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Stubble

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STUBBLE

BY

GEORGE LOOMS

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First Edition

TO

MIS' KATIE

AND HER COURAGE

STUBBLE

PART I

MARY LOUISE

Top

CHAPTER I

The front gate screamed, a slow, timid, almost furtive sort of scream, and then banged suddenly shut as though it despaired of further concealment. Mary Louise gathered her sewing to her, rose to her feet, and looked out. It was raining. Through the glass upper half of the door that opened from the sitting room upon the side porch she could see the swelling tendrils of the vines that crawled about the trellis, heavy and beady with the gathering moisture. It was one of those cold, drizzly, early April rains that dares you by its seeming futility to come forth and do weaponless battle and then sends you back discomfited and drenched. A woman was coming up the walk bent in a huddle over a bundle which she carried in her arms. Mary Louise gazed searchingly for a moment and then, as the figure would have passed the door, on around to the rear of the house, stepped out on the porch and called:

"Zenie! Zenie! Come in this way. There's nobody around there."

Zenie raised her head in mute surprise and then slowly obeyed. She shuffled across the porch, and at the door, which Mary Louise held open for her, paused and looked about her in indecision. She was a buxom creature, of the type that the Negroes about the station would call a "High Brown," but without the poise and aplomb that conscious membership in that class usually brings.

"Mis' Susie in?" she ventured, after a careful survey of the room had assured her that such was not probable. And her care, relaxed for the moment, allowed the corner of the shawl to fall from the bundle in her arms, which forthwith set up a remote wailing, feeble and muffled, though determined.

Mary Louise raised a skeptic eyebrow at the discredited Zenie.

"Sshh!" dispassionately urged the latter, scorning for once public regard and continuing to gaze about the low-ceilinged room for the absent but much-desired Miss Susie.

Such callous indifference baffled Mary Louise, even while it answered her innermost questionings, and for the moment she was

voiceless. "What in the world— —!" she said at length and hated herself for the vulgar surprise in her tone.

Zenie turned away from the inspection and, finding herself and appendage the centre of interest, bridled with a timid pleasure, and then poked a ruminative finger into the swaddle of shawl and comforter.

"Yas'm," she began in explanation. "Done brung 'im to show t' Mis' Susie. Didn' know you wuz home." Her manner had all the affable ease of a conscious equal.

Mary Louise rubbed her eyes. Time was bringing changes; Zenie had once been humble. Her voice rang with an accusing hardness. "I thought you'd shut the door on that worthless Zeke of yours."

Zenie did not raise her head but continued the aimless poking in the bundle, which strangely responded to the treatment and was quiet again. "No'm. He comes roun'. Eve' now an' then. Zeke's got a cah!" A momentary gleam from dark eyes lit like coals into a sudden flare, and Mary Louise was conscious of a pride that was fierce and strong, even if new. She felt suddenly strange, foreign, like an intruder.

Their eyes met, and this time it was Mary Louise's that fell. She felt embarrassed at the question that arose in her. Of course Zeke was the father. Such a question to the emancipated Zenie would be paternally insulting. She countered skillfully:

"What's— his name?"

Zenie shifted the bundle in her arms and then reached over with her toe and thoughtfully pushed the stove door.

"Name Nausea," she replied softly, still regarding the door which refused to shut entirely.

"Name's what?"

Zenie raised her eyes and smiled. It was a sudden unmasking of a battery in a peaceful landscape. "Nausea Zekiel Thompson," Zenie continued, gazing down into the bundle with the simplicity of a great emotion.

For a moment silence descended upon the room. Mary Louise could not trust herself in the customary amenities. She stepped over to Zenie and the younger Thompson and peered into the bundle, conscious as she did so of a slowly opening door beyond them. A tiny weazened face and two beady blinking eyes were all she saw. Zenie was making a curious clucking noise.

"Yas'm," Zenie went on, encouraged into an unwonted garrulity, "Mist' Joe done give 'im that name. Hit's from de Bible, ain't it?"

"Mister Joe?"

"Yas'm. Mist' Joe Hoopah." There was a cheery ring to Zenie's voice that had been wont to drag so dispiritedly. "He say hit come so unexpectedly an' all you kin do is make the bes' of it." Her face was suddenly wreathed in an expansive smile. "Mist' Joe done hoo-rahin' us—Zeke an' me. Zeke don' min'. Nossuh. He say de baby look lak him." She held the bundle up and looked at it in rapt contemplation.

Mary Louise's lips shut in a tight line. She turned away from the pair in distaste. But just then a light step sounded and her feeling was diverted. Zenie did not hear the advent of another character upon the scene so absorbed was she in holding the centre of the stage. "Think hit's a pritty name, don' you?"

Receiving no answer she raised her eyes and beheld Miss Susie, whose critical gaze enveloped her sternly. Zenie dropped her eyes again.

"So you've finally decided to show up again, Zenie?" Miss Susie clipped her words off short to everyone. She was a wisp of a woman with little hands as dry and yellow as parchment. Her voice had a quavering falsetto break in it and her laugh, when there was occasion, was dry and withery and short-lived like a piece of thistle-down.

Mary Louise was watching with interest. Zenie struggled for a moment and then turned and faced the inevitable. There was a growing decision in her manner.

"H'do, Mis' Susie! Yas'm. I 'cided I'd drop in on you-all. Show him to his white folks." She looked at Miss Susie and smiled a most uncertain smile.

And then for the first time was the import of the visit brought fully to the visitee.

"So," Miss Susie exploded, "that's where you've been. Out of town! Humph! You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Zenie looked as though she would like to defend herself, but it was useless.

Miss Susie went on inexorably, "That worthless Zibbie Tuttle has been tearing all my good linen and lace to pieces for the past three weeks. And now I suppose I'll have to put up with her for a few weeks longer."

"Yas'm," Zenie replied weakly.

"However" — Miss Susie pronounced it as though it were one syllable — "I suppose I can't help it. What is it? Boy or girl?"

"Boy," said Zenie, and with growing decision, "but hit ain' him I come to see you-all about. No'm. Thank you jes' as much. I jes' aim to tell you I ain' take in no mo' wash. No'm. Zeke he don' want me to take in no mo' wash. No'm."

"Zeke!" Miss Susie's snort was very ladylike. "Zeke! — and what has Zeke to do with what *you* want to do?"

"We'se ma'ied, ain' we, Mis' Susie?"

This was irrefutable, but more so the changing viewpoint. Zenie had tasted emancipation. Miss Susie shrugged her shoulders and left the room with short hurried steps.

Zenie turned to Mary Louise. "I'm tiahed of the ol' tub. 'Tain' no use my weahin' myself out fu nuthin'. 'Sides, this heah boy a heap o' trubbel." She shook her head doubtfully.

Mary Louise disregarded the confidence. "D'you say Mister Joe — Mister Joe Hooper — named your baby? How could he? He's not even home."

"Yas'm. Yas'm, he is. He come in t' see Zeke this mo'nin'. Mist' Joe lookin' mighty fine."

Mary Louise felt a curious sinking feeling of being shoved into a discard. And then Miss Susie came hurrying back into the room. In her hand she carried a small bundle of red flannel cloth freshly cut from the bolt. Zenie eyed her uncertainly.

"Here. Here's something to keep out the cold—next winter. And you oughtn't to bring *it* out in such rainy weather." She went to the door and held it open in all finality. And Zenie, with much secret and inner scorning for a ritual so antiquated and a gift so obsolete, could do naught but depart. Miss Susie had somehow managed to keep the advantage, and the two white women watched the departing figure shuffle down the walk, out through the sagging, squeaky gate. The clouds had broken in the west and a soft golden radiance suffused the row of maples that lined the fence along the street, and the swelling branches gleamed with promise. Over toward the east a patch of blue sky appeared, and then the tip of a sickle moon thrust itself through and floated entire for a moment on a tiny azure lake. A little breeze came round the corner of the porch from the sunset. It was as soft and warm as an unspoken promise, and it flipped back skirt hems and twisted hair tendrils most inoffensively.

"Come, honey!" Miss Susie said at length, wrenching herself loose from the charm. "It's getting late."

Mary Louise stepped slowly off the porch on to the spongy lawn that stretched out to a summerhouse partly covered with the skeleton of last summer's vines. "Just a minute, Aunt Susie," she answered, without looking back. "I want to see how the hydrangea is coming on."

Miss Susie turned and closed the door behind her.

Bloomfield had a quality of unchangeableness. Even in the dead of winter you could tell with half an eye how it would look bedecked in its summer finery. Down the stretch of years, past many an intervening milepost, it always stood clearly envisioned to its sons and daughters both natural and adopted. There was about four hundred yards of macadam street lined with oaks and maples as old as or older than the meeting house of early Post-Revolutionary

days which stood at the cross-roads corner diagonally across from the glary white gasolene station. Half-way down the street, in a cluster of elms, stood the remnants of an ancient tavern, whose front wall, flush with the sidewalk, showed occasional bullet scars on the rough red brownstone surface. Green outside shutters lay inertly back from dull leaded panes which reflected metallicly the orange glow of the setting sun, and over the door, which was squat and low and level with the pavement, an ancient four-sided lantern, hung from a bracket of rusty black iron, was gathering cobwebs in disuse. All this lay within Mary Louise's field of vision from the summerhouse and yet she saw it not. She was staring abstractedly at a wary robin that had stopped to rest on a fence post, his beak all frowzy with the débris from a recent drilling. The McCallum house—her father's—stood at the other end of the row of maples on the same side of the street as the meeting house and a hundred yards or so distant. There was quite an expanse of greening lawn in front and to the south, whereon stood the summerhouse, and a tangle of rose bushes hid the decaying board fence which marked the southern boundary. Along the brick sidewalk stretched a line of ageing wooden pickets and about midway in their extent hung the wooden gate with the squeak. The house was frame, low and wide-stretching, with an inviting verandah about a cavernous front door that was dark and rarely open. People used the side door into the ell sitting room, and the brick walk leading in a curved sweep to this doorway was free from grass. A high wooden lattice separated the front lawn from the backyard and sheds and stables, and about this lattice sprawled in luxuriant freedom rose vines and honeysuckle, just now faintly budding into life.

Mary Louise stooped and punched a hole in the soft earth with a little stick, unconsciously uprooting a tender shoot thereby. A black beetle came scurrying out of the decaying baseboard at this disturbance and was summarily filliped off into the greening wastes of lawn. Collecting herself, she next inspected the branches of the plant near by and finding sufficient promise of green, straightened up and flung back an escaping wisp of hair, with a sigh.

There was nothing particularly noticeable about Mary Louise unless it might possibly be a certain fine-drawnness. Her eyes, which were brown, had a sort of set focus on the immediate, and there

were some fine lines from the corners of her lips to her nose. She was slim and straight, with small hands and feet, and her arms, which were bare to the elbow, might have been soft and round, were it not for a sinuous tension that showed itself in little corded creases right where a girl's arms should be softest and roundest. And her hair had a way of coming down at all times and in all weathers. It had never been decided whether she were pretty or not. That was something that had never mattered – to her, at least.

As she threw back her head she was conscious of a general escaping of hairpins and a loosening of hair. With a frown she dropped her stick and turned her attention from horticulture to coiffure. A low whistle sounded from somewhere beyond the rose vines, and as she turned, with her fingers in her hair and elbows protruding, she saw a man come swinging along the walk past the boundary fence, his eyes sweeping the house from upstairs windows to side porch.

Mary Louise calmly proceeded with her toilette, making no sign. He caught sight of her, paused a moment, and then vaulted stiffly over the picket fence into the yard.

"Lo," he said.

She had a hairpin in her mouth and returned the greeting with a slight lifting of eyebrows. As her head was lowered and her chin tucked in, this was a sufficiently effective reply.

"Musta rained pretty hard here," he ventured, as, noticing the damage that the damp grass was doing to his trouser hems, he covered the remaining distance between them in a series of violent haphazard leaps.

The hairpin rendered her response unintelligible.

"How d'you find things?" gaining her side, and a bit more calmly.

Mary Louise deliberately tucked in one last recalcitrant wisp and pinned it down, and then turned to him. "Pretty well." Her gaze was level and critical.

"Aunt Sue better?"

She nodded. Then she turned and slowly walked within the enclosure of the summerhouse and sat down. He followed her and stood framed in the doorway.

"What's the gloom?" he asked directly, after a moment of silence.

"Nothing," she said, a little too brightly.

"Not interrupting anything, am I?"

Disregarding this: "What are you doing in Bloomfield?"

He laughed. "Aren't sorry I came, are you? This is Saturday. Times have changed. Maybe you don't know. Proletariat's riding high."

"They're giving you the whole day now?" in a mildly dubious tone.

He turned away. "No. But Uncle Buzz was in a jam, and — well, I thought I'd better come." He turned on her suddenly. "Keeping tab on me, aren't you? How'd you know?"

"I reckon I'd better, Joe." And then more softly: "Think it's the best way to do? Uncle Buzz's been in deep water before." She rose to her feet and walked slowly to the opposite entrance. "How are things — at the works?"

He was silent a moment. "Same old place. Take more'n a war to change 'em." He came and stood beside her in the doorway. The sun was making a last desperate attempt to lighten the general gray of the sky with broad shafts of orange, and as they watched, it settled slowly and then dipped behind the dim blue of the distant hills. As at a signal, a bird in a thicket somewhere over beyond them began a long throaty warble. Another answered over to the left. Faint, liquid trip-hammerings, they were, upon brittle anvils.

"It's a good thing some things don't change," she said at length, in a low tone.

"I reckon."

They watched the glow fade from the sky, the broad bands of orange receding swiftly westward, while the cloud rim above the horizon cooled softly into pink and coral and a sudden soft patter of rain upon the dried vines and leaves above their heads aroused

them. Without a word, Mary Louise slipped past him and ran for the house. He followed.

On the side porch she turned and waited for him, and he came and stood before her, hatless, in the rain. "I'd better be getting back before it gets any worse—see you in the morning?"

"Let me get you an umbrella." She turned and was about to enter the house.

"No. Can't use 'em. Get hung up in the trees. What time you want to start out? Nine o'clock? See you at nine."

"That's too early. Make it ten. I'm busy. Besides, it's Sunday."

"Comin' at nine," he called over his shoulder and started for the gate.

She watched his retreating figure as he darted along through the shadow, and then she slowly turned and entered the sitting room. A dim yellow light from a single oil lamp on the table over against the right wall was feebly penetrating the deep shadows in far corners. The low-ceilinged room seemed huge and cavernous, with deep niches and crannies and bulky, shadowy objects. Miss Susie sat by the table with her knitting, her face yellower than ever, her hands feverishly restive. She raised her head as Mary Louise closed the door, and the tiny lines, accentuated by the lamplight, covered her face like markings upon an ancient scroll.

"Why didn't he come in, honey?"

"I don't know, Aunt Susie. He was in a hurry."

"What's he doing in town? Thought he'd gone back to work in Louisville."

"I don't know, Aunt Susie."

Miss McCallum picked up her knitting. She sniffed. "No, I s'pose not."

Mary Louise went over and kissed her aunt lightly upon the forehead, and then disappeared through a shadowy door back into shadowy depths. Directly came a sound of clattering tinware and then the faint echoes of a song, hummed, and slightly nasal. A smile

flickered across Miss Susie's lips as she watched her fingers—the needles flitting swiftly in and out.

CHAPTER II

They drew rein on a hill which sloped gently away to the town a mile or so distant. Over to the right in a cluster of trees gleamed the white fences and buildings of the Bloomfield Fair Grounds like a blob of paint squeezed on a dark palette.

Mary Louise turned in the saddle and took a long thirsty look at the western sky. "I love these days that are unplanned. They bring so much more when there isn't any promise."

Joe took off his hat and wiped his forehead, keeping tight rein in the meantime with his other hand on his roan saddler, who, scenting the home stretch, was restless to be off. "After which original tribute to my day, I hesitate to tell you that it has been a hunch of mine for over a year—ever since that first spring in Texas. Made up my mind if ever I struck God's country alive and in one piece, I'd treat myself to a great bath of this sort of stuff. Unplanned! Humph!"

Mary Louise's tight little mouth relaxed but she did not shift her gaze. "You forget. It was not planned—by me." On rare occasions Mary Louise could slip from her matter-of-fact self into coquetry and back again before one realized. It was like the play of a lightning shuttle, so quick that one rarely caught the flash of the back stroke. Joe had erred before. He was discreetly silent.

"I love it," Mary Louise went on, flinging back her head, "every stick, every stone of it. That half mile of turf down Blue Bottle Lane! I'd give ten years of my life to gallop the rest of it through country like that." And then, as though startled, she bit her lip and was still.

Joe smiled as he watched her narrowly. "A woman's a mess o' contradictions. Whoa! You, too," he called sharply to his mare. "Thought you wanted to eat grass a little. Whoa!" He reined up the tossing head with difficulty. And then to Mary Louise, "You're a sort of self-inflicted exile, aren't you?"

Mary Louise turned from her musing and gave him a look of most effective scorn. "Put your hat on," she said coldly. "You talk better through it." She was backing her mount out from the thicket

whence he had thrust his nose and was wheeling him about to point him toward home. "I suppose you'd leave your job in Louisville and come back here to live yourself—just because you loved the scenery!"

"Not such a bad swap at that." But she was off and away. One rearing plunge and he was after her. Down across the grassy sweep of turf they fled, across a shallow ditch, past a stretch of willow thicket, around a jutting knob of rock, into an arching avenue of trees. It was like dropping into a cool, shadowy bowl, the first shoots and sproutings of baby leaves from the branches casting a delicate tracery of shadow on the golden-green shimmer of the grass. Through an open gate they shot, he close behind, out upon a hard metallic roadway of macadam. Here Mary Louise reined in her horse and Joe instantly drew up alongside.

"It's lucky the street came along to help," he breathed. "Twenty yards more — —"

Mary Louise reached up a hand to her hair in a futile effort to stem the havoc there. A moment of furious attempt to quiet the racing in her veins, and then, quite calmly, "It's all as it should be. We've got to look out for such things and take advantage of them. There are no ifs and buts about being caught. You didn't — that's all."

Joe opened his mouth to speak, stared at her a moment, and then turned away his eyes. They trotted along in silence, the shadows deepening and lengthening.

Directly: "When does your tea room open?"

"To-morrow. I'll be fine and stiff to start it off." Both question and answer had taken on a fine flavour of impersonality. Quiet again, with only the clatter of hoofs on the roadway. Directly they turned a wide sweeping curve and before them appeared a wooden gateway set at the end of an avenue of elms, at the other end of which showed, dim and forbidding, a house with columns and a green roof. Joe dismounted and, unlatching the gate, turned and stood grinning at her.

"So you're really goin' to try it out?" His voice had the quality of self-questioning.

It broke in on her musings and she seemed a bit impatient. "Of course I'm going to try it out. Only there isn't much 'try' to it. It's bound to make a go."

"Some little difference between a merely commercial proposition and a popular charity like the Red Cross. There's no percentage in just guzzlin' tea for fun unless you're doin' it to keep Americans from starvin' or doughboys from itchin'. You know what I believe?" He turned on her suddenly. "You're just scrapin' up an excuse to—to —" He stammered, hesitated in indecision. "Tea!"

"Don't be maudlin, Joe!" Her tone was very cold. "If you must know, we need the money and — — Well, I guess I learned enough about *tea* and *tea rooms* in the past ten or eleven months to know whether one will pay or not — if it's properly run. Got awfully hard-boiled while you were in the army, didn't you? Come, open the gate."

He was silent. Mary Louise usually could put him in his place. But thus put in his place, Joe could assume all the irritable stick-to-itiveness of a child. "How about Miss Susie?"

He watched the shot. For a moment it had no seeming effect, and then Mary Louise, turning loose all the pent-up outpourings to inner questionings, in a fury of righteous self-justification: "You needn't think I haven't thought about that. You needn't think I'm shirking my duty in any way. If you *knew*, you wouldn't ask such a question. Before you left we were just on the ragged edge, and now — well, somebody's got to do something to bring the money in. The place don't make it." Her voice quieted down a little. "It hasn't been an easy question to solve. Come, Joe! Open the gate."

He watched her curiously. "But the servants? You've still got the servants, Matty, and Old Landy, and that half-baked gorilla, Omar. Why not — —"

"Yes, why not?" She turned on him. "Why not shut down the place, too, as well as dismiss all the servants, and live in one of the old stone quarters? Why not? Why not let your heels run down if they want to? It's much easier."

Quietly he pushed the gate open and stood waiting, holding it for her. Something in his manner struck her, and she reached out her

hand from her seat in the saddle and touched him lightly as her horse swerved past. "There, I'm sorry, Joe. But you just hounded me into it somehow. I didn't mean it's that way with you. You know I didn't. You see what I mean? One ought to try. Ought to try everything first, not just give up because everything doesn't seem just right. I *have* thought about Aunt Susie, and it breaks me all up. But it can't be helped." She waited till he closed the gate and with a quick swing-up into the saddle drew alongside. Slowly they walked their horses up the avenue.

"I s'pose you're right," he said at length. "Only—only it has seemed to me that there's a lot of good time wasted doing useless things. Would you rather run a tea room than do anything else in the world?"

She looked at him but they were passing a bend in the road, and the sun, having dipped behind a jutting hill, no longer lighted up the dusky avenue, and Joe's face was in semi-shadow. "I'd rather hold on to what I've got than lose the tiniest portion of it," was all she said.

Suddenly he threw back his head and laughed. "If they could only see me now!"

"They? Who, they?"

His face sobered, but there was a momentary twinkle about the eyes. "Who? Oh, at the office." And then, as dismissing the thought, "Uncle Buzz know you're openin' the tea room?"

"No."

"Then you ought to tell him. Give you a lot of invaluable suggestions as to how to mix up little 'what-for-you's.' Get 'em comin' and goin'. Also, Uncle Buzz's got a mint bed that has parts."

"There's some patronage we will be forced to do without," Mary Louise replied primly. They were nearing the house and as they approached, someone in one of the front rooms struck a light and it could be seen moving, the shadows dancing on the walls.

"Don't overlook Uncle Buzz," said Joe with a chuckle. "Don't overlook any discriminatin' taste. You can't beat those horses of his."

"No," agreed Mary Louise, "nor — —" and then checked herself.