

## THE COST OF SUGAR

*The Cost of Sugar is dedicated to Helen Gray.*

*Without her friendship, willingness and patience  
this book would never have been written.*

Cynthia McLeod

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**hoperoad** : London

Published by HopeRoad  
P O Box 55544  
Exhibition Road  
London SW7 2DB

[www.hoperoadpublishing.com](http://www.hoperoadpublishing.com)  
<http://twitter.com/hoperoadpublish>  
<http://hoperoadpublishing.wordpress.com>

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This edition first published in Great Britain in 2013 by HopeRoad

ISBN 978 1 908446 27 5

eISBN 978 1 908446 01 5

Printed and bound by  
Lightning Source

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Mrs. McLeod has deliberately referred to the original version in Sranan, which in this translated edition is indicated by footnotes. During the period of slavery in Suriname the slaves were forbidden to know or speak Dutch. People always addressed the slaves in Nengre (which was referred to by the Dutch as Negro-English). This language developed originally as a pidgin or contact language from the mingling of African languages, Portuguese and English. It became the native language of the slaves born in Suriname. The language changed its name gradually to Sranan-tongo, and more recently to Sranan. Outsiders have sometimes called the language taki-taki, but this name is never used by Surinamers. In present-day Suriname thirteen languages are spoken. Dutch is the official language and is used in educational establishments. It is also the native language of the middle and upper classes, of whatever race. Sranan is, however, the national language, the lingua franca, and the only language spoken by practically everyone. It may surprise English-speakers how much of the language can be understood with a little imagination, but as mentioned, one of the source languages was English. (This in itself might seem surprising, but Suriname was first settled by the English [via Barbados] between 1651 and 1667, the first of three short occupations in its history.)

Terms specific to Suriname have been explained in footnotes, but most are also collated in a glossary, which in some cases offers an indication of pronunciation. This is to be found at the end of the book.

Dear Reader,

The Cost of Sugar was first published on 28 October 1987 and the first day of sale was on 30 October 1987. I still remember that a colleague from the high school where I was teaching said to me a few days before the presentation, "If five hundred copies of a book are sold in Suriname, it will be a bestseller." When I asked her over what period of time, she answered, "Oh, that doesn't matter, just if five hundred copies are sold, because Suriname doesn't have a reading tradition."

I felt troubled and sorry for the publisher, who had printed 3000 books. I already envisaged piles of unsold copies of the book in the bookstore. The facts have proven the contrary. Within six weeks the first printing was sold out and many reprints followed. Then in October 1994 the book was discovered by Dutch publisher Kees de Bakker from uitgeverij Conserve who published the book in the Netherlands under licence. Immediately after that, a German edition followed. And today we present this special edition in English.

Who could have imagined this? Not me! Who could have imagined that this book would remain the best-selling book in Suriname all these years and also the best-sold book of a Surinamer abroad? And who today would dare to say that Suriname doesn't have a reading tradition?

The Surinamese community has embraced, cuddled and cherished this book, and this in particular proves that a book, a work, can have a certain value for a community that extends far beyond a literary and/or commercial value. And especially for this I wish to thank all readers in and outside Suriname. The expressions of appreciation that I have received in abundance over these many years have always been heart-warming and an incentive to continue writing.

To my surprise I was honoured by all the bookshops of Paramaribo, led by Sylva Koemar, who organized a big party in November 2007 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the publication of my book. It was a delightful evening.

In December 2011 the excellent theatre group 'Julius Leeft' made a theatre piece from 'Hoe duur was de Suiker, with music, songs, acting and dancing. It was a trilling experience to be in the audience and watch this. It was performed twice in the Amsterdamse Schouwburg with attendance of Prince and Princess Willem Alexander and Maxima. In July and August 2013 the performances were on Aruba and Curacao. In September 2013, the feature film, Hoe Duur Was De Suiker, directed by Jean van de Velde and producer Paul Voorthuysen, was released to celebrate the 150th anniversary since slavery was abolished in Surinam. I am also proud to say, The Cost of Sugar as well as a printed book, is now an e-book, both in English published by HopeRoad Publishing.

Thank you for your interest.

Cynthia McLeod, Paramaribo, September 2013

## CHAPTER I

### THE HÉBRON PLANTATION

Dawn is breaking on the Hébron Plantation, and while the eastern sky is blushing at the caress of the rising sun, the doors of the slave huts begin to open one by one, and small fires can be seen under their lean-to shelters. Faya watra is being made: hot water into which a shoot of molasses is stirred. Here and there an appetizing scent arises from a cooking pot, signalling the presence of an aniseed leaf or some herbs in the water.

Now, outside all the huts, men, women and children are standing, some talking, some just looking around. Eventually they make their way to the southern edge of the plantation, where a canal has been dug at right-angles to the river, serving for both the supply and the drainage of water. Alongside the boathouse, where the river shore slopes gently, they enter the water to bathe: the adults more serious, the children laughing gaily and splashing each other until they're wet through. With loincloths slung around their wet bodies they return to the huts, mostly in small groups, the children following on, naked. Now it's time to drink the faya watra. The leftovers from the previous evening's meal serve as breakfast.

In the hut where the fifteen-year-old Amimba is living with her mother, brothers and sisters, Mama Leida throws a handful of dried herbs into a gourd and pours boiling water over them. This is a drink for Amimba; as happens every month, she is suffering terrible abdominal pains. She has lain on her mat moaning and groaning the whole night through, tossing and turning, now lying, now sitting up. Now she is sleeping a little. Luckily. But Mama Leida herself has hardly caught a wink of sleep the past night.

After the faya watra and breakfast, people begin drifting in

the direction of the warehouse, the occasional woman breast-feeding a baby, another with a baby already tied to her back. The warehouse doors are still closed, but it isn't long before the white overseer, Masra<sup>1</sup> Mekers, arrives with the keys. The rations for the evening are now distributed to each family head, and instructions are given for the day's work.

But first the roll-call. Where's Kofi? Oh yes, he has a sprained ankle and won't be going onto the land but will have to work in the carpenter's shop. Amimba with stomach-ache? What, again! No messing about! Come here and now, or be fetched with a whip. Why doesn't Afi have her baby with her? He was sick the whole night long with fever. Afi would prefer to leave him with the nurse today. She'll give him a herbal bath for the fever. Tenu? Where's Tenu? Come here! Basya<sup>2</sup> – five lashes of the whip for Tenu, thirteen years old, who sees to the chickens. He has stolen eggs. There were six too few yesterday, and the empty shells were still lying next to the chicken-run. Tenu protests vehemently. It's a lie; he's stolen no eggs. Didn't masra know that a huge sapakara<sup>3</sup> has been lurking around and has stolen the eggs? If he, Tenu, had indeed stolen eggs, then he wouldn't have been so stupid as to leave the empty shells lying around near the run, now would he! Even so, five lashes for Tenu! For isn't it his job to look after the chickens? How had a sapakara managed to steal six eggs if Tenu was there? Of course: because Tenu was not there! Hadn't he spent half the day yesterday fishing in the creek? Five lashes! And this evening not a single egg missing and Tenu to present the dead sapakara! Five lashes, too, for Kobi, a year older than Tenu and helping Felix look after the horses, mules and cows in the stalls. Kobi cut too little grass for the animals yesterday. And no wonder: he was sitting fishing at the water's edge along with Tenu! Five lashes, and this evening a double portion of grass to have been cut. That was all.

Once the basya has delivered the lashes the slaves can de-

1 Mister.

2 Negro foreman (himself a slave).

3 A large type of iguana that lives on eggs and small animals.



part. And after the whip has descended on Tenu and Kobi's slender, bare backs and the two boys stumble off tearfully to their workplaces, the group, about sixty strong, disperses. The field group, about forty in number, leaves first. This group begins to move off silently, most of the slaves chewing on an alanga tiki<sup>4</sup>. Two of them are carrying a bunch of bananas on their heads, another a bundle of various root crops for the meal to be cooked in the fields, in two huge iron pots. The basya, with a whip in one hand and a machete in the other, follows at the rear. Another group, comprising six slaves, goes to the sugar mill, a few others to the shed where the sugar is boiled up with water. Yet another group is off to the carpentry shop, two to the boat house, and two of the more elderly to the grounds around the plantation house to ensure, armed with rake, hoe and watering can, that everything there is neat and tidy. Five-or-so women and girls go towards this white house, too, as well as the domestic slaves and the errand boys, and Sydni, the master's personal slave. The house still presents a rather sleepy prospect, its doors and windows all closed. The overseer, Mekers, goes first to his own house, where his slave-girl has breakfast waiting.

Even before he arrives he is greeted by the mouth-watering odour of fried eggs and freshly made coffee from the laid table. A new day has dawned. For the slaves, a new day of hard labour, a new day in the endless progression of days devoid of the faintest ray of hope.

## ELZA

At the front of the splendid Great House, however, not all windows are still closed. An upstairs window is open, and there stands Elza, seventeen years old. She is gazing out over the green lawn that extends from the front of the house right down to the edge of the wide, lazy Suriname River. A lovely morning, the beginning of a good day. Today, 11 October 1765, the family will travel to Joden<sup>5</sup>-Savanna for grandma's

4 A twig from a citrus tree.

5 Jews.

sixty-fifth birthday. That will be tomorrow, the twelfth of October and at the same time the eightieth anniversary of the synagogue at Joden-Savanna.

Grandma had always been proud that she had been born on 12 October 1700, the day on which the Beracha Ve Shalom (Blessing and Peace) Synagogue in her birthplace in Suriname was fifteen years old. Elza had been looking forward to the coming two weeks. Not so much because of grandma, but for the stay itself and all the parties there would be. Many friends and acquaintances would be there, and many a tent boat had recently sailed by. Sometimes the company had stopped off for a few hours at Hébron Plantation, or had even stayed overnight, since the plantation lay precisely half way between Paramaribo and Joden-Savanna and it was sometimes necessary to wait for high tide. The whole Jewish community in Suriname was in the habit of travelling to Joden-Savanna for a few days around high days and holidays. This year the Feast of Tabernacles fell in the same week as grandma's birthday. The parties were always enjoyable, even though Elza realized that her situation was rather different, having a Jewish father and a Jewish name, but not herself being Jewish. And there were enough types who were not always that congenial towards her. She often felt a sense of admiration for her father when she considered that he had managed twenty-five years ago to act against his mother's will. Of course, she wasn't born then, not by a long chalk, but she had heard the tales often enough, especially from Ashana, her mother's personal slave.

Levi Fernandez, now forty-five years old, had from the age of twelve, when his father died, been raised single-handedly by his strict mother. She ran the Hébron Plantation on her own, and decided and organized everything. She had everything and everybody beautifully under control: the plantation, the household, the slaves, her son ... Or at least that's what she thought, until he refused to marry Rachel Mozes de Meza, the Jewish girl whom it was assumed, from the very moment of her birth, would be Levi's wife. The

twenty-year-old Levi had confronted his mother like a fiery young stallion. No way was he going to marry Rachel, the daughter of his mother's bosom friend, who was four years younger than he and whom he had known from childhood. He would not marry her because he was fond of someone else: the seventeen-year-old Elizabeth Smeets, daughter of an army officer, only two years in the colony, without money, without prospects and above all a Christian. That was the first time that Widow Fernandez failed to impose her will on her son. Immediately after Levi had married his Elizabeth, his mother had moved out, returning to Joden-Savanna, her birthplace. She left the Hébron Plantation, to which her son had been legally entitled since his eighteenth year ... 'Because it was not her intention to live under the same roof with that Christian person'.

It was nine years before she returned to the plantation, and that was on the occasion of the burial of her daughter-in-law Elizabeth. She had died a few days after the birth of her daughter, who received her name from Elizabeth, and was accordingly called Elza. Had the widow Fernandez perhaps hoped and believed that she might take up the reins of the Hébron Plantation again? Had she perhaps imagined herself holding sway over the slaves, her household, her son, the children, David, then eight, six-year-old Jonathan and baby Elza? That was, however, not to be. Levi treated his mother with politeness and propriety, but the plantation was his and his domineering mother could remain at Joden-Savanna. The children were well cared for by Ashana, Elizabeth's personal slave, and by Ashana's daughter, the eighteen-year-old Maisa. When Elizabeth died, Maisa was just starting to breast-feed her second son and so it was no problem to take on the *misi's*<sup>6</sup> newborn daughter, too. And so it was that the Hébron Plantation remained without a mistress for a good seven years, but with Ashana and Maisa there to look after everything.

Until in 1754 the second son, Jonathan, died at the age of

6 Mistress.

twelve. Such an insignificant mishap, a sharp, pointed stick in his foot. But it turned into something terrible, and Jonathan passed away. And Grandma Fernandez could claim that she had always thought something like that would happen. The children, after all, were being brought up by slaves, were running around the grounds barefooted, playing in the creeks, climbing trees, in short behaving not at all like neat and tidy, white plantation children. But what could you expect if slave women ruled the roost. They had no way of knowing how things should be in a white family. So Jonathan's death was his father Levi's fault.

Did Pa Levi give in to all these reproaches? Did he perhaps have real feelings of guilt? Be that as it may, a few months after Jonathan's death he married Rachel, the woman he should have married fifteen years earlier and who herself was now the widow of A'haron and had three daughters. And so it was that Aunt Rachel moved onto the Hébron Plantation along with daughters Esther, Rebecca and Sarith. Sarith and Elza were about the same age, and it was wonderful for the seven-year-old daughter of the house to enjoy the company of someone of the same age. And now Elza could hardly remember the time before Sarith.

Elza looked out of her window and breathed in the fresh morning air. How beautiful and fresh everything looked from the dew. In a few hours' time it would be dusty. It was the dry season and there had been no rain for three weeks now. Luckily the lawn was still green, and would remain so, for lo and behold there was the elderly slave Kwasi, already busy watering the lawn with buckets and watering cans. He walked to the jetty, lowering the bucket into the river and filling the watering cans from it. Elza turned round and called softly, "Sarith, Sarith, are you awake?"

"Hmmm, no, yes, oh Elza, let me sleep on a bit more," came Sarith's voice from a bed on the other side of the room. Sarith turned her back towards Elza and pulled the sheet over her head.

Soft footsteps in the corridor and a modest knock on the door.

“Yes, come on, Maisa, I’ve been up for ages.”

Maisa entered with a tray with two cups of cocoa in one hand and a bucket of water in the other.

“O Maisa, isn’t it a lovely day today?”

“Yes misi,” answered Maisa with a smile while she placed the tray on the table and filled the water jugs on the two washstands with water. She then went to the cupboard and took out a light-green muslin dress and asked, “Will misi be wearing this?”<sup>7</sup>

A few moments later Elza had freshened up and was sitting on her bed with Maisa kneeling before her, drawing on her stockings one by one after having put her pantaloons on for her. Thin white cotton down to the ankles, with lace at the bottom by the legs. Thereafter a white cotton batiste blouse and two underskirts. Another discreet knock on the door. Upon hearing a “Yes” from Elza, a beautiful brown girl came in. This was Mini-mini, the fifteen-year-old slave-girl who would have to dress Sarith.

Elza peered at the bed, where there was still no sign of movement, and said, “Sarith, get up now: you know that papa wants us ready in time.”

“Oh, blow – all this moaning and nagging, too.”

Upon which the sheets were pulled aside in one single jerk and landed on the floor, and Sarith strode angrily towards the small room where the chamber pots stood. Elza and Maisa exchanged fleeting but meaningful glances and the timid Mini-mini remained standing near the wall while her head dropped and she shuffled submissively over the floor. Elza sighed. Sarith was in a bad mood again, as she had so often been of late. What was up with Sarith? In the past she told her everything, but now no more. But so be it, she wasn’t going to let it worry her. Maisa motioned to Elza to sit down and she lit a candle on the table. Then she held a small curling iron in the flame and began carefully to curl her mistress’ hair.

When Elza went into the dining room downstairs a little later, only her father was sitting at the breakfast table.

7 “Misi o weri disi?”

“Good morning, papa.”

“Good morning, dear little miss; are you ready? We’ll be leaving the moment the tide is right, and that’s in three-quarters of an hour.”

The elderly slave woman Ashana entered with a plate bearing freshly fried meat, eggs and bread. She set everything down in front of Elza and remarked with an approving nod, “Oh Misi Elza, aren’t you looking pretty!”<sup>8</sup>

Soft footsteps could be heard, and Rebecca now came in from the rear veranda. Rebecca, twenty-one, was Aunt Rachel’s second daughter. She was deaf. At the age of nine she had contracted typhoid fever. She had survived this, but since then could hardly hear anything. She could still speak, but in a monotone, and she spoke very little. Rebecca lived her own private life, quiet, withdrawn, mostly in her room, where she read, painted, drew and made dolls. Lovely dolls. Everyone who saw them said she could start a business with them. Just now and then Rebecca made a doll to order and accepted some money for it, but she often gave them as presents to people she knew and most of the dolls were simply displayed in her room. People didn’t bother much with Rebecca. She hardly ever saw her mother and she said only what was really necessary to her sister Sarith and her stepsister Elza. The only people she did talk with were her stepfather Levi and her slave-girl Caro. When the widow Rachel A’haron had moved to Hébron Plantation ten years earlier she had brought with her a number of slaves: Kwasiba and her two daughters Caro and Mini-mini, who were at that time eight and five years old, and in addition her own personal slave-girl, Leida. Caro was Rebecca’s slave-girl. She followed her mistress everywhere and helped with washing paintbrushes, mixing paint, sewing dolls’ clothes and so forth. The fifteen-year-old Mini-mini was Kwasiba’s pride and joy. Obviously of mixed blood, Kwasiba had never revealed who Mini-mini’s father was, but people suspected that it must have been Rachel’s late husband Jacob A’haron

8 “Ai misi Elza, yu moi baya!”

or his son Ishaak. In any event, Mini-mini had brown skin, slightly curled hair, a slender face and large, dark eyes. Mini-mini was Sarith's slave-girl, and no-one seeing them together could avoid the impression that there was a striking resemblance in face and figure.

Father Levi smiled at Rebecca as she took her place at the table. "Ready for the trip?" he asked, exaggerating the movement of his lips.

Rebecca shook her head. "I'm not going."

"Oh come, why not?" asked Pa Levi.

Something like "Don't want to" sounded as Rebecca shook her head again. Elza looked at Rebecca. She could well understand that Rebecca didn't feel like going. Why would a deaf person want to go to a party that comprised mainly chatting, gossiping and playing music? She would be able to follow nothing and would just end up feeling lonely. She often felt sorry for Rebecca; what could her future be? Even now, at twenty-one, she was an old spinster, and was destined to remain so for ever, for who would marry a deaf woman? Above all, she hardly ever encountered a young man.

Now from the rear veranda came Aunt Rachel's voice asking Maisa and Kwasiba if they had looked after everything for the misses. Entering the dining room, Rachel asked immediately, "Where's Sarith?"

"Oh, she'll be here," answered Elza. Whatever Sarith might do, Rachel never got angry with her, for she was her mother's darling. Elza had often thought that this was due to Aunt Rachel's surprise at having borne such a beautiful daughter. And now Sarith came dashing down the stairs. She had some rouge on her cheeks and looked really lovely in her light-yellow dress. The naturally black curls danced around her ears, but with an angry look she said to her mother, "That stupid Mini-mini: I told her to wash my pink gown, but she hasn't done it and now I can't wear it."

"You have plenty of others," replied her mother.

"Yes, but I wanted to put that one on."

And then impatiently to Kwasiba:

“I don’t want that egg; take it away. I want pancakes.”

“Yes misi,” said Kwasiba, and she hurried off to the kitchen to tell Ashana that Misi Sarith wanted pancakes, not an egg. Pa Levi had in the meantime left the table and had gone to the waterside to see whether the boat was ready and the luggage properly loaded.

Elza got up and went to the rear veranda. She wanted to say farewell to Ashana before they departed. Standing on the veranda, she looked towards the outside kitchen at the back of the grounds where the cook was hastily making pancakes for Sarith. She wondered again what it was that was making Sarith so cross and bad-tempered lately. When a little later Kwasiba came towards the house with a plate of pancakes, Ashana emerged from the kitchen.

“Ashana, I wanted to say goodbye,” called Elza. Ashana hurried to the veranda.

“Look after yourself well now, misi, I’ll miss you.”<sup>9</sup>

“Oh, it’s only a few days, Ashana.”

“Take good care of your father: I hope he won’t quarrel with that old woman.”<sup>10</sup>

Elza laughed. Just like Ashana, she knew that no-one could prevent grandma using her sharp tongue. But as always, papa would survive.

“I’ll have Koki prepare a tasty banana soup when my misi returns,”<sup>11</sup> Ashana continued.

“Very good, Ashana, keep well,” and Elza nodded to Ashana with a smile. At the door Elza turned for a moment and added, “Look after Misi Rebecca, won’t you!”<sup>12</sup>

“Yes misi,” replied Ashana. She would look after Rebecca; she liked her a lot. It was a very different story with Misi Rachel and Misi Sarith. As far as Ashana was concerned they could stay away for ever.

9 “Ai misi, luku bun yere, m’o firi mankeri fa mi misi n’o de.”

10 “Luku yu p’pa yere, no meki a feti nanga a granmisi.”

11 “M’o meki Koki bori wan switi griti bana gi mi misi t’ai kon baka.”

12 “Sorgu misi Rebecca bun.”



## SARITH

The tent boat glided slowly over the Suriname River, powered by a crew of eight oarsmen. Under the canvas roof sat Uncle Levi, mother Rachel, Elza and Sarith. Behind Rachel, Kwasi and Mini-mini were sitting, and in front of Elza and Sarith sat Maisa. Sydni, Uncle Levi's personal slave, sat near the stern of the boat and now and then conversed softly with Kofi, who was seated right at the back, steering the boat.

Sarith sat with her chin in her hands, gazing ahead. In fact, she had said nothing since their departure. Now and then Elza said something to Maisa or her father, and she occasionally cast a sideward glance towards Sarith, but she looked so cross that Elza found it better not to speak to her.

When Elza had called that morning, "Sarith, are you awake?" Sarith had replied, "Let me sleep on a bit more." She didn't want to sleep, however – she had long been awake – but she did want to think about what she would do today. She must get to speak to Nathan alone, but that would not be easy, since he would of course be in the constant company of his betrothed Leah, that pale, puny Leah. What was she in comparison with her, Sarith? She was a hundred times more beautiful than Leah. Oh yes, she was quite aware of that: she was beautiful, far more beautiful than all the young girls she knew. Everyone said it, and she knew from the way all the men, young and old, looked at her.

Nathan, the yellow-belly, was engaged to Leah after all. And again Sarith recalled what had happened rather more than a month ago. There had been a huge party at the Eden Plantation, near Paramaribo. That was the plantation belonging to Nathan's parents. The occasion was the Bar Mitzvah of the youngest son, the thirteen-year-old Joshua, Nathan's youngest brother. Many guests had lodged there for a week or more: the older couples in the plantation house, the young ladies with their slave-girls in the unoccupied overseer's lodge, and the young gentlemen in a warehouse that had been refitted especially for the occasion. The nineteen-year-old Nathan, the oldest son, had behaved as a real host and had made no secret of his amorous feelings

towards Sarith. He and Sarith had spent several afternoons together in his room while everyone was resting. Many a time they had passionately kissed and hugged, and each time they both looked forward to the next moment they could be together. Nathan adored her. Infatuated, he had told her time upon time how much he loved her and that he wanted no-one else but her. But for the moment they would have to keep their liaison a secret, for it had already been decided by his parents that he should marry Leah Nassy. Sarith would have to grant him some time, and then he would make it clear to his parents that he could not marry Leah because he was in love with Sarith.

And Sarith had indeed given nothing away. With a surreptitious smile she had listened to the chatter of the other girls, especially Leah, and had seen how she blushed every time Nathan's name was mentioned. Children, they were all just children, and even Elza her stepsister was really just such a child. Now she, Sarith, knew much more about life. Nathan was not the first with whom she had played the game of love. From the age of thirteen she had lived for two years in the town<sup>13</sup> with Elza at the house of their sister, Esther. And then she had become friends with Charles van Henegouwen, the brother of one of her classmates at the French School. Many were the afternoons she had spent in the company of Charles. When his parents were out visiting, she and Charles had always managed to arrange to be alone in the house. Until his parents had found out, probably given away by one of the slave-girls. The result was armageddon. Esther was livid and had summoned mama. Sarith and Elza had to return immediately to the plantation and Charles was sent to Holland by his parents. Oh, she understood perfectly well why. She was a Jewess and Charles was not. Many well-to-do Christian plantation owners wanted as little as possible to do with Jews, as if they were an inferior type of person. Ridiculous: they were all whites, after all!

Once back at the plantation, mama had delivered a com-

13 Paramaribo, which is often referred to as 'the town'.

plete sermon and had tried to find out exactly what had been going on between her and Charles, but Sarith wasn't stupid enough to tell all. She could hardly admit to her mother that they had slept together on at least six occasions, and so she had said that they had just kissed. Mama had heaved a sigh and had said that a girl could never be too careful, and must absolutely not do anything stupid. Oh yes, that is how it was: men and boys could do anything and everything, but girls could do nothing. They had to take their place in the marriage bed as innocent and naïve angels.

After Charles there had been a young captain, who had been ordered to inspect a military post in the hinterland of Joden-Savanna. He had fallen ill there and had been taken to Joden-Savanna. A whole month he had lain there sick in her grandparents' house. During that period she and Elza had by chance lodged at Joden-Savanna for two weeks. At first they had both stayed with Grandma Fernandez, because Sarith's own grandmother Jezebel would not have two young girls sleeping in her house while the captain was lying there sick. But when the captain was beginning to recover, Sarith had visited him regularly and what in fact had begun as a bit of fun had ended as a full-blown love scene. Just once, for the captain had said afterwards that he regretted what had happened. He was married, had a wife and children, and he asked Sarith to forgive and forget him.

And a little more than a month ago it was Nathan. Nathan, who had told her that he would explain to his parents why he could not marry Leah. Two weeks earlier Uncle Levi had happened to be visiting Paramaribo for a few days and returned from town with the news that Nathan was officially engaged to Leah Nassy. Leah's parents had given an intimate dinner party for the family and a few friends. Since Uncle Levi was in town, he was also one of the guests, along with Sarith's sister Esther and brother-in-law Jacob. It would not be a long engagement, for Nathan and Leah would marry within two months. How furious Sarith was upon hearing all this! She had stormed to her room, had wept, smashed

things, thrown the bedding on the floor, stamped with rage. In short, she was livid, and Mini-mini was more than once the unfortunate who suffered at first hand. Everything the slave-girl did in those days was wrong, and on several occasions she had suffered a resounding thump on her mistress. Amazed, Elza had asked time and again what was the matter, but each time Sarith had sullenly replied, "Nothing," or, "It's none of your business."

Now she would be seeing Nathan in a few hours' time, and then everything would turn out all right, because she would demand of him that he, there at Joden-Savanna, tell his family and everyone else that he loved her, Sarith. And he would do what she said, because he loved her. He simply had to do it, and that stupid, plain Leah would get a nasty surprise and perhaps burst into tears and faint. A pity that there was no chance in Suriname to elope with someone. In another country, in Europe for instance, you could run off, in a carriage or on a horse, far away to another town and get married there. But here, where could you go? Except for the town and the plantations it was all jungle. Scary jungle with dangerous wild animals and Maroons – escaped slaves who murdered white people.<sup>14</sup> But all right, once Nathan saw her he would of course be so in love with her that he would do what she said and everything would turn out as it should. That was the reason she had really wanted to put her pink dress on that morning. Mini-mini must wash that dress as soon as they landed at Joden-Savanna, and then she could wear it tomorrow, on the feast-day itself.

When, some hours later, the boat moored at the jetty at Joden-Savanna and the company was being welcomed by the many guests who were already there, Sarith looked around straightaway to see whether she could see Nathan. But she saw neither him nor Leah. Leah's parents she did see, and they told her enthusiastically that Leah together with Nathan would arrive only the next day, since they had stopped off at Rama Plantation and would spend the night there.

14 In Suriname the term Marron is used.

Rama was scarcely an hour away from Joden-Savanna, and a cousin of Nathan's was the owner there. Leah and Nathan would be at Joden-Savanna the next day well before the start of the service in the synagogue. Until that time, Sarith would just have to be patient. Now, at any rate that gave her time to think over carefully everything she would say to Nathan.

### JODEN-SAVANNA

When the boat bearing Nathan and Leah moored at the jetty at around 9 o'clock the next morning, there turned out to be other guests on it: Nathan's cousin, who was the owner of the Rama Plantation, and Rutger le Chasseur, a young man who had been in the colony only a few weeks, appointed as assistant-administrator for a well-known Amsterdam bank. Sarith was dressed in her beautiful pink gown, pink slippers of shiny satin on her feet. When a surprised Elza had seen Mini-mini carefully lowering the exquisite gown over Sarith's head early that morning, she had asked her stepsister whether it would not be better to let the dress hang ready for the ball that evening. But Sarith had retorted with a short, "No," and then asked, "Are you coming along to the waterfront?" When the boat moored, Sarith was standing there provocatively on the very end of the jetty. Nathan had turned extremely red when he saw her standing there, but Sarith had no chance to talk with him. Leah's parents herded the complete company along, first to the house where they would be staying and then to the synagogue. In the synagogue there was not the slightest chance for Sarith to exchange a single word with Nathan, for the women and men sat in separate sections to follow the service.

### ELZA

Since all the Jews had gone into the synagogue, Elza just wandered around outside. She had just decided to go and sit on the front veranda of her grandmother's house when suddenly an unfamiliar man stood before her.

"Shouldn't you be inside, Miss, uh ..."

“Fernandez,” said Elza, “I am Elza Fernandez, and no, I don’t belong there, I’m not a Jew, and you are apparently also not Jewish.”

“No, indeed, me neither, but you do have a Jewish name, don’t you?”

“Yes, that’s because my father is Jewish but my mother is not, and as you may know, under Jewish law only children of a Jewish mother are regarded as being Jewish.”

“Well I never,” the young man continued, “I had never expected to find something as enlightened as a mixed marriage in this far-off Suriname.”

“Maybe you’ll come across a lot more enlightenment during your time here, Mister ...”

“Le Chasseur, Rutger le Chasseur is my name; please excuse me for not having introduced myself earlier.”

“How long have you been in the colony?” asked Elza.

“Oh, not so long, about three months.”

“And how has it been so far?”

“Hot, very hot,” answered Rutger. Elza laughed,

“Oh yes, these past months are usually the hottest of the year, though at Joden-Savanna it’s usually not too bad. It’s higher than Paramaribo, you see.”

“Oh yes, I have noticed that. And how do I find it for the rest? Beautiful! Paramaribo is such a lovely, bright town, not large, but pretty, fresh and clean. I’m already beginning to feel a bit at home. Shall we wander down to the river?”

Together they walked and he told Elza how he had come to Suriname as assistant-administrator. His great-uncle, who was the owner of a bank in Amsterdam and also of several plantations in Suriname and Berbice<sup>15</sup>, had decreed that he, Rutger, should learn the trade of administrator. When Elza remarked that that uncle must be extremely wealthy, Rutger had laughed and confirmed that his great-uncle was indeed very rich. He, Rutger, belonged to the poor branch of the family and was also no heir, since great-uncle had four daughters. His grandmother, who was a sister of his great-

15 Now a region of Guyana.

uncle, had been married to an exiled Huguenot, which explained his French surname.

Elza in turn recounted how she lived on the Hébron Plantation together with her father, stepmother Rachel and step-sisters Rebecca and Sarith. Her own brother David was already married and had a plantation on the Para River.

“Was that pretty girl who stood next to you on the jetty one of the stepsisters?”

“Yes, that was Sarith,” said Elza.

“What a pretty girl that was,” remarked Rutger. Elza nodded. Yes, Sarith was certainly pretty. Everyone was always saying that. Everywhere they went it was Sarith who was noticed first, and time and time again it was remarked how attractive she was. Yesterday, when they had arrived, everyone had yet again admired her beauty. Aunt Jezebel, Sarith’s grandmother, had said this on many occasions to grandma; Aunt Sarah, Aunt Rachel’s sister, had mentioned it, and Aunt Rachel beamed with pride every time she heard how beautiful everyone found her youngest daughter. The eyes of all the men beheld Sarith with wonder, and one of the older ladies had remarked that Sarith was already fully a young lady, while Elza, of the same age, was still only a girl.

“Do you come to Joden-Savanna very often?” Rutger was asking.

“Oh, at least once a year. It’s my grandmother’s birthday today, and it’s important to her that everyone knows that she and the synagogue share the same birthday, and very often this coincides with the Feast of Tabernacles, you see. And so it goes.”

“And do you always have to wait outside when there’s a service in the synagogue?” Rutger repeated.

“Yes, always, but it really doesn’t matter,” answered Elza. “We ourselves have been baptized as Lutherans, because my mother was Lutheran, and as children Pa always dropped us off in the town at Christmas, to stay with our grandfather, our mother’s father. But Grandfather died five years ago, and since then we’ve never been in the church in Paramaribo at Christmas.”

“But isn’t it difficult being Jewish as well as Christian?” asked Rutger admiringly.

“Oh, all that fuss about nothing. I think that it doesn’t matter to God whether people are Jewish or Protestant or Catholic as long as they lead a good life and do no harm to other people.”

“What a wise and well-considered remark for a young girl,” said Rutger, looking at her amusedly.

“Are wise remarks always reserved for men and old women, then?” asked Elza.

“Of course not, but you don’t fit in so well with the young ladies,” replied Rutger.

“At least, the men think that,” said Elza sharply.

Now Rutger laughed out loud: “Miss Elza, I think you’re exceptionally quick-witted.”

As they walked back, Elza showed him how the village was constructed, as a square with four streets across. The houses in the corners of this square were large and comfortable, the others sometimes simpler, but everything was very attractive. Most of the houses had gardens on the slopes. And in the middle of all this, the lovely synagogue, built of bricks, about thirty metres long, fourteen metres wide and eleven metres high. If possible, she would let him look inside later. There was a beautifully decorated ceiling and a huge cedarwood ark with lovely carvings in which the Torah scrolls were kept. Silver chandeliers, large candelabra and various candlesticks.

Jews and gentiles were in agreement: this synagogue was one of Suriname’s real gems. It was a pity, however, that many rich Jews had left or now lived elsewhere on plantations, whereby Joden-Savanna had gone into steep decline and was inhabited mainly by the elderly such as her grandmother and Aunt Rachel’s parents.

Near the synagogue was the great tabernacle. A little further along the valley a few smaller huts had been built by men who appreciated having their own tabernacle.

Once the service had finished, everyone left the synagogue and went to sit on benches at long tables that had been set up



in the hut. This was the high point of the Feast of Tabernacles. Three huge, round loaves, baked specially for the occasion, lay on the table. The rabbi said a prayer, broke the bread and distributed it among those present, after which the wine was poured and distributed.

After this traditional ceremony, dishes were brought by the slave-boys and slave-girls from the houses and the feast could begin. Rutger had as a matter of course come to sit next to Elza, and when father Levi had taken a place at the same table and had made Rutger's acquaintance, a congenial round of conversation arose among all those seated there. Elza looked around once to see where Sarith was, but she wasn't at any of the tables. Was she perhaps still busy changing? She really didn't know what the matter was with Sarith, but, all right, perhaps she didn't feel like eating at the moment and would come along later.

The conversation at the table was not always congenial, for there soon arose talk of the colony's problems. The attacks by the escapees. Only recently they had raided several plantations. They had made it as far as the Temptatie, where they had killed the Jewish owner and his wife, as well as the overseer. They had freed the slaves, who had immediately joined them, and they had set the plantation house on fire as well as the sugarcane in the field.

Some weeks earlier they had raided the Jukemombo Plantation on the Boven<sup>16</sup>-Commewijne River. The owner, Master Biertempel, was away at that moment. His wife was murdered and his three children were wounded. The raiders had taken everything, even the children's clothes. When the father had hastened back home the following day, he had found his children, half-naked, weeping over their mother's corpse. The colonists were now well and truly frightened. A stop would have to be put to this!

Rutger remarked that in his opinion it would be better for the government to make peace with the Maroons and not

16 Upper.

persecute them any longer. Suriname was so large, and nobody used the hinterland. That could be the free negroes domain. Many of the guests turned on Rutger. He was still new in the colony and didn't know what he was talking about. The government had already made peace with the bush-negroes. Some years ago there had been a huge fuss because the government had made peace with the escapees on the Boven-Suriname River. Did Rutger perhaps think that peace must be made every time a wild group appeared in the hinterland? Then you could just keep on doing that and very soon the whole of Suriname would be portioned off to those devil's children.

A corpulent woman in a dress of black silk declared that she believed that an uprising wasn't far off. Everyone could surely remember the terrible uprising in Berbice a few years ago. Well, they could expect something like that here. An uprising in which all the whites would be murdered or forced into slavery by the negroes.

"Would it not then be better if all slave owners treated their slaves well?" Rutger asked, "Without the terrible punishments that are handed out. Is it not the fear of these brutalities, such as being hung on a meat hook, a hand or a foot being hacked off, a savage beating, burning alive, that makes slaves run away?"

Pa Levi nodded in agreement when Rutger made this remark, but most of the guests at the table laughed heartily. Rutger really was a naïve newcomer. Punishment was the only way to treat slaves: they were stupid and lazy. If you didn't terrify them with heavy and cruel punishment, they would get the idea that they could do what they liked. And in any case, were they not created by our Lord to sweat and toil for the whites? Rutger wanted to remark that he would gladly like to hear how it was so unequivocally known that negroes had been created to this end, but Elza whispered to him, "Oh, Rutger, say nothing now. These folks are real fanatics. You'll fall so out of grace with them if you share your opinion that slaves must be treated well."

So Rutger had said nothing further. He was after all a guest there.

## SARITH

But Sarith was not resting in her grandparents' house. She had seized an opportunity that had presented itself as everyone was leaving the synagogue, had sidled up to Nathan and said, "Come now, I must talk to you."

"Must that be now?" Nathan had asked apprehensively.

"Yes, now," Sarith replied, "And if you don't come this minute, I will scream, and I will do it right here and loudly."

Nathan then told Leah that she should carry on to the tabernacle because he had to go and fetch something, and he walked off in the other direction with Sarith, to the back of her grandparents' house where the garden overlooked the valley.

"Nathan, you said that you loved me! I was really the one you wanted to marry. And then I suddenly hear that you are engaged to Leah. How can you, Nathan?" Sarith almost stumbled over her words, so quickly did she utter them.

"Oh, Sarith, Sarith." Nathan held both her hands. "I really do love you, but I have no choice, don't you see. This was decided long ago by my parents."

"You knew that then, but you would explain everything, that's what you said."

"It simply cannot be, Sarith, really not. My father is heavily in debt. He could lose the plantation. There are another three children after me, and Leah is an only child and the heiress, and that plantation is so huge and, uh ..."

"So it's about the money. I should have known." Sarith pulled her hands away. "But still you loved me. Have you forgotten what happened between us?"

"No, Sarith, no, I shall never forget that. I shall keep it in my heart as my most cherished memory."

"That's a lot of good to me, isn't it," said Sarith cynically.

"Oh Sarith, you just have to understand. A person doesn't always marry the one he or she really loves."

Nathan looked at her and wanted to stroke her cheek, but she knocked his hand aside and said, "What if I were pregnant now? What if I were to tell everyone here what has happened between us?"

“Oh no, Sarith, no, you mustn’t do that. Everyone would ... everyone would think so badly of you.”

“Of me, eh? Of me?” Now Sarith was screaming. “Of me, not of you, eh? You coward. Oh you vile, vile coward. I hate you!”

“Sarith, calm down.”

Nathan wanted to take hold of her hand. He hesitated, however. This was a very different Sarith from the sweet, cooing young thing he had had in his bed. This petite ball of fire scared him. She knocked his hand aside and before he knew it she had slapped his face hard, screaming, “Don’t you dare touch me, you coward! I hate you! Leave me – go away, go to your Leah!”

She turned and ran off through the back door of her grandparents’ house. Nathan remained a while, pensively rubbing his cheek, before returning slowly to where the guests were at table.

The tears rolled over Sarith’s cheeks as she stormed upstairs and threw herself on a bed in one of the bedrooms, sobbing uncontrollably, her head pounding the pillow. But wait ... she would have Nathan. She would let him see how all the men wanted her. She would show him, really show him. She called to one of her grandmother’s slaves, since she didn’t know where Mini-mini was, and ordered her to fetch a basin of cold water so that she could freshen up.

When Sarith went and sat at the long table a quarter of an hour later, there was no trace of what had just happened. She was exceptionally happy, joked and laughed with everyone and pouted and flirted with all the men, young and old. Every time her laugh rang out she saw Nathan looking her way, embarrassed or concerned, but she pretended not to notice him. Could he not see how charmed all the men were with her? During the afternoon all the ladies went to have a rest. Some men also rested, but many remained sitting in the shade of the large trees, or had slave-boys hang hammocks up, and then chatted, smoked and drank rum punch. Sarith did not go to rest with the other ladies, but remained in the company of the men and chatted nineteen to the dozen while

she sat, now with the one, now with the other, briefly in a hammock and even taking a sip from some glass or other.

In the evening a ball was held. The estate was decorated with Chinese-style lanterns, all alight, and with the ladies in their wonderful evening gowns and the men in their evening suits the evening took on a most festive air. Elza danced and chatted mainly with Rutger. Dressing for the ball, Elza had told Sarith with a blush that the new assistant administrator was so pleasant and easy to talk with. Sarith had wondered for a moment whether she should extend her flirtations to this new young man, but had decided against it. It was Nathan she wanted to hurt, not Elza, and it was not every day that men showed some interest in Elza. And above all, she, Sarith, wasn't at all interested in some poor office clerk, especially one who wasn't all that handsome anyway.

Sarith passed laughing and cooing from the one pair of male hands to the other. She was merry, even provocative, and not seldom was an angry glance cast in her direction by a wife or fiancée. Elza was too preoccupied with keeping Rutger engaged to pay much attention to Sarith. She had seen Rutger now and then glance amusedly in Sarith's direction and he had remarked, "What a pretty girl your stepsister is, and how jolly."

Then Elza had noticed how Sarith was especially enjoying herself in the company of the widower Robles de Medina. The thirty-three-year-old Julius Robles de Medina had lost his wife and a child in a smallpox epidemic the previous year, and was left with two daughters of ten and eight years. This was the first time since the loss of his wife and child that he had travelled with his two daughters from his plantation on the Boven-Commewijne River to Joden-Savanna to attend the feast.

Elza noted with considerable amazement how her stepsister was now flirting with 'Noso' and how provocatively she was behaving with him. She and Sarith had never liked Julius Robles de Medina or his wife very much, and as little girls they had given him the nickname 'Noso' because he had such an enormous nose. In recent years they had always kept out

of his way at parties because Sarith considered him such a bore, always wanting to talk about his beautiful Klein Paradijs<sup>17</sup> Plantation. And now that same Sarith was sitting so close to him and talking and laughing while she teasingly stroked his hair and told him how handsome he was. Elza couldn't understand at all what was the matter with Sarith.

Most of the company remained for almost a week at Joden-Savanna, and Sarith's behaviour did not change. When she and Elza went to bed at night, Elza got no chance to talk with her stepsister because Leah was sleeping in the same room, as was one of Nathan's sisters. And while Sarith was being undressed by Mini-mini she would hum merrily or make a remark along the lines of, "Some people can't get a man themselves and have to be married off."

After five days or so, Nathan departed with his parents, brothers and little sister. Nathan's cousin from the Rama Plantation and Rutger went in the same boat, too. Two days later Pa Levi, mother Rachel and the girls left. Rachel, above all, was pleased that the stay was coming to an end. She could not help noticing that both young and old ladies had been looking disapprovingly at Sarith and uneasily at their husbands. One of the ladies had even remarked that Sarith was behaving like any old coloured concubine. But when her mother-in-law, the widow Fernandez, had said to her that Sarith was behaving far too provocatively and freely with all the men, Rachel had answered that the poor child certainly meant no harm by it. It was just a young girl's fun and pleasure. Although in her heart she agreed with her mother-in-law, she could not permit anyone to say something hurtful about the apple of her eye.

Sitting in the boat, she now looked at her daughter, who was no longer the happy, flirtatious young girl, but was rather just looking straight ahead with a bored expression. And mother Rachel wondered and worried about what was going on in her daughter's pretty head.

17 Little Paradise.

## CHAPTER II

### RUTGER LE CHASSEUR

It was a journey of many hours from Joden-Savanna to Paramaribo in the tent boat rowed by ten slaves. When the tide started coming in they broke the journey at a plantation and spent the night there. The following day on the ebb tide they continued the journey. When the boat arrived in Paramaribo the sun was already setting and Rutger looked out from the boat at the beautiful white town that came ever closer. Now that he was approaching it from the land side, of course he saw it from different angle as compared to a good three months ago, when he had sailed in from the sea. Didn't it look crisp and cared-for. Totally different from Amsterdam, where he came from and where the narrow streets were paved with cobblestones. The streets of Paramaribo were planted with orange blossom, and this gave it a floral feel overall. Rutger could not help thinking that Governor Mauricius, who had caused considerable upheaval about fifteen years earlier, had in the end achieved good results with his measures to improve the town. Not only Paramaribo but the whole colony had made great strides forward under the rule of this enterprising governor, despite his having been thwarted by a group of rich, conservative planters who simply would not understand that better treatment of the slaves and making peace with the Maroons could only be to their advantage. Plagued and tormented by these planters and in the end wrongly impeached, Governor Mauricius had been forced to leave the colony. Although his name was cleared in Holland, he did not return to Suriname to finish what he had begun as his life's work. Luckily, this well cared-for and bright town was a permanent reminder of his good intentions.

Rutger le Chasseur was lodging with his patron, the administrator Van Omhoog, who occupied a spacious house in the Gravenstraat. One of the rooms on the ground floor served as an office. Rutger still recalled his surprise at seeing this beautiful mansion for the first time. He hadn't expected to find such houses in a faraway colony. Now he knew that there were many of these houses in Paramaribo. All were built and furnished in more or less the same way.

In front of the building was a large, high veranda that ran the whole breadth of the house. You entered through a renaissance-style door with a highly polished copper door-knocker and came immediately into the large front hall, with its own particular style of furnishing, typical of the colony. Usually there stood on the one side a piano, above which hung a large mirror with a heavily gilded frame; in the middle a huge mahogany table with a sizeable chandelier hanging above it, to be lit by candles. Around the table four rocking chairs and often along the wall another set of mahogany chairs. Two sofas stood opposite each other, and in one of the four corners there would be a large mahogany wall unit, a chiffonier or tallboy, on which would be standing all kinds of objects in glass and earthenware and also crystal glasses, smaller glasses and carafes with wine, liqueur and Madeira. In its cupboards glittered the expensive porcelain and silver tableware. On the walls hung paintings, a pendulum clock and candlesticks with finely chamfered glass reflectors. The windows had Venetian blinds and were spanned with green gauze. Magnificent curtains of silk or cotton were tied with loops and bows along the sides of the windows.

At the Van Omhoog's there was, next to the front hall, a sitting room that served as an office. Behind that there was a second sitting room. The dining room was behind the front hall. At the back of the house there ran a wide gallery where tea or coffee was taken. At the end of the gallery the minor cooking quarters were to be found: a pantry and the inside kitchen itself. A large selection of plates stood in long rows along the walls, and under the open sink were the copper pans and baking dishes. The staircase leading to the upper



floor also opened onto the rear gallery. On the upper floor there were four spacious rooms. In the bedrooms stood large, high mahogany bedsteads decorated with copper bands and globes. In the grounds of the house stood the kitchen in which the real cooking was done, the large wash-house and the building used for storage. Then, a little further away, stood the slaves' dwellings, in two rows facing each other. In between there was the brick-lined well, and nearer the house there was also a large rainwater tank. Behind the slaves' dwellings there was yet another garden with all kinds of fruit trees.

When the boat landed near the Platte Brug<sup>18</sup>, Rutger bade everyone a warm farewell and walked through the Molenstraat and the Kerkstraat to his lodgings, followed by his slave Alex. When Rutger had arrived in Suriname, to be greeted by administrator Van Omhoog on the waterside, Van Omhoog had the sixteen-year-old Alex there with him and had told his young assistant that Alex was his and that he would have to see to it that the boy attended to his slightest whim and accompanied him constantly. From that moment on, Alex literally followed him all the time, helped him with dressing and undressing, put his shoes on and took them off, stood ready with drinks, pipe and tobacco, and when Rutger was going out, had his hat and walking stick ready. Now, too, he walked behind Rutger, pushing the case with his master's clothes on a hired wheelbarrow.

Mrs van Omhoog was pleased to see her lodger after an absence of almost a month. He had gone to visit two plantations along the Suriname River that fell under the office's jurisdiction, and she had understood that, his being so close to Joden-Savanna, he would be a guest at the annual Feast of Tabernacles. The Van Omhoogs had no children of their own, and the lady of the house found it very pleasing to have this young gentleman in her home. She at least had someone to talk to, for Mr van Omhoog was a quite a taciturn indi-

18 'Flat Bridge'.

vidual. She also had plenty of time on her hands, for there were four slave-girls, three slave-boys and an errand boy around the house. Mr van Omhoog had been in the colony for fifteen years now as representative of an Amsterdam merchant banking firm, and in a few years' time, as he had some time previously written to his director in Holland, he wanted very much to be able to retire and enjoy some well-earned rest. The director had sent his nephew to the colony as assistant to Mr van Omhoog with the intention that Rutger would take over from him when he stopped working at some time in the future.

There was certainly a lot to learn. Rutger had to go through the books of past years to get an overall impression of how things were. In the beginning it was especially difficult to get a grip on the prices of things, since everything had previously been expressed in pounds of sugar. A few years earlier, card money had been introduced to Suriname: a kind of bank note with an official stamp, coat-of-arms and seal, in denominations of 1 guilder, 2 guilders 50 cents, and 10 guilders. Remarkably, the card money was made in the form of playing cards bearing images of diamonds and clubs, kings and jacks. Upon seeing this money for the first time, Rutger had asked Van Omhoog the reason for these illustrations, and received the answer that the government had probably arranged for this as an aid for the many illiterates.

The day after Rutger's return, he sat in his patron's office, and Mr van Omhoog wanted to know all about his experiences. How were things on the plantations *Mijn Geluk* and *De Goede Verwachting*?<sup>19</sup> Those were the plantations Rutger had had to visit. And what were his impressions of *Joden-Savanna*? Had there been many guests present? Of course, mainly Jews. And Rutger recounted how he had enjoyed the people's hospitality and how he had already made many new friends. He had become especially friendly with Elza Fernandez and her father Levi Fernandez, owner

19 'My Happiness' and 'The Great Expectations'.

of the Hébron Plantation. Mr van Omhoog naturally knew who Levi Fernandez was. Did Rutger realize, however, that it was better not to become too friendly with the Jews? They formed such a closed, individual circle, and in recent years there had arisen considerable 'anti' feelings among the Christians with respect to the Jewish community. Rutger did not really understand this. Had it not been the Jews who had been the founders of this colony and had set a good example with the plantations and so forth? Why, then, all the antagonism? Administrator Van Omhoog did not know this, either, but those feelings did exist, even to the extent that there was talk of housing the Jews in a separate part of the town. A kind of ghetto, so to speak. Rutger shrugged: "Small-minded colonial palaver! I'm man enough to choose my own friends and won't let myself be misled by the prejudices of others."

"Of course, the position of the Fernandez girl is somewhat different," the administrator continued. "She herself isn't a Jewess because her mother was Lutheran, but, well, she does have a Jewish name."

Rutger remarked that, as far as he had observed, the Fernandez girl had very good judgement when it came to matters of Jew and gentile, Christian and non-Christian: really refreshing amongst all this small-mindedness. Mister van Omhoog could not help laughing at what Rutger was – somewhat curtly – saying, but he still found that it would be better to avoid being too intimate with the Fernandez family. As far as female company was concerned, if Rutger needed a woman, the administrator could provide a pretty mulatto girl. Almost all whites had a mulatto woman as mistress or concubine. This satisfied the needs of the man and carried absolutely no responsibility. For of course, no white man would ever be so stupid as to consider marrying one of these women. If such a woman had children by him, then a few guilders sufficed for their care and upbringing. He, Van Omhoog, himself had such a mistress. He had installed her in a small house on the road to the Oranje Cemetery on the edge of the town. She had had two children by him. There were even a few whites who gave such children their own

family name, but he, Van Omhoog, certainly did not intend to do this. Many of these mulattos then began to get big ideas and started behaving as if they were white, but he would not be party to that.

Rutger listened in astonishment to his patron's words. It was not the first time he had heard this kind of thing. What double standards: use a woman, conceive children by her, and then look down on your own children because they were coloured. Rutger thought, "God help me never to become like this." When he heard the whites in Suriname going on like this about the negroes he wondered whether he really wanted to remain in this country, and he had often wondered whether he was the only one who thought this way. Of all the people he had met thus far, the sixteen-year-old Alex, his slave, was possibly the most intelligent. He had noticed that the predominant occupations of the colonists, as far as the men were concerned, were drinking, eating, playing cards and other games of chance, sleeping with various women, and indulging in so-called deep conversation, that always concerned money, the governor, attacks by the bush-negroes, and their own small circle. With the women it was no different: chatting, gossiping, complaining about the slaves' laziness, about their husbands' behaviour, endless nibbles, and yet more gossiping. And for the rest, all the showing off, partying, one-upmanship and displaying one's wealth and magnificence.

When Rutger had accompanied mister and mistress Van Omhoog in their carriage to church the first Sunday of his stay (even though the church was no more than a five-minute walk away, just around the corner, in a large hall above the town hall on the church square), he could not understand why two slave-boys, two slave-girls and his own Alex had to walk alongside the conveyance. Only upon their arrival at the town hall on the square did it become apparent what this was all about. The Van Omhoog couple were decked out in all their richest finery and the slaves, too, had beautiful clothes on, but naturally no shoes, for it was strictly forbidden for slaves to wear shoes. When the company alighted

from the carriage, Mr van Omhoog's personal slave held a large parasol above his master's head while another slave walked behind him with the prayer book. This pattern was repeated for Mrs van Omhoog: a slave-girl with parasol, another with the prayer book. Since Rutger had no parasol, it was Alex who walked behind him with the prayer book. All the colonists had come to church in this manner, with or without a carriage, but always with five or six slaves in attendance. Rutger could barely restrain himself from laughing out loud at this comedy act. What a farce, what a stupid, vain show. And when you looked at the churchgoers' severe, deadpan faces, then you really wanted to burst out laughing. Just as all the feasts and parties: each wanted to outdo the other with rich attire and a superfluity of dishes.

And now such an invitation was delivered. It was from Governor Crommelin and his wife, to a spectacular ball that would be held in four weeks' time. Mr van Omhoog had told Rutger that the whole of 'high and white society' in Suriname would be attending the ball. Rutger very much hoped that Elza would be in Paramaribo at that time. He could then meet her at the Governor's Ball. Her family would also be invited.

What a hollow and vain existence it was in such a colony. Those who read and concerned themselves with things other than trivia were so few in number that it had come as a surprise to have met a girl such as Elza Fernandez. She lived on a plantation but knew a lot about books and had very definite views on particular matters. She was a marked exception to the women and girls he had met until then. Not once had she belittled a slave-girl, but to the contrary had said that, apart from her father, brother and stepsister, the two slave-women who had brought her up were the most important people in her life. He had noticed that she never spoke to a slave in a commanding tone of voice, but was always pleasant and friendly. He had thoroughly enjoyed her company. How they had talked about all kinds of things: books, slavery, the Maroons. And that stepsister, what an incorrigible flirt she was, a typical spoilt colonial girl who did just as

she pleased. Rutger had to smile as he thought back on Elza's worried looks when her stepsister was carrying on like that. And Sarith had acted as if she had not noticed in the slightest all the women's hostile glances while she flirted with first the one, then the other man. Even so, Rutger wondered whether it had all been as innocent as it might have appeared.

## ELZA

A few weeks later, the Fernandez family were indeed on their way by tent boat from the Hébron Plantation to Paramaribo. Father Levi, Aunt Rachel, Elza and Sarith would stay in the large house of Jacob de Ledesma, who was married to Aunt Rachel's eldest daughter, Esther. That couple had three little sons, the three-year-old twins Samuel and Joshua and a baby of a few months, Ezau. Everyone called Samuel and Joshua Sammy and Jossy because that was the way the slaves pronounced the names. Jacob de Ledesma was a very well-to-do businessman who, in addition to his businesses in Paramaribo, owned three plantations. Everything pointed to the family's good fortunes: a beautiful, large mansion on the Saraccastraat blessed with vast grounds supporting lots of fruit trees, a vegetable garden and ten or more slave huts right at the back. In fact, thirty slaves worked in the house. The front hall and dining room were enhanced by superior furniture specially imported from Europe, silk curtains, expensive porcelain and silverware and large crystal chandeliers in which hundreds of candles could be lit to provide brilliant lighting at balls and feasts. This part of the house was normally forbidden territory for the two youngsters, who had the habit of terrorizing the whole household with their mischievous antics. Each had a slave-girl, a girl of fourteen or thereabouts, who did nothing all day but run after the little master to ensure he didn't have an accident or to take an object out of his hands. In addition there was a small errand boy who was constantly picking up discarded toys.

Aunt Rachel loved her two grandsons, but a little of their company was quite sufficient, for they soon got on her

nerves with all their running and shouting, and given half the chance they would climb on her and attack her meticulously coiffured wig with their grabbing little fingers. If Elza and Sarith were lodging in the town and heard the patter of tiny feet running up the stairs, they would hastily lock the door, for, "If those Philistines should get in ..."

The lodgers had then installed themselves, and during the extensive meal put on for them, the feast at Joden-Savanna was recounted at length, whereafter the conversation turned to the supper ball that the governor would be holding in a few days' time and to which they, too, were naturally invited.

Rutger was one of the first to see Elza when she entered the great ground-floor hall of the Governor's palace. He went to her with outstretched hands, and it was clear that he was pleased to see her again. Elza was pleased, too. She had hoped to see him again and blushed when she saw that he appreciated her company so much. They were together the whole evening, talking, laughing, dancing. Sarith was the star of the evening. She looked lovely in a light-green gown, her black curls pinned up, her grey-green eyes sparkling with pleasure at all the male attention. All the men, young and old, wanted to dance with Sarith, and like a butterfly she was now here, now there, flirting and laughing. At a certain moment she was also near Elza and Rutger and said laughingly to Rutger that he surely must not spend the whole evening devoting his attention only to her sister; she was there, too. And smiling, she had led Rutger to the dance floor. Elza had watched how the two danced, one dance, and then another one, and she had also seen that there was just as much admiration at her beauty in Rutger's eyes as in those of all the other men. Shortly thereafter it was time for supper. As was the custom, the tables for the Jewish guests were in the upper hall. That was always the case in the governmental palace. At their special tables the Jews were served dishes that were prepared for them in their own kosher manner. Sarith therefore went upstairs together with her father, Aunt Rachel, Jacob, Esther and all the other Jews. Elza was pleased that

the supper began at that moment, for she had wondered whether Sarith and Rutger would carry on dancing with each other for much longer.

A few days after the ball, an invitation was delivered to Elza in the Saramaccastraat. Her company was requested for a meal at the Van Omhoog's'. There was also an accompanying note for Mr and Mrs Fernandez in which the Van Omhoog's requested their permission to invite Elza.

This was the subject of much discussion in the family. Aunt Rachel had her objections. Was this done? After all, Rutger moved in very different circles from the Fernandez family. Would it not be preferable for Elza to choose a man from her own sphere? For Pa Levi everything was all right as it was. Elza might be his daughter, but she was not a Jewess. She was not really accepted within the Jewish community, after all. Would a Jewish man ever want to marry her? No, it was in fact a good thing that this newcomer to the colony was showing so much interest in his daughter. Elza blushed when all this was being discussed so openly, especially when Sarith remarked that it all seemed to be becoming quite serious.

The invitation was accepted and Rutger was pleased. In fact, Rutger would have preferred not only Elza but the whole Fernandez family to have been invited, but he understood well enough that that was something the Van Omhoog's would not readily do. He did not know that it had already cost Mr van Omhoog all his powers of persuasion to bring his wife round to agreeing to invite just Elza. So it was that Elza went to eat at the Van Omhoog's'. In front of her walked a slave with a lantern; two steps behind her followed Maisa.

Mrs van Omhoog found her guest, despite everything, to be a dear girl, so sensible and unassuming. The dinner was a complete success. Afterwards Rutger accompanied her home. Alex led the way with the lantern and behind the couple walked Maisa, who had waited the whole evening, seated on the back doorstep of the house.

In the days that followed, Elza and Rutger often walked and talked, sometimes dropping in on Mrs van Omhoog for



a cool drink. Alex always walked in front of the couple and Maisa behind. Rutger wondered whether he would ever get used to the idea of slaves being constantly in his company, literally with every step he took.

In bed, late evenings, Elza and Sarith often talked extensively about Rutger. Yes, Sarith was certain: Elza was in love. Elza denied this at first, but come now, in Sarith's mind there could be no shadow of a doubt. Look how Elza could talk about nothing else but Rutger, and could think about nothing else. That was true love. When she had jokingly asked her stepsister whether Rutger had kissed her, Elza had responded indignantly, "Sarith, please!" – such things certainly never happened before you were married to someone. And Sarith had laughed at such naïvety. She was happy for Elza that she had this young man, of course. He was certainly most agreeable, but it would not be someone for her. She wanted a rich man with money and plantations.

The De Ledesmas threw a grand dinner on New Year's Eve, followed by a ball. There were many guests, including Elza's brother, David, who had come to Paramaribo for a week with his wife Suzanna and their two small boys from their plantation on the Para River. They were lodging with Suzanna's sister on the Malebatrumstraat. Rutger was naturally one of the invitees. He and Elza danced a lot, but also spent a lot of time talking outside on the large, wide veranda, it being very hot inside.

When the Fernandez family returned to Hébron a few weeks later, it was taken for granted that Rutger would soon be paying a visit to the plantation. That he did, and during that visit he asked Pa Levi for Elza's hand in marriage. Pa Levi was most impressed with this respectable young man. He wasn't rich, but would undoubtedly be a good husband for Elza.

Ashana and Maisa were happy with Elza's choice. Yes, Masra Rutger was a good person. And when Rutger was at the plantation he was spoilt outrageously. Ashana had to know what his favourite dishes were and Maisa was always seeing to it that his clothes were perfectly washed and ironed

and that Alex could always bring him something to drink. A busy period now ensued for Aunt Rachel. Elza's trousseau had to be prepared. Twenty-four sheets, twenty-four pillow-slips, hand-towels, bath-towels and so forth. As soon as they could be spared, Caro, Mini-mini and some other slave-girls were to be found in the sewing-room, hemming, sewing and embroidering.

When Rutger was there, he got involved with everybody. He talked with Rebecca, looked at her drawings and paintings and discussed books with her, and it was clear that Rebecca felt at ease with him. Sarith talked and joked a lot, too. She was in her element again. At the Vooruitzicht<sup>20</sup> Plantation, which was only 90 minutes' journey from Hébron, three young men were lodging who were paying her a lot of attention, and the young ladies and gentlemen were constantly coming and going between the various plantations. But Sarith could not help flirting with Rutger, too. When Elza noticed the amused looks Sarith was getting from Rutger, she wondered whether he didn't perhaps find her dull and boring.

One afternoon Elza and Rutger were sitting on a bench on the river bank near the boathouse. It was a peaceful afternoon and they looked out over the river to the green of the rainforest on the other side. Elza was a bit quiet. They and Sarith had just been playing cards and Sarith had laughed and talked so much with Rutger. Now Sarith had gone indoors. Rutger's eyes had followed her admiringly, and he had said, "How pretty she is, eh?"

Elza asked softly, "Would you perhaps rather marry such a beautiful woman?"

Rutger looked at her amusedly and said, "Elza, you're not jealous, are you?"

Elza said nothing and shrugged her shoulders, and Rutger continued, "Listen, Elza. I would never want to marry your stepsister. I admire her beauty in the same way that I admire a beautiful flower or bird or a painting, but marry her? No,

absolutely not. A beautiful woman is a difficult possession, and a beautiful woman with Sarith's temperament would be a difficult and dangerous possession. I would soon find myself in the position of having to fight duels, and that is nothing for me. But Elza, you must promise me one thing: never be jealous. I find men who have jealous wives always so pitiful and I would never want to be like that. Trust me: I love you and will always love you, always."

Elza smiled at him: "That sounds good."

Rutger said pensively, "This land is sometimes so odd. There are sometimes such strange customs. Promise me, Elza, that you'll never get angry with me over another woman. That even if I get involved with another woman on occasion – you never know – you must even then trust me and know that I will always love you and never will leave you."

"Involved with another woman?" said Elza, while reflecting that such things were commonplace in this colony. So many men had, in addition to their lawfully wedded wife, a mistress or a concubine, and these latter were usually mulatto or even slaves. Did Rutger intend this, too?

"Are you intending to take a mistress, Rutger?" she asked.

"Intending? No, certainly not!" cried Rutger. "Oh no, but you never know how life goes, and I want you to know that I will always remain true to you, even if, for instance, I have a brief something or a short affair with another woman. Do you understand that? Promise me that you won't be angry or think that you must have your revenge with another man."

"Yes, I promise," said Elza, "But if, if ..." she hesitated.

"If what?" asked Rutger.

"Such an incident or short affair – that would surely not happen in my house?"

"Oh, come now, Elza!" Rutger laughed. "Certainly not, my darling. Were you afraid of that?"

"Oh, rain, rain, come my dearest, inside, quickly; hurry."

It had suddenly started to rain, and within a few seconds it was pouring down. He brought Elza quickly to her feet and they raced indoors, followed by Alex, who took the empty glasses and plates to the kitchen.

When Rutger was again at the plantation a few weeks later, Elza saw immediately that there was something amiss. He looked strained and tense; it seemed as if something was restraining him. "What's the matter, Rutger," she asked softly when the two of them were sitting on the veranda.

"Van Omhoog wants me gradually to take over his position in the Court of Civil Justice," Rutger replied.

"But surely that's wonderful, Rutger, a real honour and so good for your career," thought Elza.

"Perhaps, but still I think I won't do it. It's always swimming against the tide. I went along to one of the sittings, and after that I got the chance to read various papers. It was terrible, Elza, terrible what I read there. It was mostly about the cruel punishments the slaves received. I couldn't believe my eyes. And do you imagine for one moment that the owners were punished? They got a telling-off! You ask yourself how it is possible that people can think up such atrocities. You know, I read about a certain Basdow. A few years ago he had a slave's fingers hacked off one by one, and then he forced the slave to eat the first few fingers that had been cut off!" Rutger shivered as he recounted this.

"Oh, terrible!" cried Elza.

"Wait, that's not all," Rutger continued. "He wanted to have the same slave burned alive, and when they couldn't get the fire hot enough, he had him buried alive. It is surely that wretch himself that should be well and truly punished?"

"Who should be well and truly punished?" asked Sarith, who had come onto the veranda and had heard the last few words.

"A certain Basdow who wanted a slave to be cruelly punished," said Elza.

"But the slave will have deserved it," said Sarith.

"No-one can deserve the punishment of being first forced to eat his hacked-off fingers and then being buried alive." Rutger was furious as he said this.

"Oh, Rutger," cried Sarith, "You seem not to have understood that slaves need to be severely punished. If we didn't do that, they could quite easily murder us!"

“I don’t call this punishment,” retorted Rutger. “A punishment must offer the chance for improvement, and these atrocities most certainly do not do that.”

“Oh come, you make it sound as if you can compare slaves with ordinary people. Slaves are negroes. You punish one to scare the others. Don’t you understand that?” Sarith went and sat in the rocking chair while she said this.

“Do you know what I think?” Rutger went on. “I think that people who invent such horrible things as hanging on a meat hook, scorching lips and tongues and burning alive – those creatures don’t deserve to be called people. Even in the animal world you see that creatures kill other sorts only for food. Even animals don’t treat their victims in this way.” Rutger was getting all worked up. Elza looked at him: his face was red and a small artery pulsed in his neck.

Sarith rocked slowly to and fro in the rocking chair. “Rutger,” she said, “What do you know of slaves? You’ve not been here long enough to be able to judge. When you’ve been here longer, you’ll talk differently.” Then she called out, “Mini-mini, I want something to drink.”<sup>21</sup>

“What Rutger is saying has nothing to do with being here for a long or a short time,” said Elza. “He’s right: the slaves are simply mistreated. On some plantations they get an extreme beating or a hundred lashes for the slightest thing. Have you heard what Susanna Duplessis has done now? She has had a child drowned before its mother’s eyes. Even children get a cruel, cruel beating under her.”

“Then at least they learn to work from a young age,” said Sarith. “If Uncle Levi allowed the slaves to be treated more strictly, then the plantation would produce much more, that’s what everyone says.” And then she shouted out loudly, “Mini-mini, come on! And why are you always grumbling about the slaves,” she sneered. “Don’t you have nicer things to talk about?”

At that moment came the sound of a bell from the river-side.

21 “Mini-mini mi wani dringi.”

“A boat, a boat! Who is it?” Sarith had sprung up. “Oh look, visitors!”

Two gentlemen walked up from the riverside. One was Joshua de Miranda, the eldest son from the Ephrata Plantation, and the other was a stranger. Arriving on the veranda, Joshua explained, “This is Moshe Bueno de Mesquita. He’s just arrived from Amsterdam. He has come to lodge with us as of yesterday. We’ve come to ask whether the ladies and gentleman would like to come home with us for a pleasant afternoon.”

Sarith was excited. Of course she wanted to go along. There was nothing to do here, after all. She had got bored long ago. Rutger, however, was not all that keen, and therefore Elza also preferred to stay at home of course.

When Sarith returned towards evening, she was cheerful and even elated. They had had such a good time. Later in the evening she described excitedly to Elza how obviously charmed by her the newcomer Mosche Bueno de Mesquita had been. Actually he was destined for Joshua’s niece, Naomi, but he couldn’t take his eyes off Sarith, and that Naomi, she had looked increasingly miserable and annoyed. Now, Sarith had in any case had a really wonderful time!

“And Elza, what have you been doing all afternoon?” asked Sarith, before she prepared to go to sleep. That Rutger had got so worked up about such unimportant matters as slaves’ punishments and all that nonsense. Was Elza sure that she wanted to marry such a moaner? And, already yawning, Sarith declared, “When you are married I won’t visit you very often; there won’t be very much happening. Hmm, I can see it already: a dull couple you’ll become, really boring.”