

# Light Falling on Bamboo

Lawrence Scott



**Tindal  
Street  
Press**

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## I

Rose Debonne Cazabon spoke in a whisper, hardly being heard, unless one of her daughters pressed her ear to her mouth and deciphered her puzzled cry: '*Maman . . . ?*' Her full red lips were now a thin grey line, disappearing when she did not speak. '*Maman . . . veni!*'

'She's calling on her own mother to come and meet her and take her to Paradise.' Rose Clotilde, her younger daughter, turned and spoke to the family, standing and kneeling at the side of the bed. She leaned closer to hear her mother better, kissing her sunken cheeks that used to be smooth and rouged. Her green eyes were large in her seemingly shrunken head, her silvering hair pulled back tightly from her brow.

All the time, the click of rosary beads was mixed with the murmur of prayers: *Notre Père . . . Je vous salu Marie plein de grace . . .*; holy waves breaking upon the shore of death, antiphons for her departure.

Magdeleine Alexandrine, her eldest daughter, led the women in the prayers. These were women whom her mother's family had brought with them from Guadeloupe as enslaved; they were free women now, who had come to witness their madam's passing. They kneeled outside on the gallery, blocking the stairs, perspiring with the heat, saying their prayers in -their patois, *Salu Marie plein de grace . . .* accompanied by the rhythm of the Yoruba chants which was creeping into the swaying of their bodies.

Michel Jean, her youngest son, stood to the side of the proceedings looking in. He was astonished at a world that he

used to forget and then wake up to in nightmares, crying out, 'Maman.' Now he again remembered the prayers, the chant, and found his feet shuffling to the rhythm of the African women. He lost himself in that trance.

He is at St Edmund's, the time he misses his mother the most, just thirteen, sick for home, in the dormitory of the English boarding school with the snow falling outside the window and silently covering all the fields and the roof of the college chapel. Far away, in the distance, across a field of white moonlight, he remembers seeing a single, yellow light burning.

She is at her dressing table poised for her toilette. Then she stands in her peignoir before the open window, the muslin falling loosely about her. Beneath the white cloud is the shadow of her brown nakedness.

Josie is brushing her hair, a fire in her hands with the dying sun, as she collects his mother's hair in her arms, her arms full of crinkling tresses, tresses of Africa and France.

He pictures his mother with her beautiful hair arranged on top of her head, or tied with a rich Madras, Martiniquan style. It is morning and she sweeps it up the nape of her neck into a chignon. Then it is evening and she cradles it in a snood studded with pearls. This is when the families visit to drink punches on the veranda and dine beneath the chandeliers lit with candles. He is curled up on the chaise-longue. He waits to hear her descent from the top of the stairs. He hears the tread of her soft shoes and the train of her satins falling upon each step, slipping over the pitch-pine floor. He imagines it is the sound of water flowing over stones into a river-pool. It becomes a kind of mild thunder.

He hears his mother's voice: 'Take care, girl.' It is Josie descending the stairs, helping his mother with her gown. Josie smiles at him. He and Josie are in attendance.

Where was Josie now? He could not see her among the women with their prayers told upon their rosary beads. His mind sped to the jumbie beads they played with as children. Josie had had a bracelet of jumbie beads, black and red. He

had not seen her since his visit from Paris in 1840. He thought she would have been here to welcome him after all this time. He turned towards his mother's bed. She will not last long, he thought.

When he first started painting women he painted Josie. She had been his ideal of female beauty, his empress. He had made her his Josephine Beauharnais. Every painting of a washerwoman began as Josie. He remembered his own words: 'I'll paint the washerwomen as if they're empresses.'

Leaving the island, and returning intermittently, had created it in his mind as a place of remembrance. Seeing his mother's diminished beauty now, her dying body upon the bed, it comforted him to leave the room and enter the past in his mind. This pilgrimage takes him down the avenue of *palmistes* into the green air of their splendour against an indigo sky. They take him to the ravine below the Corynth house near the Ciperio River. He and Josie are swimming there with her mother, Ernestine. Their black arms are cradling him and bathing his brown skin with green water.

At first, he and Josie had grown like brother and sister, playing together as children in the yard. He thought he had glimpsed her on the veranda among another group of women who had just arrived from Corynth, on the long journey from the Naparimas. They must have taken the steamer from San Fernando. He went towards her. 'Josie.' When the woman turned around it was not Josie.

'*Excusez moi,*' he apologized.

The woman smiled. '*Je m'appelle Celine.*'

'*Ah, excusez moi.* Do you know Josie? You see Josie?'

'Josie? Josephine? Ma Ernestine's daughter? *Non.*'

The yard was filling up. The drums for the wake had started. Their rhythm anticipated the death. He could not see Josie anywhere. He noticed how his sisters followed his every move with their eyes, raised between their prayers for his mother's departing soul.

He stayed with the past. 'Jeansie, Josie, *mes enfants!*' His mother is calling them in from the backyard where they are hiding among the sheets hanging in the breeze, where he plays hide-and-seek with Josie, smacked in the face by the wet sheets.

'Is a white woman he marry, you know.' Michel Jean heard the whispered gossip of the old women from Guadeloupe: 'Is *béké, oui!*' They passed on the gossip between their prayers, between the *Salu Marie plein de grace*.

'They say she's a white woman. He leave she behind in Fwance.' The young woman, her head tied with white cloth, did not realize he was standing behind her. 'He's the last one, *oui*. Is she *bébé*, she little darling!'

The women she was talking to raised their eyes in prayer to take a good look at him. 'Look him, nuh,' one old woman whispered. 'A right gentleman, as them English does say now. Is only them English in the place now, *oui*, girl, taking over everything.'

How would he be able to bring Louise to this country to suffer this gossip? He had forgotten what his small island was like.

He decided to ignore their banter. He continued to look for Josie. Why was she not here to meet him? There was no knowing what his sisters, or even Joseph, his brother, might have told her.

Michel Jean felt again the longing and loss, anticipation and disappointment, arrival and departure, which had shaped his life with his mother. Theirs had been a relationship of correspondence; billets-doux, expressing their passion for each other. He had once found in 1840 on his return from Paris that she had kept all his letters from St Edmund's and from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts tied with ribbon in neat bundles at the top of her linen press. When he read them they read like an autobiography of regret which he had attempted to assuage with fantasies of assurance. He wondered what she had believed. He felt ashamed of himself at times. '*Maman*, I can tell you that there is nowhere else to live but Pigalle with its *cafés-chantants*.'

François Cazabon, his father, had now entered the room. He had just arrived from San Fernando. They acknowledged each other formally. 'Mon père.'

'Mon fils.'

They kissed each other on the cheeks.

There was *Papa*, the figure he carried in his mind, tall in his white linen suit; *that handsome man*, his mother used to say, *he think he can have everything for nothing*. For Michel Jean it was his brown skin which still startled him; lighter brown than his own and, when he was not in his linens, but in his khakis for the cane fields, his sunburned arms were then burned darker brown. Michel Jean watched him now, his nose with the slightest flare of Africa, the Frenchman's nose, from that grandfather and great-grandfather before him, the planter Frenchman in Martinique, who made baby with the black woman in his kitchen. Michel Jean's feelings were now, as always, of attraction and repulsion, fear and at the same time a desire for his father's approval.

'We must meet and talk,' his father said. 'Your mother will soon be gone.'

Michel Jean nodded. 'Oui.' His reply almost inaudible. He then turned his attention to his brother. His father had arrived with his brother, Joseph. 'Mon frère.'

Joseph had met him at the wharf off the steamer earlier in the day with his wife, Jeanne. He had arrived back, just in time, was how Joseph had put it earlier. 'She still with us, boy. She waiting for you, I think.' His sincerity was flawed by his tone of cynicism and jealousy of his mother's special affection for him. He remembered that coldness he had always felt from Jeanne and his brother. Joseph was immediately talking about the will and how little cash there was and how they would have to wait for the right moment to sell land. 'It would be better to leave things in my hands as our sisters have. They leave me to manage their affairs,' he had said. Michel Jean had felt unable to respond right away. With very little business sense himself, he felt that he needed advice.

\*

He had, throughout his childhood, come to understand that his mother had transferred her passion for her husband onto him, her last child, since she had taken him as a baby to live with her when she had left her husband's house. That separation had shaped their lives. She gestured to him now to approach her bedside. 'My darling. You reach. I going soon. Don't forget me.'

He smiled, encouraging her in the last breath of her life, the last moments of her existence, the last departure and farewell.

'It would be nice if you could make another visit and I would be here to welcome you.'

'I know.'

'Your wife? Have you brought her to see your old mother?'

She raised her head a little from the pillow, exuding the scent of vetiver in the draught of her movement, trying to look over his shoulder to where she presumed she might see the woman who was to replace her in his life. He explained that he had had to leave Louise and the children in Paris.

'But she coming, eh? They coming, *oui*?'

'*Oui, oui*, she coming. She wish she could've come. She and the children.' He said this more to comfort her than to set out his plans. How was he to organize their arrival?

Rose Debonne Cazabon surveyed the room with a last glance at her small universe. Then she noticed that François Cazabon had come to stand with his children to witness her going. There was him with Joseph and her two daughters. Michel Jean noticed her recognize them and then turn again towards him. The family witnessed what they had always thought was an indulgent relationship between their mother and their younger brother. Michel Jean noticed them turn towards each other. It was a huddle he remembered well.

Sometimes when Michel Jean thought of his father, it was as if he had never existed. He had to strain for childhood memories of him, those that were pleasant and were without that paradox of fear and attraction. Once he had taken him riding around the estate at Corynth. He was still a small boy and his father had sat him in front of him. He remembered his excitement



being held there between his father's sunburned arms, which were holding the reins of the horse. But then he remembered his panic and screams of fear to be put down. That was when his father used his whip on the rump of his horse. He had been a disappointment to his father. Yes, he would have to deal with him without his mother's protection.

His father came towards him and then turned away when he realized he was still in conversation with his mother.

His brother, the sugar planter, continued to watch. His sisters patted their cheeks, wiping away tears with their kerchiefs.

His mother sank back to her rest, gesturing to Michel Jean again, to come closer. 'Keep true to her, your wife. And you have children now, eh?'

He realized that she was sinking fast, alert one moment, vague another. He nodded. 'A little girl of four and a boy of three.' His mother's asking for his children as she lay dying filled his eyes with tears.

She smiled. He could see that her every gesture was an effort.

He made his effort. 'Rose Alexandrine and Louis Michel.' Saying their names brought them to the bedside; Rosie his jewel, and his little boy.

'*Oui, oui.*' She was telling him that she remembered the family names, the mantras of ancestry that had been passed on to her grandchildren.

His mind sped to Paris along avenues of poplars, across a river with bridges. He saw Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the meadow with the plane trees and the lindens that grew on what he called his little savannah, *la petite savanne*. He and Louise had courted there. They had sheltered under the trees and clung to each other. The children had been christened in the parish church. He could see Louise, with Rose Alexandrine; Louis Michel still in his perambulator. They were an ocean away. They were a fortnightly packet-steamer away, one that would bring Louise's letters to him.

His mother pointed to an envelope on the table beside her bed. He picked it up. She took it from him and pressed it against

his chest, not only the place of his heart, but where she also imagined his soul to reside. These were gestures and thoughts from childhood.

‘Something extra for the children,’ she managed to say, hardly able to open her lips.

‘*Merci bien.*’ He guessed it was money. Then he noticed her looking up over his shoulder to see how his father, his sisters and brother were reacting to this secretive disbursement of the family fortune. He followed her eyes and met theirs. The shuffling of Joseph’s feet and the brisk rearrangement of his sisters’ bombazine skirts told him that they were irritated. His father had long reconciled himself to this state of affairs, as he put it to himself and his family. He had once announced at the dinner table: ‘Your brother is your mother’s child.’ That was the night that Uncle St Luce had teased his father and said, ‘This one, François, was an immaculate conception, eh, *oui!*’ He was careful to be out of earshot of Rose Debonne Cazabon at the time.

Louise’s first letter had arrived in advance of his return. Ernestine brought it to him, as if to remind him of his responsibilities. ‘Jeansie, *mon garçon*. All this time we miss you.’ Then, after embracing him, ‘Is your wife. She must be telling you not to forget she. Josie collect it from the packet.’

‘Ernestine. So long.’ She was like another mother; part of the household for as long as he could remember. At first he did not understand her. Then, taking the letter, he ignored her words and instead inquired after Josie. ‘Where Josie? How come Josie not here?’

‘She somewhere,’ Ernestine said, dismissing his anxiety. Then she added, ‘Why you ent bring your wife? And you have a wife now. No need for all this *commesse* here with Josie, you know. Too much confusion, boy.’

He recalled how Ernestine could upbraid him.

Michel Jean went off to the bedroom that had always been his. He shut the door behind him. There, away from the prayers of