

CHAPTER II

CAPE JESSAMINE

THE two came from beneath the dripping trees out upon the cleared bank of the Mississippi, and into a glare of pine torches. The rain had lessened, the fitful wind beat the flames sideways, but failed to conquer them. There was, too, a tar barrel burning. The light was strong and red enough, a pulsing heart of light shading at its edges into smoky bronze and copper, then, a little further, lost in the wild night. The river curved like a scimitar, and the glare showed the turbulent edge of it and the swirling cross-current that was setting a tooth into the Cape Jessamine levee.

'Rasmus spoke. "Dis was always de danger place. Many er time I've seen de Cun'l ride down heah, en' stand er-lookin'!"

There seemed as many as a hundred negroes. They swarmed about the imperilled point; they went to it in two converging lines. Each man was bent under a load of something. He swung it from his shoulder, straightened himself, and hurried, right or left, back to shadowy heaps from which he lifted another load. "Dey sho' gwine need de sand bags dishyer night!" said 'Rasmus.

In the leaping and hovering light the negroes looked gigantic. Coal black, bending, lifting, rushing forward, set about with night and the snarl of the tiger, they had the seeming of genii from an Eastern tale. Their voices came chanting, or, after a silence, in a sudden shout. Their shadows moved with them on the ground. Edward glanced around for the directing white man. "Dar ain't none," said 'Rasmus. "De haid oberseer when he heah dat New Orleans been taken he up en' say dey need mo' soldiers than dey do oberseers, en' he went ter Baton Rouge! En' de second oberseer dat come up en' tek he place, en' is er good man, las' week he broke he hip. En' dar wuz two-three others er-driftin' erroun, doin' what dey wuz tol' ter do, en' dey gone too. When hit wants ter, de river kin pull 'em in en' drown 'em en' tek 'em erway, but dishyer war's