

# “Black Death”

by Zora Neale Hurston



We Negroes in Eatonville know a number of things that the hustling, bustling white man never dreams of. He is a materialist with little care for overtones. They have only eyes and ears, we see with the skin.

For instance, if a white person were halted on the streets of Orlando and told

that Old Man Morgan, the excessively black Negro hoodoo man, can kill any person indicated and paid for, without ever leaving his house or even seeing his victim, he'd laugh in your face and walk away, wondering how long the Negro will continue to wallow in ignorance and superstition. But no black person in a radius of twenty miles will smile, not much. They know.

His achievements are far too numerous to mention singly. Besides, any of his cures of "conjures" are kept secret. But everybody knows that he put the loveless curse on Bella Lewis. She has been married seven times but none of her husbands have ever remained with her longer than the twenty-eight days that Morgan had prescribed as the limit.

Hirma Lester's left track was brought to him with five dollars and when the new moon came again, Lester was stricken with paralysis while working in his orange grove.

There was the bloody-flux that he put on Lucy Potts; he caused Emma Taylor's teeth to drop out; he put the shed skin of a black snake in Horsos Brown's shoes and made him as the Wandering Jew; he put a sprig of Lena Merchant's hair in a bottle, corked it and threw it into a running stream with the neck pointing upstream, and she went crazy; he buried Lillie Wilcox's finger-nails with lizard's feet and dried up her blood.

All of these things and more can easily be proved by the testimony of the villagers. They ought to know.

He lives alone in a two-room hut down by Lake Blue Sink, the bottomless. His eyes are reddish and the large gold hoop ear-rings jangling on either side of his shrunken black face make the children fly in terror whenever they meet him on the street or in the woods where he goes to dig roots for his medicines.

But the doctor does not spend his time merely making folks ill. He has sold himself to the devil over the powerful black cat's bone that alone will float upstream

and may do what he wills. Life and death are in his hands -- he sometimes kills.

He sent Old Lady Crooms to her death in the Lake. She was a rival hoodoo doctor and laid claims to equal power. She came to her death one night. That very morning Morgan had told several that he was tired of her pretenses -- he would put an end to it and prove his powers. That very afternoon near sundown, she went down to the lake to bathe, telling her daughter, however, that she did not wish to go, but something seemed to be forcing her. About dusk someone heard her scream and rushed to the lake. She had fallen in the shallow water at the edge. The coroner from Orlando said she met her death by falling into the water during an epileptic fit. But the villagers *knew*. White people are very stupid about some things. They can think mightily but *[illegible in original manuscript]*.

But the undoing of Beau Diddely is his masterpiece. He had come from up North somewhere. He was a waiter at the Park House over in Maitland where Docia Boger was a chamber-maid. She had a very pretty brown body and face, sang alto in the Methodist choir and played the blues on her guitar. Soon Beau Diddely was with her every moment he could spare from his work. He was stuck on her all right, for a time.

They would linger in the shrubbery about Park Lake or go for long walks in the woods on Sunday afternoon to pick violets. They are abundant in the Florida woods in winter.

The Park House always closed in April and Beau was planning to go North with the white tourists. It was then Docia's mother discovered that Beau should have married her daughter weeks before.

"Mist' Diddely," said Mrs. Boger, "Ah'm a widdler 'omen an' Doshy's all Ah got, an' Ah know youse gointer do what you orter." She hesitated a moment and studied his face. "'Thout no trouble. Ah doan wanta make no talk 'round town."

In a split second the vivacious, smiling Beau had vanished. A very hard vitriolic stranger occupied his chair.

"Looka heah, Mis' Boger. I'm a man that's traveled a lot--been most everywhere. Don't try to come that stuff over me--what I got to marry Docia for?" "'Cause--'cause"--the surprise of his answer threw the old woman into a panic. "Youse the cause of her condition, ain'tcher?"

Docia, embarrassed, mortified, began to cry.

"Oh, I see the little plot now!" He glanced maliciously toward the girl and back again to her mother. "But I'm none of your down--Southcountry--suckers. Go try that on some of these clod-hoppers. Don't try to lie on *me*--I got money to fight."

"Beau," Docia sobbed, "You ain't callin' *me* a liah, is you?" And in her misery she started toward the man who through four months' constant association and assurance she had learned to love and trust.

"Yes! You're lying--you sneaking little--oh you're not even good sawdust! Me marry you! Why I could pick up a better woman out of the gutter than you! I'm a married man anyway, so you might as well forget your little scheme!"

Docia fell back stunned.

"But, but Beau, you said you wasn't," Docia wailed.

"Oh," Beau replied with a gesture of dismissal of the whole affair. "What difference does it make? A man will say anything at times. There are certain kinds of women that men always lie to."

In her mind's eye Docia saw things for the first time without her tinted glasses and real panic seized her. She fell upon her knees and clasped the nattily clad legs of her seducer.

"Oh Beau," she wept, struggling to hold him, as he, fearing for the creases in his trousers, struggled to free himself--"You said--you--you promise--"

"Oh, well, you ought not to have believed me--you ought to have known I didn't mean it. Anyway I'm not going to marry you, so what're you going to do? Do whatever you feel big enough to try--my shoulders are broad."

He left the house hating the two women bitterly, as only we hate those we have injured.

At the hotel, omitting mention of his shows of affection, his pleas, his solemn promises to Docia, he told the other waiters how that piece of the earth's refuse had tried to inveigle, to force him into a marriage. He enlarged upon his theme and told them all, in strict confidence, how she had been pursuing him all winter; how she had waited in ambush time and again and dragged him down by the lake and well, he was only human. It couldn't have happened with the *right* kind of a girl, and he thought too much of himself to marry any other than the country's best. The worst sin a woman could commit was to run after a man.

So the next day Eatonville knew; and the scourge of tongues was added to Docia's woes. Mrs. Boger and her daughter kept strictly indoors, suffering, weeping, growing bitter.

"Mommer, if he jus' hadn't tried to make me out a bad girl, I could look over the rest in time, mommer, but--but he tried to make out--ah--"

Docia broke down weeping again.

Drip, drip, drip, went her daughter's tears on the old woman's heart, each drop calcifying a little the fibers till at the end of four days the petrifying process was complete. Where once had been warm, pulsing flesh was now cold heavy stone that pulled down, pressing out normal life and bowing the head of her. The woman

died, and in that heavy cold stone a tiger, a female tiger--was cut by the chisel of shame.

She was ready to answer the question Beau had flung so scornfully at her old head: "Well, what are you going to do?"

Docia slept, huddled on the bed. A hot salt tear rose to Mrs. Boger's eyes and rolled heavily down the quivering nose. Must Docia awake always to that awful desolation? Robbed of *everything*, even faith? She knew then that the world's greatest crime is not murder--its most terrible punishment is meted to her of too much faith--too great a love.

She turned down the light and stepped into the street.

It was near midnight and the village slept. But she knew of one house where there would be a light; one pair of eyes still awake.

As she approached Blue Sink she all but turned back. It was a dark night but the lake shimmered and glowed like phosphorous near the shore. It seemed that figures moved about on the quiet surface. She remembered that folks said Blue Sink the bottomless was Morgan's graveyard. All Africa awoke in her blood.

A cold prickly feeling stole over her and stood her hair on end. Her feet grew heavy and her tongue dry and stiff.

In the swamp at the head of the lake, she saw Jack-O-Lanterns darting here and there and three hundred years of America passed like the mist of morning. Africa reached out its dark hand and claimed its own. Drums, tom,tom,tom,tom,tom,beat in her ears. Strange demons seized her. Witch doctors danced before her, laid hands upon her alternately freezing and burning her flesh. She cried out in formless terror more than once before she found herself within the house of Morgan.

She was not permitted to tell her story. She opened her mouth but the old man chewed a camphor leaf or two, spat into a small pail of sand and asked:

"How do yuh wanta kill 'im? By water, by a sharp edge, or a bullet?"

The old woman almost fell off of the chair in the amazement that he knew her mind. He merely chuckled a bit and handed her a drinking gourd.

"Dip up a teeny bit of water an' po' hit on de flo',- -by dat time you'll know."

She dipped the water out of a wooden pail and poured it upon the rough floor.

"Ah wanta shoot him, but how kin ah' 'thout . . .?"

"Looka heah" Morgan directed and pointed to a huge mirror--scarred--and dusty. He dusted its face carefully. "Look in dis glass 'shout turnin' yo' head an' when he comes, you shoot tuh kill. Take good aim!"

Both faced about and gazed hard into the mirror that reached from floor to ceiling. Morgan turned once to spit into the pail of sand. The mirror grew misty, darker, near the center, then Mrs. Boger saw Beau walk to the center of the mirror and stand looking at her, glaring and sneering. She all but fainted.

Morgan thrust the gun into her hand. She saw the expression on Beau Diddely's face change from scorn to fear and she found it in herself to laugh. "Take good aim," Morgan cautioned. "Yor cain't shoot but once."

She leveled the gun at the heart of the apparition in the glass and fired. It collapsed; the mirror grew misty again, then cleared. "You'll find things alright when you git home," Morgan said.

In horror she flung both money and gun at the old man who seized the money greedily, and she fled into the darkness, dreading nothing, thinking only of putting distance between her and the house of Morgan. The next day Eatonville was treated to another thrill.

It seemed that Beau Diddely, the darling of the ladies, was in the hotel yard making love to another chamber-maid. In order that she might fully appreciate what a great victory was hers, he was reciting the Conquest of Docia, how she loved him, pursued him, knelt down and kissed his feet, begging him to marry her,--when suddenly he stood up very straight, clasped his hand over his heart, grew rigid and fell dead.

The coroner's verdict was death from natural causes--heart failure. But they were mystified by what looked like a powder burned directly over the heart. Probably a cigarette burn.

But the Negroes knew instantly when they saw that mark, but everyone agreed that he got justice. Mrs. Boger and Docia moved to Jacksonville where she married well.

And the white folks never knew and would have laughed had anyone told them. He who sees only with the eyes is very blind.

Part I: Read and annotate

Part II: How does this story reflect the themes and ideas of the Harlem Renaissance? Use quotes to back up your answer.