

CAPE JESSAMINE

19

Désirée smiled, and the room seemed to fill with soft rose and golden lights. "I don't call it a thorny wood and a briar hedge. I always see a moat with a draw-bridge that you have to catch just at the right moment, or not at all —"

At table they talked of this or that — which is to say that they talked of War. War had gripped their land so closely and so long; War had harried their every field; War had marked their every door — all their world, when it talked of this and that, talked only of some expression on some one of War's many faces. It might be wildly gay, the talk, or simple and sad, or brief and grave, with tragic brows, or bitterer than myrrh, or curiously humorous, or sardonic, or angry, or ironic, or infinitely touching, or with flashing eyes, or with a hand that wiped the drop away; but always the usual, customary talk into which folk fell was merely War. So Désirée and Edward talked War while they ate the delicate, frugal supper.

But when it was eaten, and he followed her back into the drawing-room, they sat on either side the hearth, the leaping red and topaz flame between them lighting each face, and little by little forgot to talk of this and that.

It appeared that save for the servants she had had few to talk to for a long, long while. There was a relief, a childlike outpouring of thought and fancy caged for months. It was like the awakened princess, eager with her dreams of a hundred years. They were dreams of a distinction, now noble, now quaint, and always somewhat strange. He learned a little of her outward life — of her ancestry, half French, half English; of her mother's death long ago; of her father, studious, courteous, silent, leaving her to go her own way, telling her that he, not she, was the rapier in action, the reincarnated, old adventurousness of his line. He learned that she idolized her brother; that, save for a year once in France and six weeks each winter in New Orleans, she rarely left Cape Jessamine. He gathered that here she reigned more absolute than her father, that she loved her life, the servants, and the great plantation. It was as large almost as a principality, yet even principalities had neighbours up and down the river! He gathered that there had been visiting enough, comings and goings, before the war. Other principalities had probably come a-wooing — he hoped with passion to no purpose! He