

Journal of Singent Straubb

3d day of August, 1665

It is late in the evening, very late to judge by the fact that mine is the only illuminated window on the street, and I have only just returned home. I would very much like to retire, to put this day to an end, but I must record the events of the day now whilst the details are still fresh in my mind. Where ever shall I begin? I suppose it's best to relate the day in its entirety and, once that has all been recorded, I shall better be able to express my feelings, those emotions swimming around in my head that would keep me from unconsciousness, even if I were to retire right at this very moment. Speaking of sleep, I slumbered very little last night and I suppose that's just the way of it for anyone about to realize their dream with the next sunrise; I was awake and out of bed long before my father. Hoping to make an exceptionally good first impression, I bathed thoroughly with a sponge and some lye, before dressing in my best Sunday suit. I remember thinking to myself, as I prepared for the day, that my first week's pay must be spent on new clothes and better toiletries. An officer of the courts should certainly be far more presentable than the average citizen. He should be a physical manifestation of the highest principles of law, or so I'd imagined in my dreamy mind.

By the time father was up and preparing for his own day, I was ready and anxious to head out the door to begin my very first day of apprenticeship. It was all he could do to get me to sit down at the breakfast table for a mere five minutes, but I did concede, not wishing to disrespect him so soon after he'd agreed to allow me to pursue this dream of mine. As soon as he placed the fresh milk, steaming eggs, and toasted bread in front of me, my empty belly reminded me that I'd neglected one of the most important morning duties in my excitement. As I ate the prepared meal with enthusiasm, he spoke softly, kindly to me.

“Son, you are about to go out into the world to make your mark as a man and nothing could fill me with more pride.”

I glanced up at him briefly, before I gulped down half of the glass of milk. He must have read my thoughts in my expression, because he continued:

“Perhaps this isn't the profession I would have chosen for you, but I am proud of you, nonetheless.”

“Thank you, father.”

His benevolent smile, which has very rarely made an appearance in our household since mother's passing, graced his moustache-shrouded lips. “I have every confidence that you will become the fine hard-working and upstanding gentleman that your mother and I have dreamt you would be.”

“I will strive to never disappoint you or to tarnish mother's memory.”

He smiled once more. As that smile faded, he produced his pocket watch and presented it for me to view, as he said in mock alarm, “Now go! You mustn't be late on your very first day!”



I was the first to arrive at the courthouse, yet it wasn't long before I was greeted by those same men that had detained my father this past Sunday. They looked mismatched in their fine suits here, as I had a better opportunity to see them than I had had outside of the church. The more outspoken of the men introduced himself as Mr. Blackburn. He was easily a foot shorter than his associate, Mr. Sterling, and bigger, bulkier than both Mr. Sterling and myself put together. He wasn't fat though. Far from it. He was solid muscle from head to toe and so fit, in fact, that when he walked, no part of him jiggled with the flabby flesh of obesity. He was bald, which I think added to the menacing, overbearing appearance of the man. His pale eyes, more the color of a stormy sky than that of a clear ocean, pierced through me in such a way that an icy shiver ran up my spine. His bulbous nose was crooked with crude knots spread along the ridge; it had clearly been broken more than once, throughout his life. Also worth noting is the condition of his overgrown hands, which I'd had ample opportunity to observe during our handshake. His hands were harsh -I don't think there is a gentle bone in the man's entire body and, if not for his brutish demeanor, I am certain most would think him little more than a clumsy oaf- and the skin rough, as one might expect of a man that had spent a lifetime engaged in hard labor. The knuckles on each hand were red, as though the skin had been battered with repeated abuse, and they were as scarred as they were discolored. Tiny yet noticeable nicks, scrapes, and abrasions marred his fists in such a way that he could only have obtained such scars from a lifetime spent in a boxing ring or in street brawls.

In some ways, Mr. Sterling was as different from Mr. Blackburn as night from day, yet he seemed just as menacing and as brutal in his own way. He was more than six feet tall, standing, as I've already mentioned, a foot taller than Blackburn. It was nearly impossible to estimate his true height, because his lanky body was slouched and, when he was viewed from either side, it seemed that his prominent spine was permanently curved. I remember noticing this, disturbed by just how visible that column of bony ridges appeared beneath a thin layer of skin, and thinking to myself that such a condition was sure to cause problems, as he aged into his later years. Lacking the muscle mass of Blackburn, he was as slim as he was tall. His sleek, black hair was trimmed short and I found his emerald eyes to be most misleading, as they lent to the

impression of a warm, gentle heart, even set in that unerringly stoical face. His nose had clearly never been broken, judging by the manner in which the perfectly straight bridge sloped downward, and it seemed as though that sloped nose overhung his thin lips, though I'm sure that was just an illusion created by the dwarfed angle at which I looked up at him. Multiple scars mapped his face, from forehead to chin and the depth and length of each marking suggested that they had been left there by sharp blades of knives or swords. The wounds had obviously healed without the benefit of proper medical treatment, as the skin had folded over itself and had left more pronounced scars than what should have been formed. Another clue that Sterling was no stranger to knives came when he reached forward to shake my hand. Chance, in the guise of a temperate breeze, blew his jacket open, as he extended his right arm in camaraderie, revealing a sheathed bowie knife secured to his leather belt, which, in turn, held his trousers in place. It was only then, when he'd observed the recognition of the weapon in my own eyes, that those unwaveringly stern lips formed a smile.

These were not nice men and, to be perfectly honest, keeping their company stirred within me feelings of uneasiness, disquietude, so I was only too happy to agree, when they, at length, suggested escorting me to the magistrate's office.

I felt, as we entered the courthouse, that I was finally going to meet a true legal professional and, better still, I was going to take my rightful place at his side. One can imagine, then, the dismay I felt upon walking into Magistrate de Heart's office and finding him in a state of disarray...to be very polite about it. The office, as one might expect of a newly erected and recently occupied government building, was sparsely decorated with only a single portrait of His Majesty, Charles II, adorning the cream colored walls. In the center of the room sat a massive desk, hand-carved of oak and heavily varnished, and, behind that desk, the magistrate sat in a plush, leather chair, which looked more like a throne than a chair suited to a government employee. Papers were scattered across his desk to his left and to his right, but, directly in front of him, sat a silver serving tray with a half-eaten pig sprawled across its breadth.

As we entered the office, following a brief knock, the man behind the desk was passionately devouring one of the sow's legs, his full lips dribbling with grease and slobbering over the meat just as he might slobber over a lover's lips. The sounds of him suckling at his feast, pulling the grease down his greedy gullet, and the noise of his moist lips smacking together, as he chewed, echoed throughout the chamber. In between bites, he waved an arm toward one of the three vacant seats facing him and motioned for me to join him. As I drew closer, I could see the sweat beading upon his brow, as his hairline was so far receded that he may as well have been bald, and, though he wore a makeshift paper bib, his black robe was stained with pig grease, where the bib could not reach. Blackburn and Sterling had remained stationed at the door, as though they had been assigned to guard the magistrate, until Jacob de Heart picked up and dropped the serving tray, urging the men forward with a chubby, grease-soaked hand.

“Get this slop out of here!”

Sterling removed the tray, as Blackburn used a fresh rag to help the magistrate clean himself.

“Forgive me, but I had not had the chance to breakfast this morning, thanks in no small measure to my bothersome wife.”

“I understand, Magistrate.”

“You are my new apprentice. Are you not?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied with the utmost zeal. “Singent Straubb, with two B's.”

“Well, Singent Straubb, with two B's, how much do you know of this court and your position herein?”

“My father, upon informing me of the position, had very little information for me. I do know, through my own researches, that the Court of Assizes is here established only recently and that its purpose is as ecclesiastical as it is legal.”

“Come again?”

“Oh...Well, sir, it's my understanding that this court's function is to investigate and try instances of witchcraft and heresy. Is that not so?”

Magistrate de Heart nodded. “It is. As well, English law, under which we must operate, demands that the accused be tried by two magistrates. The truth of the matter, Straubb, is that His Majesty couldn't be bothered with the day to day workings of these colonies. He is aware, as are we all, that, for the most part, a great many of the colonists are tax evaders, criminals...undesirables. He does, however, expect English law to be *strictly enforced*.” Magistrate de Heart glanced up at Blackburn and Sterling ever so briefly, as he'd uttered those last two words as though there had been disciplinary problems with the men in recent history. “It is this contradiction that has led His Majesty to insist upon these trials without having provided for the necessary regulations. As it is becoming more troublesome to find established magistrates willing to come to these abhorrent colonies, I have taken it upon myself to retain an apprentice magistrate. That is you, boy.”

“I understand. I am most eager to begin.”

“What know you of English law?”

“Everything!”

“Everything?” The magistrate's robust laughter was so deafening in the small chamber that it was nearly impossible to hear Blackburn and Sterling chuckling from behind.

“What I mean to say, sir, is that I have been studying the law, since I was a small boy. I am familiar with most principles and procedures.”

“And the witchcraft laws? Are you equally familiar with them?”

“No, sir. I must confess that I am not.”

“I would be very much surprised if you were, as there are none.”

“Sir?”

“Don't misunderstand me, boy. There are regulations for the establishment of this tribunal, but much of what we do will be governed by the actions of the Dutch in their recent trials.”

“I see.”

“And do you still feel up to this task?”

“I do, sir.”

“Time will tell, boy.” The magistrate arose from his chair with no small measure of struggle and the chair itself creaked and groaned with relief, upon being unburdened of his massive weight. Drawing the handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped the remaining pig grease from his lips and jowls. “We have a guest awaiting our attention.”

“A guest, Magistrate?”

I arose as well, turning in time to see this 50-something year old minister of justice glance at his fellows, both of whom had maintained their positions at the door. The magistrate's grin at these two men left me with an uneasy feeling for what reason I could not fathom and, although I momentarily felt foolish for being so suspicious of my employer, the ensuing chuckles of Blackburn and Sterling once again set the hairs upon my neck prickling afresh. I tried reminding myself that I knew nothing of these men -for good or for ill- and that they all were, as a matter of fact, officers of a most high court, but still I could not shake the wariness I felt in their presence. I told myself that it would be quite foolhardy to act or even to speak upon these suspicions, but, as I am generally a good judge of character, I had determined to observe these men with a cautious eye, until my suspicions were either confirmed or disproved. My thoughts were interrupted, when the magistrate spoke to me, as he led our party from the office.

“Our guest, Straubb, is a neger slave by the name of Tiekka, accused of heresy and of the practice of voodoo.”

“May I know the details of this case?”

“Here.” He handed me a stack of neatly arranged papers, each page filled with the writings of a female hand, to be judged by the bubbly beatific cursive known to be most common amongst women. “The statement of Tiekka's employer and only friend in all of this great colony.”