

Panama Gold

I

The sun was slowly dying. Ella, a switch in her hand, rounded up her chicks. Cocks came proudly in, puffed by poise and conquest; hens, agitated, jealous of their young, clucked in—furious at the disappearance of a one-eyed one caught by the leg and dragged down the hole of a mongoose.

“Yo’ go up dere, an’ behave yo’self.”

Swish, swish, swish . . . “Ah know you had to be last, yo’ rascal yo’ . . . jump inside!” Guinea fowl, swifter than a hare, wild as any of the gap’s tabbies.

The wind subsided. Butter fish clung to the sky . . . fish in the sky . . . mullets, gar fish, butter fish. Fish—blue, gold, black, orange—tossing on a sea, floundering around in God’s sky. Fishermen at Low’rd set their nets by the twilight visions, mirrored in the sky, of the lore rolling drunk on the sea’s bottom. They were dark sea rats streaming out at twilight to embark on some intrepid quest.

She would be alone at dusk, cooking, mixing flour or tasting broth. . . . “Why taste it, why? If no fo’ me alone?” Yampies, eddoes, plantains . . .

“De Bajan man him say,” Ella smiled, “‘plantain an’ salt fish me don’t want ‘um, an’ de Mud-head man him say, me

wish me had 'um, me wish me had 'um. . . ." And moisture came to Ella's laughing eyes.

From the plantains to the corn and the flour dumplings. . . . "One o' dem would knock a man in a cock hat," she observed . . . a man . . . a man. . . .

All of a sudden a problem arose, "Gahd, I ain't got a bit o' salt in de house. No, sah," she cried frantically, "me can't stand no fresh food—me muss get a pinch o' salt."

II

"Yo' mahmie inside, Capadosia?" Ella paused before the Dalrimple cabin. Even the mangy brindle pup with his ears sticking sickly up row-rowed hoarsely after the spunky downpour of rain.

"I is talkin' to you, girl!"

And Capadosia, still pricking the chigger fested in her thumb, hollowed, "Mahmie!"

"Don't tu'n yo' back 'pon me, girl, befo' I tell yo' mahmie!"
Unruly Capadosia!

"Capadosia, what is it?"

"Miss Heath, heah, mum, she want yo'. . . ."

Skimpy-legged Capadosia, the color of a warm chestnut, freckles dominant on her rude, glazed, hard little face.

"Hey, dese chilrun, Lizzie. . . ."

Ella stepped over to Capadosia's mother. "Hey, I ask de gal if she mahmie home an' Lizzie, yo' know what she tell ma, why de little rapscaillon tu'n me she back side an' didn't even say ax yo' pardin."

"Come in heah, miss, come in heah an' tu'n round. Ax

Miss Heath pardin! Ax she! yo' won't—yo' wretch! Vagabond! Take dat, an' dat, an' dat—shut up, I sez. Shut up, befo' I box ev'y one o' dem teets down yo' t'roat! Didn't I tell yo' not to be rude, shut up, yes—didn't I tell yo' not to be onmannerly to people, dat yo' must respect de neighbors? Like she ain't got no manners! Shut up, I sez, befo' I hamstring yo', yo' little whelp!"

"Dese gal picknees nowadays is 'nouf to send yo' to de madhouse! Hey, but Lizzie, what we gwine do wit' de chilrun, ni? Ev'y day dey is gettin' wussah an' wussah."

"Lord only knows, soulee gal, dat Miss Capadosia, yo' wait till she pappy come home. He gwine beat she fo' true."

Ella drew near the cabin door; near enough to be able to spy, through the blue smoke of Lizzie Dalrimple's cooking, Capadosia cutting her eyes at her and murmuring, "come complain' 'pon me—de old hag—why she don't go 'n get sheself a man?"

"An' how yo', ni," cried Ella, turning to Lizzie and coloring brightly, "how yo'?"

"Oh, so so, soulee gal, I still got de rheumaticks in me leg."

"Yo' ain't doin' not'ing far-rit, no? Hey, gal yo' ain't frighten, no? Yo' ain't afraid o' de horspital, no?"

"Come in an' sit down, Ella, an' res' yo'self."

"Don't put yo'self out o' de way, Lizzie, on account o' me. I wus jus' gwine ask yo' to len' me a pinch o' salt when dat gal chile o' yours skin up she behin' at me. A body can't even talk to chilrun nowadays."

"Tell yo' de troot, Ella," Lizzie answered, "I jus' use de las' drop meself to sweeten Christian's coffee. It make he coffee taste good."

"An' how's Christian, soulee?"

"Oh, so so, chile."

"He still at de quarry?"

"Yes, soul."

"Well, I gwine go back down de gap. I lef' de pot boilin'."

"Yes, soulee gal, I jus' shell de bonavis an' put dem in, an' in course de dumplings will tek long fo' swell up."

"Which kahl to mine dat las' ebenin' Christian bring home a bag o' soup-crabs from Miss Foulkes, de buckra. She are always givin' him soup meat, or pepper soup, or crab fo' soup, fo' tek' way. How-somevah, dem crabs is so nice, chile, I nevah taste nothin' like dem in all me bawn days."

"We usta catch dem in Low'rd, too—but I don't like dem. Giv' me de belly ache."

"Why yo' don't go up de road an' get a bag o' salt?"

"Up whey?"

"Up at Missah Poyah's shop."

"Missah who?"

"Missah Poyah, no."

"Who 'im are—whey he come from?"

"Palama, soul."

"Palama?"

"Yes."

"An' wha' he doin' heah?"

"He open a shop, soulee."

"Oh, I see."

"Yes, chile, he are a Palama man."

"Well, I must be goin' den," Ella drew the shawl around her shoulders. "I must go see disyah Poyah."

"An' oh, Ella, he got one leg—"

"Yo' don't say!"

"Deed he is! Got it cut off on de canal—"

"I gwine 'long now. Got to go back . . . leave me pot boilin'
. . . got to go back an' eat me fresh food."

III

Aftermath—green aftermath.

The gap gave up the scurvy ghost. In balloons of steaming froth, the fog of drought and heat, which had settled over the gap for the entire summer, bore its way over the craggy tips of Low'rd to the red, brewing sea beyond.

Splashes of rain—a swift transfusion. The earth murmured under it; lay tense, groaning, swollen, like a woman in toil, with the burden of its inheritance. Gold and green and yellow things, near-ripe, sent up tall, nodding fronds to trumpet the bursting of the dawn.

Dawn cast a greenish gold over the gap. Over the jagged stones donkey carts slipped, wheels stuck in mud. Men got down to coax their beasts out of the muddy gutter. Gone the dust. Red mud flowed over the land. Red mud—good for beans and potatoes—crawled up the legs of dusky West Indian peasant women, up the hoofs of townbound cattle.

Once more the peewits sang. Strange—the way they found their way back to the tip-top ends of guava or breadfruit or pine. Gobbling turkeys and fowls, fond of their new, egg-cruste'd young, proudly stepped out of coops, traversing the broad marl highway. Worms swarmed into their paths to be devoured; plenty to go round. Mixed with the rain the marl dust made a hard resilient road.

The wind tossed the lanky guava tree. Scudding popcorn—white, yellow, crimson pink guava buds blew upon the ground. Forwards and backwards the wind tossed the guava tree. It shook buds and blossoms on the ground—moist, unforked, ground—on Ella Heath's lap, in her black, plenteous hair, in the water she was drawing from the well. Guava buds fell in Ella's bucket, and she liked it. They gave flavor to the water. All of nature gave flavor to Ella, wrought a magic color in Ella's life. Green, wavy moss—rhubarb moss—at the bottom of the frog-harboring well, with fern and broad leaf sprawled along its ribs; brought color to the water, gave body flavor to it. Gave the water a tang.

Cast up on a bare half acre of land, Ella came to know the use of green, virgin things. Ore; green ore—spread over the land. Riotously nature peopled the earth about her. In front of her cabin door there was a water course. It was filled with sparrow grass. A wild, mad, hectic green—the green of young sugar canes. Up and down the gap, horses, donkeys, ring-horned goats, on the way to Bridgetown to be raced, tugged at their tethers, crazy to eat up Ella's sparrow grass. It tempted the oxen carting tremulous loads of salty sugar cane grown on the swampy seaside of Barbadoes—tempted sheep, oracular, voiceless, dog-shy sheep bewilderedly on the road to market—tempted hens frizzly with the pip, and leaping, lap-eared dogs.

Ella had come from Low'rd—the Lower Side—that dinky bar of salty black earth jutting out to sea on the easternmost tip of Barbadoes. From Low'rd Ella had brought a donkey cart load of sea crab shells, horns, conchs, rose and orange and crimson hued, and set them in rows between the blazing hibiscus and chrysanthemum along the walk.

Inexhaustible stems of green sprang up around Ella's domain. It'd take five years to mature, but she had planted a cocoanut tree on the northern-most wing of the cabin. Half an acre of land, but it was no trifling stake. Inch by inch green overspread it. Corn, okras, gunga peas, eddoes, *tannias*, tomatoes—in such a world Ella moved.

As if she were on an immemorial lark, Ella experimented with the green froth of the earth. One day she was grafting a pine and breadfruit. Standing, "jooking" a foreign stalk in—tamarind, star apple, almond—and strapping it into the gummy gash dug into the tree's side.

Similarly, with the pigeons and the ground doves. Pigeons at sunrise on a soapbox coop set on top the latrine cooing:

A rooka ta coo

A rooka ta coo

My wife is just as good as you

Good as you

Good as you

to sherbet-winged doves on the cabin roof—in spite of Ella's scissors. And rabbits; red-eyed ones white and shy, Ella'd set in the thick sparrow grass, guarded over by Jit, the dog, to play and frolic. Sometimes, unmoved by their genetic dissimilarity, Ella'd use drastic, aggressive methods. . . .

Sows fared prodigiously at the hands of Ella. She filled huge, fat-stinking troughs of slime for them. Ella's boars grew tusks of flint-like ivory. Vicious, stiff-haired boars who ate up the sow's young, frothed at the mouth at Jit's approach, tried to stick their snouts between Ella's legs whenever she ventured in the pen.

Under Ella's tutelage the one cow she owned streamed milk. From fat luscious udders filled skillet after skillet. . . .

Gay, lonely girl, her bare arms yellow in the blazing February sun, the words of a West Indian madrigal issued from her lips:

Do Mistah Bee don't chase me 'way
 Fo' de gals nex' do' will laugh at me
 Break me han' but let me stan'
 Break me han' but let me stan'. . . .

Ella poured the water in a skillet. Guava buds in the water—honey in guava buds.

All around it was dark. Gravel assailed her feet. A moon worked its way through a welter of thick black clouds to soar untrammelled in the phosphorescent sky. Marl dust assailed Ella's unshod feet.

Under the evergreen big barnacled roots stood up like a mass of sleeping crocodiles—and Ella grew tired, and like blacks on a dark country road at night, began to sing

Do Mistah Bee don't chase me 'way

The broad road led to the world. Beyond Black Rock, beyond St. Michael's to Eagle Hall Corner, and Bridgetown. Along it traders from Low'rd, in landaux and victorias and oxcarts, sped to barter sea eggs

Sea egg, sea egg
 Tittee Ann tan tan!

Evergreen leaves fell swirling through the dusk upon Ella's face. She brushed them away, and into her untutored mind came a legend. "Sh, carrion crow," she cried, "me no dead yet." The evergreen leaves, caressing her face, brought it vividly to her. . . . "Sh, carrion crow, me no dead yet." An old Dutch Guianese had uttered the ghastly words. Black Portuguese legend. . . . For sticking his hand in a pork barrel in a Portuguese grocer's shop, a Negro had been caught and whisked off to a dark spot in the woods. His hands had been cut off and he had been buried alive, with only his head sticking out of the ground. That had happened at night. In the morning the crows had come to gouge the eyes out of his head. "Sh, carrion crow, me no dead yet. . . ." Evergreen leaves on Ella's face . . . crows swirling around the head of a body buried on the Guiana mound. . . .

"Dis muss be it," Ella murmured.

Up a greasy embankment, one more leap, and Ella paused, breathing hard. Words—male words—vied with the wind for position in her alert consciousness.

Voices—

"... I mek dem pay me! Deed I did! Says to dem, 'pay me, or be Christ you'll stan' de consequences!' 'Pay me,' I says, 'or I'll sick de British bulldog on all yo' Omericans!'"

"An' dey pay yo' fas' enough, didn' dey?"

"Pay me? Man, yo' should o' see how fas' dey pay me! Pay me fas' enough, indeed! Five hundred pounds! Ev'y blind cent! Man, I wuz ready to sick Nelson heself 'pon dem. At a moment's notice, me an' de council wuz gettin' ready fo' ram-sack de Isthmus and shoot up de whole blasted locks! Hell wit' de Canal! We wuz gwine blow up de dam, cut down de

wireless station an' breck up de gubment house! If dey didn't pay me fo' my foot!"

"Yo' handle dem fo' true, didn't yo'?"

"Man, don't tahlk! Shut yo' mout'! Handle dem? Dat am not all de troot. I swallow dem up! Swallow dem up like a salipentah! Sha'? Man, let me tell yo' something. I let dem understand quick enough dat I wuz a Englishman and not a bleddy American nigger! A' Englishman—big distinction in dat, Bruing! An' dat dey couldn't do as dey bleddy well please wit' a subject o' de King! Whuh? I carry on like a rattlesnake. Carry on like a true Bimshah! Heah I wuz losin' my foot fo' dem wit' dere bleddy canal an' dey come tellin' me dey wuzn't to blame, dat nobody wuz to blame, dat de engine wuz gwine slow an' dat I wuz musta been layin' down on de job. Hear dem Americans, ni? Layin' down on de job, hear dat, Bruing? And wuzzahmo' dey say dat why I didn't ketch holt o' de cow-katcher an' fling meself outa de way! Wha', man, dah t'ing knock me onconscience! I didn't even know I wuz hit! Dere I wuz oilin' de switch—oilin' de switch an' de nex' t'ing yo' know I wuz in de horspital at Ancong wit' one foot cut off."

Pipes were being smoked . . . stinking tobacco smote Ella. Green tobacco leaves burning in rotting corncob pipes.

Sugar, snuff, codfish, lard oil, sweet oil, corn, rum, kerosene—were the ingredients of one grand symphonic smell.

"Giv' me a bag o' salt an' a package o' senna."

"Are dat yo', Miss Ella?"

"Yes, it am me."

She turned. Perched on an old biscuit barrel was Petit Bruin, the village idiot, smoking a pipe which exuded an odor of burning cow dung.

"Howdy do, Mistah Bruing, how de worle a treat yo'?"

"Oh, so so, gal."

Ella's eyes deserted the old man to light upon the shopkeeper sticking his black veiny hand in the brine for the salt beef, his back to her. With a stab to the breast, she noted the protrudent tip of the cork leg. . . .

"Anything else, miss?" he asked, the brine dripping from his salt-crusted arm.

"Gahd, he are black in troot," Ella, mulatto Ella observed to herself; then aloud, "bettah giv' me a gill o' bakin' soda, I might wan' to make a cake."

"Look out dey, Poyah," mumbled Bruin, "gwine bring down dat salmon tin 'pon yo' head too."

"Oh dat can't hit me," Poyer replied, lowering the baking powder on the tip of the hook. "T's a man, man."

He faced Ella, piling up the goods on the counter. "T's a man, man," he said, meeting Ella's frosting eyes. "I wuz a brakesman in Palama, don' fomembah dat. I wuz de bes' train hooper on de Isthmus!"

"Count up de bill, quick!" Ella hastened, putting a sixpence on the counter. "It a get dark."

"Frighten fo' duppies?" Poyer said, a suggestion of teasing and mockery in his voice.

Island bugaboo. . . . "Who, me?" Ella's eye blazed, "I ain't frighten fo' de livin' much mo' de dead!"

"T'ink I is any cry-cry ooman, t'ink I is any cry-cry ooman—yo' lie!"

On the way back up the gap Ella felt unforgivingly warm in the temples at the very idea of Poyer's thinking she was afraid of ghosts. "Like I is any mamby-pamby ooman, like I ain't usta to takin' care o' meself."

Six days passed. Ella stuck a pig and corned the meat. The sapodillas ripened. Shaddocks—tropical grapefruits—filled donkey cart after donkey cart going through the gap to Eagle Hall Corner. Often as the sun rose showers fell. And then a visitor came—with a peg-step. . . .

It was dark when he came. He was perspiring furiously. He was one of those black men whose faces present an onion-like sheen, and upon whose brow and flabby jaws little fester-bright pimples stand out with a plaguing glitter.

He met Ella by the side of the well, binding up the spurs of a pugnacious game cock.

"I shut up de shop," he said abruptly, "why don't yo' come an' buy from me any mo'?"

"Hey, wha' yo' t'ink o' dat? Wha' wuz I doin' befo' yo' come along? Yo' t'ink I was starvin'? I look like I is starved out? Look at me good! We had plenty shops befo' yo' come along, bo."

"I taught—"

"Wha' yo' are taught? Yo' must be a funny man. Hey, yo' lock up yo' shop fi' come aftah one customah! Dat are a funny business."

"Bruing is dere—besides, it are good business."

"Tell me, how it are good business? Explain yo'self."

"Fo' me it are."

"Me can't see it, sah, furdah mo, I gwine ask yo' fo' excuse me, I got de chicken dem fo' feed."

"Wait—befo' yo' go, Ella—Miss Ella, yo' don't seem fo' hav' no feelings at all fo' de po' wooden foot man."

"Gahd! How yo' mean feelings? Wha' yo' want me fo' do? Hug yo' up?"

"Tek pity. . . ."

"Go 'way from heah I say. Don't come near me. Loose me befo' I go get de cutlass an' chop off yo' udder foot."

"Yo' know yo' won't do dat."

"Is dat so?"

"Yo' know yo' won't. . . ."

"Fo' true?"

"Yo' too kind. Yo' won't—yo' like me—"

"Oh, is dat de saht o' man yo' is, eh?"

"Wha' yo' mean? Tahlk, ooman, what saht o' man is dat?"

"T'ink dat ev'y ooman is de same. But yo' is a dam liar! Nutting can frighten me. All dem bag o' flour yo' 'a' got, an' dem silk shut, an' dem gold teets, an' dem Palama hats, yo' a spote round heah wid—dem don't frighten me. I is a woman what is usta t'ings. I got me hogs an' me fowls an' me pota-toes. No wooden foot neygah man can frighten me wit' he clothes or he barrels o' cologne. . . ."

Yellow kerchief mopping his brow, he walked off . . . peg step, peg step . . . leaving Ella by the well, gazing with defiance in her being.

"What he t'ink I is, anyhow?"

"Go back an' lahn, go back an' lahn, dat not de way fi cote."

The western sky of Barbadoes was ablaze. A mixture of fire and gold, it burned, and burned—into one vast sulphurous mass. It burned the houses, the trees, the windowpanes. The burnt glass did amazing color somersaults—turned brown and gold and lavender and red. It poured a burning liquid over the gap. It colored the water in the ponds a fierce dull yellowish gold. It flung on the corn and the peas and the star apples a lavender glow. It pitched its golden, flaming, iridescent shadow upon the lush of paw-paw and sunflower. It

withered the petals of rose or sweet pea or violet or morning glory. Its flame upon the earth was mighty. Sunset over the gap paralyzed. Sunset shot weird amber tints in the eyes of the black peons . . . sent strange poetic dreams through the crinkly heads of mule boys tiredly bowed over the reins of some starved-out buckra cart horse.

Sunset at Ella's—"Go in yo' pen, sah, go in. . . ." Hogs, fowls, pigeons, geese, bastard creations, straggled waywardly in.

Smoke. Smoke is easy to smell. Ella quickly smelt it. Then she began to look for it. . . . Smoke and the sunset. A smoky sunset. No. The setting sun kept her from seeing it. But slowly it grew dim, dark; slowly the gold burned into a deep rich bronze . . . slowly it burned and burned . . . black.

"Somebody grass burnin'," Ella sniffed and looked about. The dense night helped. The smoke persisted. "Ah, dere it are." Ella paused, a hen, sick with the yaws, clutched to her bosom.

"Gahd, a cane fire." Vaults of black smoke rose. A winding, spouting pyramid of it. Black, greasy, caneless.

"It must be de church steeple, dem ministers is so careless. . . ." Ella watched, lured by the curving, spouting ascent.

"Miss Heath!" From the gap a voice called. "Fiah, Miss Heath, fiah, Poyah shop on fiah!" One of the Dalrimple children . . . speeding down the gap, to the rest of the folks. . . .

"Lahd, 'a' massie!"

The hen suddenly took flight out of Ella's arm, spilling the molasses and corn she had been feeding it. Emptying the bucket containing the relishes of her evening meal, she ran to the well and jerked it down it. Swiftly the bucket was jerked

back up. Water splashed. It was a big bucket. With one grand sweep Ella swung it on her head. Ella was a mulatto, with plenty of soft black hair. She didn't need a cloth twisted and plaited to form a matting for her head. Her hair did that; it was thick enough. It could hold, balance a bucket.

The bucket sat on the crown of her head looking as if it had been created there. And Ella sailed on with it. She forgot to put out the fire under her food.

And down the gap she fled, the bucket of water on her head. Her strides were typical of the West Indian peasant woman—free, loose, firm. Zim zam, zim, zam. Her feet were made to traverse that stony gap. No stones defied her free, lithe approach. Left foot to right hand, right hand to left foot—and Ella swept down with amazing grace and ease. Her toes were broad; they encountered no obstacles. Her feet did not slip. The water did not splash. It was safe, firm, serene on top of her head.

Ella got in the broad road—easier. A sigh escaped her lips. The road was enlivened by one or two people coming up from town—

“Run, dahtah, the shop a bu'n.”

“Quick, dem a need it.”

It was dry; a little marl dust. Up the stony resilient incline she went, then swiftly down by the evergreen tree.

“Gahd, he is burnt out clean.” All around the evergreen tree there used to be shadows. The fire sent gleams of fire-light pelting through the dark. The shadows flew. You could have picked up a pin under the evergreen. . . .

Crowds of anxious hill dwellers gathered up the road. From Eagle Hall Corner a constable was coming with the

white cork hat, the creaking shoes, the regal swagger of the black constabulary. . . .

It was easy for Ella to strain through the tiny crowd of folk up the embankment.

Fire singed Ella. Smoke dazed her, choked and repelled her. . . . "Go back dere, go back. You—stand back!"

"Where is Missah Poyah, where is Missah Poyah?" Ella screamed. A straw valise, label spattered—deckers' luggage—an old shirt—one or two stray sacks of split peas—the money canister.

Faces; old Bruin, "Where is Missah Poyah?" Ella pursued madly, collaring the weed gourmand. "Where is Missah Poyah?"

"Stand back!" the constable ordered, "stand back, and let 'em bring in de stretcher!"

Old Bruin gave way, talking loudly and excitedly. "He is in dey, yes, he is in dey . . . don't push me 'bout . . . I tell yo' he is in dey. Yo' must be drunk yo'self."

It was then that Ella realized how for nothing was her bucket of water.