

DREAM OF GOLD - 014

The west was a vault of gold the day Janis leaned on the chain of the pier and watched the boat taking Carless to the ship go. She saw the white flash of Norris' teeth, before he reached over as though to whisper into Carless' ear. Carless jerked his head round as though he had forgotten, and Janis saw the ring of gold she had got from her father upon his finger when he lifted his hand and threw her a kiss across the distance of water. Norris nodded his head, still smiling, then brought up his hand and threw her a kiss too. This seemed to remind all the other men in the boat that they could throw kisses also, and for a long time they threw kisses to the women on the pier, and the women threw back at them.

Janis leaned on the chain until long after the gold in the west turned plum, and the lights sprang to life throughout the length of the ship's grey wall. One by one the other women had left her, but she remained unconscious of their going, until the night, which had prowled like a panther, at last sprang down upon her, and showed her, above the topmost beacon of the ship's sprangled mass, a cuticle of gold. At that she straightened slowly, with a motion like a shudder, and lifting her face to the heavens gazed, as though to read the stars. Then, with a quiet sigh, she lowered her eyes, and turning, walked away the youth gone from her step and from her drooping hips.

As she walked Janis revolved the words which Carless had sung:

“Dig the Canal wide and deep,

Wide and deep,

Wide and deep,

Ho, boys! Ho’

“I am going down;

Down Panama,

Where money grows

Like apples on a tree “

But Janis had not wanted Carless to go. Not even though, as they sang, the streets were paved with gold, and the gold grew on the trees thick as the golden, luscious, mangoes in their season. Janis had not wanted him to go, even though the golden dollars with which he would be rewarded should be numberless as the stars swinging everywhere into the sky, and though the sand with which they would build their locks should be grains of gold. And in the short, sad days before his going, when Carless had laughed and sung and uttered his dreams, the ache in Janis’ heart had grown until it was a pain that insulated her whole being. But Carless had not understood, and Janis had kept silence through her sober preparations, for she did not want to cloud the happiness which bubbled from him, nor blemish his dream of gold.

Norris was often with them in those last few days. Norris, with his flashing teeth, and his spearhead of moustache, and his hair like the wind on a river, and his arms bulging with strength, and his brown eyes always searching out Janis. He and Carless would sit for hours watching the sun scourge the fields like a fierce god, and the palms and papaws losing hold of their leaves like faint ones. Janis would hear their talk and laughter through the whir of the machine as she sewed, or through the singing of the saucepan as she got them tea. And always, as she heard them their talk was of their dream of gold. Sometimes Carless would jump from his seat as one mad, and driving his fist into his palm, would chase her until she stood cornered, like a creature at bay, only laughing, through the pain inside her. Carless would snatch her up, and spinning around like a ninepin until her head spun, would then plant her on her feet to stand, and she would have to clutch at him to save herself from falling. Once Carless called to Norris and threw her to him like a ball, and when she screamed because she thought she would have fallen Norris' strong arms caught her up and threw her back to Carless.

The day before Carless went they set out before the birds found their voices, while Norris' smile was still a dull gleam in the darkness, and when the sun laid hot hands on their necks they had reached the small town. Carless showed her the place where he wanted his gold put, and Norris, striding down the side-street that flanked the building, salvaged

a lump of coal from the waterfront and dashing back, marked a big cross upon the wall of the bank. At that Carless laughed, and taking Janis by the hand threw his other hand around Norris' shoulders and urged him down the street.

When they returned to the country in the evening they went into the warm, cloying breath of the mill, and brewed long draughts of the steaming juice, throwing it from tot to tot. Norris watched her drink until she stopped her breath, then he took the tot from her and drank where her lips had been.

On the day after Carless went the cloth-of-gold started to bloom on the trees quartered under the hillside, and the next day the wind ravished them and tossed them down into the gully, so that the tops of the palm trees looked like girls with flowers stuck into their hair. Janis was sitting on the rock where Carless was wont to sit talking to Norris, when the promise of the morning went and the day turned into dismal farce. She saw the boys, naked, their dark skins shiny like eels, the wire handles of their tiny tin pails clicking, charge through the lash of rain up to the hilltop and rob the laden cows.

On the day when it was two weeks since she had last gone to the landlord's house and when the number of days that Carless had left her was like a harsh hand tightening its grip upon her heart, Janis took the three pieces of sliver and the two coppers from the tin that had contained cigarettes, and slipping her feet in her sandals, went slowly along the palms that marched up to the landlord's dwelling. On her way

she saw Urmilia, who concerned the butcher, decked out in new, gaudy garments like a macaw, hoisting her fortune like an ensign, and Janis knew that she had got golden tidings from her man Bud who had been in the boat with Carless. She saw Papa Steed giving his shack a new coat of paint while he forever jerked his head, plagued with his nervous tic, and it was clear that he too had received gold, gold from his son Blaine. Eddie Bright, from the door of his shoe-maker shop, left the gob of saliva on the sole he was tanning and stared long after her, and Janis knew he was wondering what she had done with Carless' gold, why she looked drab, drab as his wretched little hovel of a shop.

While the canes were there it was easy for Janis to slip into them and, snapping two or three of the stems, steal back to her home under cover of darkness. Then she would tear the pith into shreds with the white seeds of her teeth and swallow the sweet juice gratefully, to appease the hunger that gnawed like a rat at her other pain. But then the canes went, and she had to search through the pith of the old sucklings for the tiny ends that she had thrown away.

At night she went to the mission house and sat through the long rantings of the preacher, while her heart was a wordless prayer. Then she went back to her home and groped to her bed in the darkness.

On the day after the bailiff came Janis set out for town when the moon in the east was wan like an old scar. Her ankles were powdered and white with dust above her sandals when she went into the shop and, slipping the ring which Charles had given her from her finger, placed it before the man with the cough behind the counter. The man wondered why she seemed to prize the slip of card which he gave her a thousand times more than the white pieces of silver.

Janis went into the street where the bank was and stood staring for a long time at the cross Norris had made on its façade. And while she stood there gazing, Janis became certain of the child.

But even then Janis had no awareness of all Carless' going had meant until the night she heard the children singing. Janis stood in the mesh of the moonlight and watched them, while they sallied up to each other singing their quaint, sad songs, and her pain, and the nostalgia for all she had missed and would never recapture wanted her to die. She turned away, wandering through the hushed temple of the fields, until she saw the cold moon mirrored in the stream, whose voice was like a child singing. Janis sat on the stones where the women rested their tubs, and slipping her sandals, let her feet down to the water, feeling the cool haste of the tide. When at last she got to her feet she felt she had a friend in the river, for she knew it would not mind her dying.

The time Janis started to worry about the child there were only two chairs and a table. Janis hadn't minded the rude jests of the men when she passed, but the day the women in the door of the shop laughed, sending their bawdy cackles far after her, she decided to let the couch go, for she would not die letting them know that she had received nothing from Carless. So the couch went, and she had bought new silk that shone in the sun like glass, and the women believed that she had received Carless' gold.

Janis was glad that the women saw when the postman brought her the letter. She knew Norris' hand, for in the days which she had lost, when there was Carless and happiness, Norris had sung and written her songs. She wondered why he had had to finish the address which Carless had begun, till she saw the letters were lame and tottering, like the writing of dying men. She wondered why what they had written had lain so long, for it was rumpled and soiled, as a letter that has been written and sealed and tossed among other effects gets. She wondered long, too, holding the letter up against the light, what the smaller square of the second envelope it contained held.

When she slit open the second envelope and emptied what was in it out on to her palm, she saw it was the circlet of gold she had got from her father.