

A Prologue

(To an Unwritten Play)

By Gertrude Atherton

CHARACTERS: James Hamilton, Mary Fawcett, Rachael Lavine, two slaves. Place: Nevis, British West Indies. Time: The month of April, 1756.

[A large room, with open windows, to which are attached heavy inside wooden shutters furnished with iron bars. Beyond the windows are seen masses of tropical trees and foliage, green and more brilliantly hued, filled with screaming birds and monkeys. In the court is a fountain. The house is half-way up the mountain, and between the trees is a glint of the sea. The room is severely simple. There are no curtains, carpets, nor upholstered furniture; but there are two handsome pieces of mahogany, a bookcase full of books bound in old calf, a table on which are tropical fruits and cooling drinks in earthen jugs, one or two palm trees, and Caribbean pottery on shelves. In one corner is a harp.

In the distance is heard a loud menacing roar. The sky is covered with racing clouds. Suffusing everything is a livid light.

Mistress Fawcett is leaning on her crutch, looking through one of the windows. Two slaves are crouching on the floor. All are in an intense attitude, listening. Suddenly there is heard the quick loud firing of cannon, four guns in rapid succession. The negroes shriek and crouch lower as if they would insinuate their trembling bodies through the floor. Mistress Fawcett hastily closes the window by which she is standing, swings to and bars its shutters. Immediately after may be heard the sound, gradually diminishing in the distance, of a long line of windows slammed and barred. Mistress Fawcett attempts to move the shutters of the other window, but the hinges are rusty and defy her feeble strength.]

MISTRESS FAWCETT (to the slaves). Come here. Close this window. Did you not hear the guns? A hurricane is upon us.

THE SLAVES (crouching lower and wailing almost unintelligibly). Oh, mistress, save us! Send for oby doctor!

MISTRESS FAWCETT. To strangle you with a horsehair pie! Your obeah charlatans are grovelling in their cellars. Only our courage and our two hands can save us to-day. Come! (Beating the floor with her crutch.) A hundred man slaves on the estate, and not one to help us save the house! Are my daughter and I to do it all? Get up! (She menaces them with her crutch.)

THE SLAVES (not moving). Oh, mistress!

[Enter Rachael. She walks to the open window and looks out.]

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Close the windows, Rachael. I cannot. And those creatures are empty skulls.

RACHAEL. In a moment.

MISTRESS FAWCETT. In a moment?

Open your ears. Do you want to see the roof racing with the wind?

RACHAEL. The hurricane is still miles away.

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Great God! How can you stand there and wait for a hurricane ~ Do you realise that an hour, if this old house be not strong enough, may see us struggling out in those roaring waters? These desolate afflicted Caribbees! They have tested my courage many times, and I can go through this without flinching; but I cannot stand that unnatural calm of

yours.

RACHAEL. Do I seem calm? (She closes and bars the window.) It is a fine sight. We may never have such another.

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Nor live to know.

RACHAEL (her back is still turned, as she shakes and tests the window). Well, what of that? Are you so in love with life?

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Even at sixty I am in no haste to be blown out of it. And if I were twenty—

RACHAEL (turning suddenly, and facing her mother). At twenty, with forty years of nothingness before you, cut off from all the joy of life, on an island in the Caribbean Sea, what then? (She snaps her fingers.) That for the worst a hurricane can do!

MISTRESS FAWCETT (uneasily). Do not let us talk of personal things to-day.

RACHAEL. I never felt more personal.

MISTRESS FAWCETT (looking at her keenly). I believe you are excited.

RACHAEL (she clenches her hands, and brings them up sharply to her breast). Excited! Call it that if you like. All my life I have longed for the hurricane, and now I feel as if it were coming to me alone.

MISTRESS FAWCETT (evasively). I do not always understand you, Rachael. You are a strange girl.

RACHAEL (bursting through her assumed composure). Strange? Because I long to feel the mountain shaken, as I have been shaken through four terrible weeks? Because I long to hear the wind roar and shriek its derision of man, make his quaking soul forget every law he ever knew, stamp upon him, grind him to pulp—

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Hush! What are you saying? I do not know you—‘the ice-plant of the tropics,’ indeed! The electricity of this hurricane has bewitched you.

RACHAEL. That I will not deny. (She laughs.) But I do deny that I am not myself, whether you recognise me or not. Which self that you have seen do you think my real one? First, the dreaming girl, in love with books, the sun, the sea, and a future that no man has written in books; then, while my scalp is still aching from my newly-turned hair, I am thrust through the church doors into the arms of a brute. A year of dumb horror, and I run from his house in the night, to my one friend, the mother who—

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Not another word! I believed in him! There wasn't a mother on St. Kitts who did not envy me. No one could have imagined—

RACHAEL. No one but a girl of sixteen, to whom no one would listen

MISTRESS FAWCETT. I commanded you to hush.

RACHAEL. Command the hurricane! I will speak!

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Very well, speak. It may be our last hour—who knows? (She seats herself, sets her lips, and presses her hands hard on the handle of her crutch.)

RACHAEL. Did you think you knew me in the two years that followed, years when I was as speechless as while in bondage to John Lavine, when I crouched in the dark corners, fearing the light, the sound of every man's voice? Then health again, and normal interests, but not hope—not hope! At nineteen I had lived too long! You are sixty, and you have not the vaguest idea what that means! Then, four weeks ago—

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Ah!

RACHAEL. James Hamilton came. Ah, how unprepared I was! That I—I should ever look upon another man except with loathing! Sixty and twenty—perhaps somewhere between is the

age of wisdom! And the law holds me fast to a man who is not fit to live! All nature awoke in me and sang the hour I met Hamilton. For the first time I loved children, and longed for them. For the first time I saw God in man. For the first time the future seemed vast, interminable, yet all too short. And if I go to this man who has made me feel great and wonderful enough to bear a demigod, a wretch can divorce and disgrace me! Oh, these four terrible weeks—ecstasy, despair—ecstasy, despair—and to the world as unblinking as a marble in a museum! Do you wonder that I welcome the hurricane, in which no man dare think of any but his puny self? For the moment I am free, and as alive, as triumphant as that great wind outside—as eager to devastate, to fight, to conquer, to live—to live—to live. What do I care for civilisation? If James Hamilton were out there among the flying trees and called to me, I would go. Hark! Listen! Is it not magnificent?

[The hurricane is nearer and louder. The approaching roar is varied by sudden tremendous gusts, the hissing and splashing of water, the howling of negroes and dogs, the wild pealing of bells. In the room below is heard the noise of many trampling feet, slamming of windows, and smothered exclamations.]

MISTRESS FAWCETT. The negroes have taken refuge in the cellar—every one of them, beyond a doubt, two hundred and more! God grant they do not die of fright or suffocation. It is useless to attempt to coax them up here. These only wait until our backs are turned. Look!

[The slaves have crawled to the door on the left. They are livid. Their tongues hang out. Rachael runs forward, seizes them by their long hair, and administers a severe shaking.]

RACHAEL. Wake up! Wake up! We need your help. The windows must be watched every moment.

[A terrible gust shakes the house. As Rachael relaxes her hold, the slaves collapse again, but clutch at her skirts, mumbling and wailing. Rachael gazes at them a moment, makes a motion as if to spurn them with her foot, then shrugs her shoulders and opens the door.]

RACHAEL. Go. Die in your own way. May I be granted the same privilege some day.

[The slaves stumble out.]

MISTRESS FAWCETT. I see you recognise no will but your own to-night. They are my slaves, and I had bidden them stay. But in truth they are useless; and as for you—have your little hour. I embittered too many. It may be your last. And—thank God!—Hamilton is not here.

RACHAEL (with great agitation). Where is he? At sea? Riding over the mountain—far from shelter—

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Trust any man to take care of himself, let alone a Scot. No doubt he is over on St. Kitts, brewing swizzle with Will Hamilton. Will's house is one of the strongest in the Caribbees. Look!

[One of the heavy shutters has been forced open by the wind, which has shattered the outer glass. Leaves and glass fly into the room. Rachael and her mother hurl themselves against the heavy wooden blind. By exerting all their strength they succeed in fastening it again. Then they examine the other window. Mistress Fawcett sits down, panting, holding her hand to her heart.]

RACHAEL. I will see to the other windows. (She runs out of the room.)

MISTRESS FAWCETT. If she knew that Hamilton was on Nevis an hour before the guns were fired! As like as not he helped to fire them, for he is a guest at the Fort. If I had not commanded him to go when he came this afternoon, he would be here now. Thank heaven, no man could breast this hurricane and live! I know her! I know her—little as she thinks it! Will she continue to obey me? And after I am dead? Ah! Do I allow myself to fear aught in this hurricane, I shall never see the morning. (She presses her hand hard against her heart, and composes herself.)

[Rachael returns. She pours out a drink and forces her mother to take it, while her own head is

erect and listening. Her nostrils dilate; one can almost see her ears quiver. The wind increases every moment in violence. In it may now be heard a peculiar monotonous rattle, the agitation of seeds in the dry pods of the 'giant' tree.]

RACHAEL. Did you see? I had but a glimpse, but hours could not have made the picture more vivid. I could *see* the great wind. The tops of the palms are flying about like Brobdingnagian birds, their long blades darting out like infuriated tongues. I saw the oranges flung about in a great game of battledore and shuttlecock—as if the hurricane remembered to play in its fury! I saw men shrieking at the masts of a ship. Their puny lives! Why are they not glad to die so splendid a death?

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Thank God, Hamilton is not here!

RACHAEL. I tell you that, if he were, the greatest man of his time would one day call you granddam.

MISTRESS FAWCETT (rising with energy). Hark ye, Rachael! Calm yourself! You have had your hour of wildness. I understand your mood—the relief, the delight to give to the storm what you cannot give to Hamilton. But enough! I can stand no more. I am old. My heart is nearly worn out. If the storm unnerves me, I am undone.

RACHAEL. Very well, mother. I will put my soul back in its coffin—if I can. This is a favourable moment. There is a lull.

MISTRESS FAWCETT (she seats herself again). Come here, Rachael. (Rachael, who has apparently calmed herself, approaches and stands beside her mother. She tenderly rearranges the old woman's hair, which fell from her cap during her struggle with the blind.) Rachael, these hours, I repeat, may be our last on earth. This house is old. The hurricane may uproot it. Like you, I am not afraid to die. Indeed, I should welcome death to-night if I could take you with me. Bitterer than any pain has been the thought of leaving you alone in the world. I am glad you have broken the silence you imposed. I never could have broken it. I ask you now to forgive me, and I acknowledge that I alone was responsible for the tragedy of your married life. That I was deceived is no excuse. I am reckoned more astute than most. I should have known that behind that white and purring exterior was a cruel and hideous voluptuary. But I had known Danes all my life, and respected them, and you were the child of my old age. I knew that I had not long to live. But I am not making excuses. I ask you humbly to forgive me.

RACHAEL. Forgive you! I have been bred in philosophy, and I have always loved you perfectly.

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Ah! I did not know. Until to-night you have been so reticent. And silent people think—think—

RACHAEL. I have thought, but never to blame you. And what is past is past. I waste no time on what cannot be undone. The soul must have its education, and part of that is to be torn up by the roots, trampled, beaten, crucified. Let me hope that, having had that course at the begin-fling of my life, I have had it once for all.

MISTRESS FAWCETT. There are worse things than a loveless marriage with a brute. One is to love a man you cannot marry, and be cast aside by him, while your heart is still alive with the love he has sloughed off like an old skin that has begun to chafe. And then, without friends—with children, perhaps, the world snatching at its skirts as it passes you—the uncommon and terrible disgrace of divorce. Rachael!—will you not promise me—

RACHAEL. I promise you this—in normal mood, I will think of you first. But, do I ever meet Hamilton when I feel as I do to-night, I should not think—not think, I say—not think nor care! Am I like those cattle in the cellar? Did not Nature fashion me to love and hate, to create and

suffer—to feel as she does to-night?

MISTRESS FAWCETT (with a long sigh). Thank heaven, Hamilton is not here! Ah!

RACHAEL. Yes, it comes again.

[The hurricane bursts with renewed fury. The concussions are like the impact of artillery. Hail rattles on the roof. Trees and roofs crash against each other in midair. Suddenly the house springs and rocks. Simultaneously there is a long horrid shriek from the negroes in the cellar.]

RACHAEL. Has Nevis been torn from her foundations?

MISTRESS FAWCETT. It was an earthquake. A hurricane tugs at the very roots of the earth. Pray Heaven that the fires in Nevis are out. But we have no time to think on imaginary horrors. Look to the windows. (As Rachael examines the windows, Mistress Fawcett thrusts her head toward the outer door, as if listening in an agony of apprehension. She raises herself from the chair, her eyes expanded, but keeps her face turned from Rachael, and says, steadily): I think I hear the rattle of a shutter in the dining-room. Run and see. And examine all the other windows before you return. Remember that if the wind gets in, the roof will go. (Rachael runs out of the room. Immediately after there is a loud knocking at the front door, which is on the side of the house at present sheltered from the direct attack of the storm. Mistress Fawcett hobbles forward and secures more firmly the iron bar, making it impossible for an outsider to force his way in.)

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Who is there?

A Voice without. It is I—James Hamilton.

MISTRESS FAWCETT. You cannot enter.

HAMILTON. Not enter? I have braved death, and worse, to come to you, knowing that you were alone. Nor would you leave a dog out on such a day.

MISTRESS FAWCETT. I would open to the most desperate criminal in the islands, but not to you. Go! Go! At once! (She turns her head in great anxiety toward the long line of rooms where Rachael is examining the windows.) Surely she cannot hear us; the wind is too great. (Raising her voice again.) You cannot enter. If my daughter opens the door to you, it will be after violence to me. Now will you go—or, at least, make no further sign? You are welcome to the shelter of the verandah until the hurricane veers, when you can take refuge in an outhouse.

HAMILTON. You have not an outhouse on the estate. Not one stone is upon another, except in this house. Hardly a tree is standing. If you send me away, it is to certain death.

MISTRESS FAWCETT (in a tone of great distress). What shall I do? I do not wish you so ill as that. If I admit you, will you let me hide you? Promise me not to reveal yourself to Rachael?

HAMILTON. I will not promise.

[Rachael enters. She raises her head with a quick half-comprehending motion.]

RACHAEL. Who is out there?

MISTRESS FAWCETT (she turns sharply, draws herself up, and places her back to the door). James Hamilton.

RACHAEL. Ah! (She is about to advance quickly, when she notes the significance of her mother's face and attitude.) Let him in!

MISTRESS FAWCETT. No.

RACHAEL. It is not possible! You? Why, he must be half-dead. But, of course, you are only waiting to extract a promise from me.

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Will you make it?

RACHAEL. No.

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Then he can die out there in the storm. (Rachael laughs, and approaches her swiftly. Mistress Fawcett raises her hand warningly.) I shall struggle with you,

and you know that will mean *my* death. You may choose between us. (Rachael utters a cry, and covers her face with her hands. Hamilton throws himself against the door with violence, but the iron bar guards it.)

HAMILTON. The hurricane is veering, Mistress Fawcett. Do not you *hear* the absolute stillness? In a few moments it will burst out of the west with increased fury. Unless you admit me, I shall stay here and meet it. I have crawled here, wriggled here, like a snake. It has taken me two hours to cover half a mile. I shall not crawl back. I came here to protect Rachael—to die with her, if inevitable—

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Or to ruin her life.

HAMILTON. That is done.

MISTRESS FAWCETT. True; but I can protect her from worse.

RACHAEL. Very well! You can keep him out. You cannot keep me in. I shall not struggle with you; nor will I admit any one to your house against your will. But if you do not open that door—at once—I go out by another.

MISTRESS FAWCETT. Rachael! Do I count for nothing? I have loved you so! Is this all you have to give me in return?

RACHAEL. I know your motive—your love. I misprize neither. But if women loved their mothers better than the man of their hearts there would be the end of the race. And what is the will of either of us against Fate? Cannot you understand? Why was he permitted to reach me to-night? What man has ever lived through a hurricane before? Nature has held her breath to let him pass. Do you suppose your puny strength can hold us apart? Quick! Answer! (She half turns toward the door leading into the next room.)

MISTRESS FAWCETT. You have conquered. But wait until I am out of this room. (She falls heavily on her crutch, and hobbles out. Rachael holds her breath until the door closes behind her, then runs forward and lowers the bar. Hamilton enters. He is hatless. His long cape is torn and covered with leaves and mould. He closes and bars the door behind him, and Rachael, seeing him safe, and her desire so near to fulfilment, experiences a revulsion of feeling. She falls back, and hurriedly fetching a pan of coals from a corner, fires them, and mixes a punch.)

RACHAEL (hurriedly). You are cold. You are exhausted. In a moment I will give you a hot drink.

[Hamilton, after a long look at her, throws himself into a chair by the table, and stares at the floor, his hand at his head.]

HAMILTON. Thank you. I need it. I feel as if all the hurricane were in my head.

RACHAEL (pouring the punch into a silver goblet). Drink.

HAMILTON. Gratefully! (He raises the goblet.) I drink—to the hurricane.

RACHAEL (she moves restlessly about, but remains on the other side of the table). Tell me of your journey here? I should think you would be gray and old! Ah, the colour comes back to your face! You are young again, already.

HAMILTON (he has drained the goblet and set it on the table; he rises, and looks full at her). Did you doubt that I would come?

RACHAEL (speaking lightly, and averting her eyes). I thought you were on St. Kitts.

HAMILTON (vehemently). Still I would have come. I knew the hurricane would give you to me. And out there, fighting inch by inch, the breath beaten out of my body, my arms almost torn from their sockets, maddened by the terrible confusion, I still knew that Nature was driving me to you, as she has separated us since the day I came, with her smiling, intolerable calm—

RACHAEL (still half-frivolous under the sudden wrench from tragic despair). And, after that

terrible experience, you still have love and romance in you! I should want a warm bed, and then—to-morrow—to-morrow—we will sit on the terrace and watch the calm old sun go down into the calm old sea, with not a thought for the torn old earth—

HAMILTON. Rachael! I did not come here to jest.

RACHAEL. I must go to my mother! She is alone! *What* have I done?

HAMILTON. Stay where you are! Do you mean that you wish you had not opened the door?

RACHAEL (she hesitates a moment, then raises her eyes to his, and answers distinctly). No! (She is leaning on the table, which she has deliberately kept between them. Hamilton throws himself into his chair, and, leaning forward, clasps her wrists with his hands.)

HAMILTON. This hurricane is the end of all things, or the beginning.

RACHAEL (she throws her head back, with a gesture of triumph). The beginning!

HAMILTON. Yes, the storm has come as a friend, not as an enemy, no matter which way—no matter which way. (He speaks hoarsely and slowly. There is a silence, during which they stare at each other until both are breathless, and the table, under the pressure of Hamilton's arms, slowly slips aside.)

RACHAEL. Hark!

HAMILTON. Yes; the storm returns.

[Without further warning, the hurricane bursts out of the West with the fury of recuperated power. The house trembles. The slaves screech in the cellar. A deluge of water descends on the roof. The confusion, waxes louder and louder, until it seems as if the noise alone must grind all things to dust. Hamilton thrusts aside the table, and takes Rachael violently in his arms. Her laugh of delight and triumph blends curiously with the furious noise of the hurricane.]