultivate rice. In their native land, rice was grown along the west coast, as well as on Madagascar. South Carolina’s first rice seed came from that island.

The slaves of the lowcountry rice plantations and the work they did should be remembered as they were by Ben Horry, born a slave on Brookgreen Plantation on the Waccamaw River. When interviewed by a field worker for the WPA Federal Writers Project in 1937, he said, “Missus, slavery time,

people *done* something.”²

Indeed they had done something. “By 1750, the labor of those rice plantation slaves in South Carolina earned their masters the highest per capita income in the American colonies, and they continued to earn huge profits up to the Civil War.”³

Much has been written about the undebatable evils of slavery, but little has been told about the accomplishments of those enslaved. Because history’s focus has been the institution, individual lives have been all but forgotten.

But they did live. Generations of blacks hoped and dreamed, lived and loved, and died as slaves. Who they were and what they accomplished has been overshadowed by the anger the word “slave” evokes. But beyond the word, slaves were human beings. They should be remembered as such, as well as for what they achieved.

Sympathy and praise have been lavished, and rightly so, on the courageous runaways who too often were dragged back to the plantations and whipped. Forgotten—or worse, labeled “Uncle Toms”—were those who lived their lives tilling the soil, caring for their children, bringing a quiet dignity to an impossible situation. They did the best they could, and survived. Respect should be the legacy of the slave; shame, the legacy of the institution.

A common misconception is that slaves were sold frequently and endured many masters, but on the rice plantations of the lowcountry, slave families often worked the same land for generations. “The slaves developed a strong sense of ownership of these plantations that their ancestors created and that they continued to make productive. That a slave considered to be property might enjoy a sense of ownership that rivaled his master’s claim seems paradoxical. But a slave was not merely property; a slave was also a human being who had immense investment in the plantation both by inheritance and by personal contribution.”⁴

In *Down by the Riverside*, Charles Joyner quotes from a letter written by a nineteenth century visitor to the region: “In infancy the same nurse gives food and rest to her own child and to her master’s; in childhood the same eye watches and the same hand alternately caresses and corrects them; they mingle their sports in boyhood; and through youth up to manhood there are ties which link them to each other by an affinity that no time or circumstance can destroy.”⁵

The creation and cultivation of rice plantations that thrived for more than one and a half centuries was a cooperative effort between black and white, albeit slave and master. Slaves have often been depicted as mere shadows on the periphery of the lives of their white masters, but nothing could be further from the truth. On isolated plantations, where a handful of whites lived

among hundreds of slaves, their cultures combined to become one uniquely Southern.

Author's Note

Lowcountry blacks in South Carolina spoke Gullah, a Creole language that incorporated English vocabulary and African grammar. Dr. Joyner described the formation of the Gullah language in this way: "The earliest African slaves in South Carolina did not constitute a speech community, as the term is used by sociolinguists. The slaves' various African languages were often mutually unintelligible. The common language that they acquired was a pidginized form of English. Pidgins are developed as a means of communication among speakers of diverse languages. A pidgin is by definition an auxiliary language. It has no native speakers. But when the pidgin was passed on to the American-born children of those enslaved Africans, it became the children's native tongue. If a pidgin language acquires native speakers, it is no longer considered a pidgin by linguists but is said to be a creole language."⁶

The Gullah spoken by the blacks in *Dark River* approximates the dialect the author recalls having heard in coastal South Carolina.

¹Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside* (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1984), 1.

²Ibid., 42.

³Ibid., 41.

⁴Ibid., 42.

⁵Ibid., 15.

⁶Ibid., xx.

First Seed

How wonderful is earth
This soil of precious worth
Though gold be gold, it has no life to give
But in the furrow dark
There waits a vital spark
That whispers to the seed,
“Awake and live”

Archibald Rutledge



Chapter One

Along the coast of South Carolina known as the lowcountry, dark rivers rise and fall with the tides of the sea, and great swamps stretch across the floodplain. Shallow water covers the swamp floor where centuries of rotting vegetation lies reduced to mud. In that murky place, only filtered light penetrates the dense cypress canopy rising from buttressed trunks to stand ghostlike with hair of moss, long and gray. The trees' craggy knees jut through green slime floating on black water, where insects swarm and reptiles prey.

Seemingly inhospitable, much of the area along those rivers was once under cultivation, and there grew the fabled Carolina Gold Rice. To those who would listen, the resonant past speaks: it sighs down avenues of moss-shrouded oaks; it murmurs through decaying floodgates where river water runs unchecked into old rice fields overgrown with wampee, saw grass, and cattails. It whispers, remember . . . remember.

Waccamaw River, All Saints Parish
Georgetown District, South Carolina
April 30, 1850

Fog shrouded the vast coastal swamp that lay still in the hour before dawn. Quiet descended as creatures of the night ceased hunting and found places to hide. Rupturing the silence, the bellow of a bull alligator rose from the bowels of that primordial quagmire. The reptilian thunder rolled across the river and the fields to the slave quarters at Moss Bank Plantation. Kneeling on the hearth, a huge black man paused to listen. A surge of hatred curled

his hands into fists and strutted veins on his powerful neck. To judge the direction and distance of the threatening sound, he slowly rotated his shaved head.

“Dat’s em, Saffo,” he whispered, speaking to the memory of the sad-eyed hound that had been his shadow, always at his heels. “I know dat’s em.”

Bacchus angrily sucked air through clenched teeth, held his breath, and listened again to the thunderous challenge of the great reptile. Exhaling, he said with certainty, “Yeah, dat’s em, all eighteen feet’a em.” He raised a fist toward the swamp. “I heahs you,” he whispered. “I heahs you ovah yonda in Belin’s Deep, you rogue bastard. Bellow whiles you kin; yo days is numbud. You done kilt de wrong man’s huntin dog.”

A sardonic smile played across Bacchus’s broad, handsome face as he contemplated revenge. “One’a dese days,” he said. “One’a dese days . . .”

Bacchus resumed poking a stick through the ashes in search of the live coals he knew were there. They glowed in the dark as he raked them from beneath gray ashes at the back of the fireplace. The fire started by his ancestor Ancrum still burned to keep Bacchus warm, to cook his food, and to light the darkness. In the African tradition, that same fire had been kept burning for generations.

Leaning to blow life into the coals, Bacchus could feel their warmth on his face. The heart of pine kindling he placed on top of the red hot coals burst into flames. Over them he eased a huge oak log. The log would cook his breakfast and keep the fire burning until supper.

The ancient fire cast golden, flickering light throughout the cabin as he moved toward the bed where his wife slept. Bacchus sat beside her, reached under the bed for his work boots and said, “Time to git up, Angelique.”

The rice straw mattress crackled as she turned over, stretching sensuously, exposing flesh that gleamed in the firelight. Reluctant to wake, moans of comfort and protest rose from her, along with the scent of her warm body.

Bacchus stopped lacing his boot. Pulling the patchwork quilt from her, he repeated the magical “Angelique,” his resonant bass voice softening as he said it.

Before meeting her, he’d never heard the name. It rolled off his tongue, “Angelique.” The sound fascinated him, as did everything about her. The fascination had begun two years earlier when he’d first seen her on the auction block at the Charleston slave market. Each day his love had grown.

“Time to git up,” Bacchus repeated, moving his wide, calloused hand under her cotton nightgown and up a silky thigh.

Angelique’s sleepy topaz eyes opened when the pressure of his hand made their unborn child shift. Her time is near, he thought, dreading the birth.

Maum Hannah, the old midwife, had called for Dr. Matthews when Angelique's first baby was born. "The girl's problem is a narrow pelvis," the doctor had said. His meaning became all too clear as the sixteen-year-old suffered through the long night into the next day to bear a son.

Stirring drowsily, Angelique pressed on his hand, barely covering it with both of hers. Moaning in comfort, she drew up her legs and arched her back. Bacchus forgot about the time and crawled onto the bed. He supported his weight on his knees and buried his face in her neck, inhaling her sweet, clean smell.

Languorously, her warm arms encircled him until she felt him pulling up her gown. "No, don't Bacchus," she whispered sleepily. "I's too fah along."

"I ain't gwine do nuttin," he lied as his hand moved down her narrow hip. "I jus laks de way you feel." Repeatedly kissing her neck, his lips slowly progressed to her mouth. Whispering her name, Bacchus lifted his head to look at her. He froze, drew back. Angelique's words had not stopped him, but her eyes did. Cold, distant, forbidding eyes.

Cursing under his breath, Bacchus returned to the edge of the bed where he hesitated before putting on his other boot. Whut do I care, he thought. Whut do I care whut de woman tink, jus so long as she do whut I wants, jus so long as she do whut I tells er.

And Angelique always did as she was told; obedience to men had worked well. Early she had learned that her way was made easier if she was agreeable in bed, for it was her body men had always wanted.

Until now, no man had been aware of her secret part, the part that lived in her head, separate from her body; the one called Nona. Bacchus knew about Nona, she could tell, and he wanted her. Angelique allowed the man she'd married for protection to take everything else from her. But if he came too close to Nona, she would kill him. She exposed her to no one except her young son, and even with him, she was careful. She had already made three trips to the conjure doctor for potions to add to Bacchus's food to keep him from Nona, but nothing had worked. Even though she feared Obie had mixed a love potion by mistake, she would go again today.

Watching her husband beneath lowered lids, Angelique was frightened by his anger, but her face showed no emotion and she lay very still. If Obie kept his promise, if he did not trick her as she had him, she would soon know the conjurer's secrets; she would have the power; she would be afraid of no one.

"You gwine stay in dat bed all day?" Bacchus asked harshly. "Git up and cook my brekfuss fo I makes you sorry you evah seed a bed."

With one hand supporting the weight of her belly, Angelique struggled out of bed. Bacchus watched, hoping to see some sign of hurt or anger. Jus whut

I spected, he thought. She don't care how come I's mad.

Bacchus had enjoyed the love of many women in his twenty-eight years and no matter how strongly they might deny that love, their eyes always betrayed them. More times than he could remember, he had used what he knew to his advantage. Ironically, that knowledge now tormented him, for the look he knew so well was absent in the eyes of the only woman he had ever loved.

The realization cut him deeply. Until Angelique, women had been easy to get and easy to dominate. He was the powerful head driver of Moss Bank, accustomed to controlling others. Bacchus wielded his power without restraint, for his master had great confidence in him. Bacchus understood power, and knew that in his relationship with Angelique, she was the one in control. He felt weakened by his love, and was angered by the weakness.

"You betta be done cookin my brekfuss fo I gits back from ringin de fust bell. You know I gotta ring dat secon bell one hour from now, so don't you make me late," he warned. Striding across the room to the water shelf, he yanked a gourd dipper from the wall and scooped from a cedar bucket.

The water Angelique had fetched from the spring the evening before tasted fresh and sweet, made that way, she'd said, by a green snake that lived in the spring. She bleves in voodoo, Bacchus thought, always talkin bout snakes and whut dey kin do. And she practice voodoo. I know she do, even if she hide it from me. I done los count'a all de times I seen er headin trew de woods, and deh ain't but one reason to be goin to see a conjure docta. I bet she done put a spell on me. Dat's how come I cain't git er off'a my mind.

Bacchus did not believe in voodoo or spells, but he liked having someone or something to blame for his overpowering love. As he drank, his eyes followed her over the bowl of the dipper. Busy preparing breakfast, Angelique cut thick slices of smoked bacon and placed them to sizzle in a hot skillet. She then stirred grits into a black cast iron pot hanging low over the flames. Though heavy in her last month of pregnancy, his young wife appeared both delicate and agile. Bacchus loved watching her movements. He could not find words to describe her. She made him think of special things he observed in the wild: a doe at first light, picking her way through dew-covered grass; egrets silhouetted against a setting sun as they winged their way home. But the incongruity of her appearance and her nature puzzled and confused him. As he watched her now, he recalled the voice of his master.

When Bacchus had asked permission to marry Angelique, John Michaux was hesitant. "Are you certain you want to marry a girl you've known only a few months? We know nothing about her other than she's off a sugarcane plantation somewhere in Louisiana. Have you asked her anything about her people, or what her life was like before she came here?"

“Nah suh, she don’t talk much,” Bacchus had replied. “She specially don’t lak talkin bout ersef. All she say is she don’t wanna nevah tink bout de place she come from. She say it was a bad place, and dem was bad people she belong to. But I don’t care if she don’t tell me nuttin bout ersef. I knows all I needs to know.”

There had been a pause in the conversation. Michaux walked to his office door and leaned against the frame. Staring toward the rice fields and the river, he whistled softly. Bacchus stood, hat in hand, and waited.

The whistling stopped and his master said, “I want you to think about what you’re doing, Bacchus. We’re talking about the girl who will bear your children, not just another one of your women. Don’t let a pretty face blind you to that fact.”

“I done tawt bout all dat, my massa.”

The master cleared his throat, seemingly transfixed by some distant object on the river. “I’m reluctant to mention this, Bacchus, but it’s too important to ignore. The girl is of mixed blood, a mulatto. When you come to wed, you can’t be too careful about whose blood is mixed with your own.”

Silence hung heavy as John Michaux continued to look out the door while Bacchus stared at the floor. The golden haze of a late October afternoon filled the room, along with a heretofore unknown tension between the two.

Michaux turned and Bacchus felt his gaze. He lifted his downcast head to look at the man who had reared him. “You don’t want me to marry a mulatto girl?”

“No Bacchus, I don’t. You know . . . ,” he hesitated, looking intently at the black man. “You know you have the purest blood.” John strode to the old mahogany desk. He opened the bottom drawer, retrieved a large ring of keys, and went to unlock a glass-fronted bookcase. Pulling down a thick ledger, he asked, “Do you know what this is?”

“Yas suh. Dat’s de Book.”

“And what’s in it?”

Bacchus was incredulous. There was not a person on the plantation who did not know what was in the Book. He stared at Michaux.

“What’s in it?”

“De names’a all de Negroes whut evah belong to de Michauxs.” Bacchus said *Negroes* instead of *slaves* after the habit of his master. The Michauxs had rarely used the word *slave* and looked with disfavor on anyone who did.

“That’s right. Their names and either their date of purchase or, if born on Moss Bank, their date of birth along with the names of their parents. Do you know how far back this book goes?” Waiting for Bacchus’s answer, Michaux took his eyeglasses from a cubbyhole in the desk.

“Yas suh, you tolt me it go back to when de fust massa come heah from cross de big watah to plant rice in de swamps.”

“And do you remember the first entry was your great, great, great grandfather back in 1693?” Michaux asked, putting on his glasses.

“Yas suh,” Bacchus said, tentatively. He was uncertain where all the ancestor talk was leading.

“Here it is.” He’d opened the book to the first page and was tapping the entry at the top with an index finger. “It says here: ‘Ancrum, bought off a ship in Charleston Harbor. Approximately twenty years old, remarkable physical specimen, seven feet tall, extraordinarily strong.’”

John removed his glasses, noisily exhaling a sigh. Bacchus knew the sound. John Michaux was upset. His master continued staring at the page for what seemed an eternity.

Replacing his glasses, he leaned over the ledger. “There is more, Bacchus.”

“Yas suh, I know. You done read it to me befo.”

Michaux seemed not to hear. “It also says: ‘Brought Ancrum to the Santee. He proved to be highly intelligent and knowledgeable in the cultivation of rice. Apparently of royal blood, son of a chief captured by a rival tribe and sold to slavers.’ You remember I’ve told you all this before, do you?”

“Yas suh, you tolt me my people was brung fust to de Santee Rivah, den on up heah to de Waccamaw. You say dey clear de swamps and built de banks along de rivah and dug de canals to drain de fiels.”

“That’s right. Ancrum and his get, all the way down to you, helped build the Michaux rice plantations on the Waccamaw. And they taught my ancestors how to plant rice. My people were from France. They didn’t grow rice there. It was your ancestors, the Africans from the west coast of the continent, who knew how to cultivate rice. My ancestor, Charles Michaux, organized them and supplied the money, but it was your people, your ancestor who taught him how to grow rice.”

John returned the ledger to the bookcase. “Do you see all these books?” he asked, pointing at the row of journals with dates on their spines. Not waiting, he continued, “These are journals kept by my ancestors. Many times they mentioned looking for Negroes to buy from Senegal, Angola, or Sierra Leone because those people were rice growers.” Michaux looked from Bacchus to the journals.

Bacchus wondered what all the talk had to do with his marrying Angelique, but he soon had the answer. As Michaux locked the bookcase, he said, “Your blood is pure African. It’s royal, Bacchus. You are descended from an African prince of imposing strength and intelligence, qualities that you have obviously inherited, as had your father before you. That’s a legacy to be proud of, to

pass along to your children.”

Michaux sat at the desk, swiveled in his chair to face the bewildered man. “Bacchus, I raised you with my own son, defied the law to educate you to read and write. You know there was no man of any color that I thought more of than I did your father. So I say to you now what I believe Prince would say, were he still alive: don’t marry a mulatto; don’t water down blood like yours.”

Nothing could dissuade Bacchus, and eventually the master gave his permission. “I suppose it’s too much to ask a man of your age to think of the children he might have some day,” Michaux rationalized, “if that excludes the woman he wants today.”

John Michaux’s misgivings were not evident at the lavish wedding he gave Bacchus and Angelique in the garden of the Big House. Wedding cards were sent to every Negro on the plantation. Although few could read, they valued the invitation. Hogs, cows, and fowl were slaughtered for the occasion, and there was an abundance of many kinds of food. The banquet ended with cake and wine, but the celebration continued late into the night with music and dancing.

The day Michaux had given his permission for the marriage, he’d also written his factor in Charleston asking that he find out what he could about the mulatto girl. The answer arrived shortly before the birth of Bacchus’s first child. Her previous owner wrote that Angelique was the daughter of a plantation seamstress and an unidentified white man, probably an overseer. The letter also said the girl was a seductress, had possessed the body of a woman when she was only twelve, and capable of corrupting men of any age. In particular, she had undermined the moral character of the owner’s three sons and for that, she had been sold.

The letter sickened John. He knew what had happened, knew it was the girl who had been defiled. These things were not uncommon, but he would never understand people who misused or allowed their Negroes to be misused. His consolation was knowing that such would never happen at Moss Bank. What had that treatment done to Angelique? he wondered. And having been so abused, what must she think of men, what kind of wife would she make, what kind of mother? He wished he’d found out before granting his permission, but he had not, so there was no point letting Bacchus know after the fact. He burned the letter and tried to dismiss it from his mind.

It would have made no difference to Bacchus, for even as he belatedly questioned the wisdom of marrying Angelique, he could not keep his eyes from her. The tantalizing smell of frying bacon brought his attention to the present, but his master’s words still echoed, “You know nothing about the

girl.”

Bacchus drank the last of the water from the dipper and threw it back into the bucket. Water sloshed over the shelf and floor, but he paid no attention. I should’a listened to my massa, he thought. Well, it’s too late now and I ain’t leavin my boy fuh de laks’a er to raise.

He deceived himself. Neither the one-year-old sleeping in the side room nor the unborn child kept him with Angelique. Bacchus was bound to her by an intricate knot of physical passion and mental obsession. Struggling to loosen the knot, he felt it tighten.

In frustration, Bacchus snatched his hat from an antler rack and stormed out, slamming the door behind him. The force of the door rattled a gun that rested across the antlers, the gun that had belonged to his father. But he had no memory of Prince, only his gun and the stories others told of him.

Bacchus had trouble visualizing his father as a mere man. Those who had known him, most especially John Michaux, had elevated him to the status of legend. The gun, however, was something he could hold in his hands, a direct link to the unknown. Consequently, it was his most valued possession. Bacchus listened to make sure the gun had not fallen from its perch. Satisfied it was safe, he adjusted the sweat-stained hat, and walked down the porch steps into the fog.

“I ain’t got time to tink bout no woman,” he mumbled to himself. “I gotta rice crop to plant.” He was concerned because the last day of the month was at hand, and long tradition dictated that rice planting at the plantation be finished by the end of April. There were several large fields yet to be seeded, and he knew the workers would need to be pressed hard. Dey gwine git de rice seed planted fo de sun set, he thought. I’s gwine see dey do, if I gotta watch em evry minute’a dis day. Angelique de las ting I’s gwine worry bout today.

But she was not so easily dismissed. When the blood-curdling shriek of a screech owl cut the silence, he was reminded again of Angelique’s belief in voodoo. She would say an owl calling so close to the house early in the morning was a bad omen, meaning misfortune or even death.

Moving catlike through the fog, the black giant walked in pitch blackness. He knew where he was going and did not need to see. Every workday morning he rang the first bell one hour before sunup. When he rang the second bell at first light, the slaves were to come out of their cabins and head for the fields.

Bacchus reached the entrance to the slave quarters, marked by stone columns, and groped for what he knew was there. Seizing the damp rope, he pulled

hard. Shattering the stillness, the plantation bell pealed through the dark, its sound distorted by heavy fog drifting up from the river.

On the Street, as the slave quarter was called, inside weathered cabins lining both sides of the sandy road, blacks stirred in their beds. Nearby at the Big House, on a bluff overlooking the river, the master of Moss Bank Plantation opened his eyes. The tolling of the bell began the day for slave and master alike.