

Chapter 1

Drum Beats

(1850)

Streaks of red and black war paint glistened on the faces of the braves as they leaped and danced around the flames. Long tongues of fire licked at their muscular legs. Their coiled topknots, encrusted with vermilion paint, swung to and fro as they danced. In and out of the flames they moved, their bodies twisting and turning through waves of shimmering heat.

The pulsating sound of drums grew ominous as the figure of a man in a robe of white egret feathers approached. His masked face, grotesque in the firelight, was that of a bird of prey. Only his eyes could be seen, their black depths reflecting the tongues of flame until they seemed to burn of their own accord. He waited as though poised for flight; then, with the shrill cry of a hunting eagle, he plunged through the line of dancing Indians.

Chanting in time with the drums, the birdlike figure raised his arms over the burning coals. Slowly his clenched fists uncurled, and the fire exploded in a spray of brilliant light and flying sparks. Waves of heat and leaping flames shot upward, lifting the braves as they writhed about in their macabre dance.

The masked figure turned, this time beckoning the boy, calling out his name, “Gil-ly, come. Come, Gil-ly. Come!”

“Come on, Gilly! Wake up, son. You’re dreaming. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Eight-year-old Gilly opened his eyes. His mother stood over him, her smile gentle with concern. She reached down and stroked back a lock of his damp hair. As she touched his face, the soft fabric of her white gown rubbed against his cheek. With a shudder, he pulled away, seeing again the feathered robe of his nightmare.

“It’s all right, Gilly. It’s over. I’m with you now.”

“There were drums, Mama. Did you hear them? I’m sure there were drums.”

“Oh, no, child, there were no drums. It’s just the sound of the waves hitting the pier. You were sleeping - you had a bad dream. It’s over now.”

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The woman turned at the sound of footsteps. Her husband stood behind her, his stern face angular in the candlelight. "The boy's right, Marian. Why fool him? There are drums; I've heard them every night for more than a week." He turned away and pounded his fist into his hand. "We'll have to put a stop to this. It's getting out of hand!"

Marian Weldon protectively encircled the child with her arms. "Please, Gilbert, he's far too young to understand. Why frighten him more?"

Gilly felt his mother's body tremble and knew that it was she who was afraid. Why? What did it mean? Where was the sound of the drums coming from?

The boy had reason to wonder at his father's agitation. Gilbert Weldon was a man who prided himself on his self-control, but this was different. It wasn't anger he felt. It was more than that - an explosive mixture of frustration and, though he'd never admit it, a giggling fear.

Tightly cinching the sash of his robe, Gilbert walked to the window and peered into the darkness. He cocked an ear and listened for the distant mutter of the drums. It was the slaves; he was certain of that. The sounds were coming from Ladies Island. He could only hope that none of his people was involved. The patrol was sure to catch them tonight. If not, they'd be forced to call in the militia. Nothing struck terror into the hearts of the planters on these lonely islands quite as much as the thought of a slave rebellion. If the blacks once realized that they could overwhelm their masters by sheer numbers, there would be a blood bath!

While the master of Weldon Oaks fretted over the problem of the drums, his young son fought back sleep with an imagination made more vivid by the candlelight and the echoing sounds coming from the darkened forest. A slave rebellion was the furthest thing from his mind. He had never given serious thought to the social status of the Negroes. They were just there - like the house and the fields. It was the Indians who filled his nightly dreams. Their shadowy forms danced across the walls, and their ghostly faces leered at him with every beam of moonlight that filtered through the shuttered windows.

It was Gullah Jim who had stirred Gilly's imagination with his spellbinding stories. And how he could tell them! - as though he had been there himself those many years ago when the Yemasseees and Guales streaked their faces with war paint and sharpened the long, curved blades of their scalping knives. If a boy listened with more than his ears, he found himself there too. Gilly let his eyelids droop and

close. In his mind he could hear Jim's musical voice telling of that fateful day when the Yemasseees had come to Coosaw.

"Ki! Dat ben many a year gone by. Many a year!" The old man's lilting voice, laced with the words and nuances of his West African heritage, gently touched his listener's ear. "What year be dis?" he asked.

"Eighteen-fifty," answered Gilly, proud of possessing such knowledge.

"Dat's right den, many a year gone by. De buckra -" at this, the old black looked sideways to see if the boy comprehended. "De white man don't hab many slaves back den, but me-oh-my, dey sho got Injuns." Jim rolled his eyes for effect. "Lots and lots ob Injuns!

"Happen dis-a-way. Yemasseees - dat ben de name of dese Injuns - Yemasseees get tired ob all de promises giben - neber kept. Tired of de buckra stealin' de land, cuttin' de trees, damin' de creeks. One day all dose Injuns get demselbes togeda an' commences fer ta fight ..."

And so old Jim told and retold the story. Gilly could repeat it by heart. More than that, with his eyes closed and his mind drifting back - back in time - he could see it all happening.

The small farmstead lay nestled among the pines, the spring sunshine softening the sharp edges of its crude buildings with the pale light of early morning. The homesteader placed the last baskets of salted fish and smoked meat in his flat-bottomed bateau. He would barter them in Port Royal for the seed he needed for spring planting. Rubbing the remnants of salt from his hands onto the stiff fabric of his breeches, he reached out and touched his young bride's face and then brushed her cheek with a gentle kiss.

For a long moment, they stood there looking into each other's eyes. Then, sensing the start of her tears, he turned away abruptly, fearful that any further hesitation would undo his purpose. He stepped into his boat and, with a final wave, poled the awkward craft away from the bank until the pull of the current took it to midstream.

The young woman standing on the muddy bank shaded her eyes from the shimmering glare of sunlight on the moving water. She watched intently as the small boat reached the distant bend in the river. As it slowly drifted out of sight, she lifted her arm in farewell. Blinded by the brightness of the water, she was oblivious to the long dugout canoes skulking among the shadows on the opposite shore.

The Yemasseees, their faces smeared with black and red paint, the symbols of war and death, bode their time until a restless flock of white egrets resettled themselves on the frilly branches of the tall cypress that

marked the far bend in the river. When all was quiet, the braves moved out across the water, leaving hardly a ripple to mark their passage. A swarm of buzzing flies followed in their wake, attracted by the dried blood on the scalping knives and the gruesome remnants of Human hair that dangled from the deerskin belts of the war party.

The small group of braves crept silently toward the newly built cabin under the pines. The woman was alone. One of the braves, the leader of the group, made a quick decision and motioned his men to put up their knives. Approaching the cowering woman, his mouth twisted in a menacing sneer, he reached out and grasped a lock of her shining auburn hair. Twisting the strands of hair around his hand as one would appraise a skein of new yarn, he grunted and pointed to the river. For the time being she would be more useful to them alive. The brave nearest the leader moved with the swiftness of a springing panther. He bound the woman's hands and dragged her to his waiting canoe.

Terrified of what was to become of her, the woman could do no more than lie in the bottom of the canoe and watch the destruction of the island homesite that she and her husband had worked so hard to build. It was with a resigned certainty that she knew she would never see it again.

The farm animals - the milk cow, the hogs, the old mule, and the squawking chickens - meant nothing to the Yemassees. They had the wealth of the forests and streams to choose from, but the lust for blood and revenge was upon them. Opening the pens, they slaughtered the helpless creatures within, wreaked havoc on the outbuildings, fired the main house, and carried off whatever implements they deemed valuable. Having finished their violent deed, they returned to their canoes and silently disappeared into the rising mists of the shadowy river.

Two days passed before the man returned. He sensed disaster even before rounding the bend. The sickening smell of smoke and carrion clung to the air. A flock of vultures rose at his approach, their thick bodies and long wings moving across the face of the sun to cast morbid, moving shadows on the water. His buildings were gone; smoldering piles of ashes marked the places where they had been.

As his foot touched the shore, the horrible smell of decaying flesh struck him, causing him to stumble backward. Feeling the bile rise in his throat, he pressed his hand across his face and willed himself to approach the animal pens. His mule and the milk cow lay where they

had been slaughtered, their bodies bloated and flyblown. The hogs and chickens lay scattered about in the horrid confusion of panicked victims seeking to outrun the certainty of death.

There were moccasin prints everywhere - their toed-in patterns telling of those who had wreaked the carnage. Walking cautiously to the rubble that had once been his home, the man shuddered involuntarily, certain of what he would find in the ashes. Steeling himself, he took up a branch and raked through the charred wood but could find nothing resembling human remains.

Dropping the branch, he searched the shattered pens and storage bins. He skirted the creek bed and ran through the pine woods, shouting out her name, all the time hoping to find some small sign. But only the raucous calls of the scavenger birds answered him. Finally, with bowed head and heaving shoulders, he retraced his steps to the bank of the river. It was there, half-covered with mud, that he found her silk slipper.

"... and it's time he learned." Gilly shook himself from the lifelike horror of his dream. His father was still talking. Pulling away from his mother's arms, he sat up on the edge of the bed. It was vital that he know about the drums. What if the savages came back to Coosaw?

"Papa, what do the drums mean? Will the Indians come back?"

Gilbert Weldon shook his head. His wife was right; he had no business scaring the boy with this talk of drums. "No, Gilly, the Indians have been gone for years."

"Where did they go, then?"

Gilbert lifted his son in his arms. "The tribe was scattered, son. Most of them joined the Creek nation in their migration to the mountains beyond the upcountry." He hesitated, thinking back to the stories that, in his own childhood, he so loved to hear. "I've heard it said that there were those who went south - down through the Okefenokee - or possibly all the way into Florida."

"Aren't there any left in the Low Country, then, Papa? Perhaps they've just gotten mixed up with some of our people."

Gilbert was startled by the boy's insight. How, at such a young age, had his son hit upon the one thought that so often added to his own fears of an uprising? It was common knowledge, of course, that slaves did escape from time to time. But the possibility that many of them might have joined with the Indian nations, eventually blending into a potentially fierce fighting force, was a matter not openly discussed. The red men had never taken well to the slave economy. With the two

bloods mixed, and with revenge as their motive, they would be hard to stop.

Gilbert decided that in this case, evasion would be the best response. "It's possible, son, but not worth worrying about. In any case, I've heard that there are a few of them left in Yemassee Town, but they're a rather dispirited lot - poor as sharecroppers."

His wife reached out and took the boy in her arms once more. "Gilbert, you must talk to Jim. He's the one who's filling the child's head with tales. It's no wonder he has nightmares!"

"No, they're not just tales, Marian. Those stories are a part of his heritage. You mustn't be so hard on old Jim; he means well."

Gilly glanced at his father. So it was true; there were Indians. If so, surely it was they who talked at night with their drums. He tried to digest the information; but something didn't fit. Yemassee Town was miles away. Could the sound of drums carry so far?

Papa lifted Gilly up and stood him on the bed. He grasped his shoulders and made him stand straight and tall. "Son, you must never let fear overcome you. A strong man must first learn to master himself before he can be the master of others." He waited for Gilly to nod his understanding and then continued. "There are things that, from time to time, you may question - things that don't seem entirely fair. But remember this: the inferior races were nothing more than savages before we civilized them."

Gilly looked at his father quizzically, wondering how such a nice conversation had suddenly turned into a lecture. What did his father mean by "inferior races"? Considering, however, the stern look that had come across Papa's face, perhaps it was better not to ask. But he was wide awake now and enjoying himself. Gilly decided to take a different tack. "What about the pirates, Papa? Gullah Jim said there used to be lots of pirates."

Gilbert Weldon let out a deep laugh. "I'm not a storyteller, son, not like old Jim. But I do know this: there's meaning to every story that he tells. They're not just idle tales! Oh, sometimes he'll make them sound that way - animals that talk and people who fly - but there's something real behind all of that imagination." He stopped and looked sideways at his wife, then quickly added, "Of course, animals don't talk like people, and people don't fly like birds. Jim knows that. Listen to him with your heart and not your head, son."

"Gilbert, please!" Marian Weldon's voice was laced with tears. The flickering candlelight accentuated the pallid lines of her face. "It's one o'clock in the morning. The boy needs his sleep!"

Gilbert stood up and gently placed his arm around his wife's sagging shoulders. "I'm sorry, Marian. Of course, you're right. We've had too many of these late nights." He bent down and pressed the boy back onto the soft goose-down mattress. "Gilly, you must try to go to sleep now. Your mama needs her rest, son. We'll be having a new baby in the house soon. Now, won't that be fine? You'll have a little brother or sister to play with."

Gilly sat upright and stuck out his lower lip. He didn't consider that "fine" at all. He was quite happy the way things were.

"This is quite enough for the night, Gilly," Mama said as she kissed him on the forehead. "Now close your eyes and go to sleep."

She blew out the candle by his bed, kissed him again, and then she and Gilbert tiptoed from the room. As they walked away, Gilly caught the first few sentences of their conversation.

"Marian, I'm going down to Maum Beezie's cabin in the morning. It's high time we had a children's nurse back here. She really should have stayed after helping with Gilly's birth. I know I can trust her. After all, she was my nurse when I was a child."

"I know you're right, but I hate to give up his care. Besides, Maum Beezie is growing older. Perhaps we should consider someone else. What about Josephine?"

"Indeed not! Josephine's talents obviously lie in the kitchen. I'll not have a perfectly good cook sent off to mind children."

"Then one of the young women from the quarters, perhaps one with small children."

"Marian, Maum Beezie may be growing older, but she knows how to handle children better than any field hand. Running a plantation house is no easy matter. This is not the time to be training field hands as nursemaids, especially when we have a perfectly good one in Maum Beezie. With another child on the way ..."

Their voices trailed off down the hallway and disappeared. Gilly lay quietly for a while until the house grew still. He listened intently. There it was again, the thumping of the drums - and something else. Was it voices he heard in the wind, voices chanting in time with the drums?

He tiptoed through the shadowy room to the window and quietly slid it open. His bedroom faced east, and he could smell the salty breath of the sea in the freshening breeze. He stretched as far over the

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windowsill as he dared. There lay the river beyond the row of oaks, but the drum sounds were not coming from the direction of the river. They were coming from the south. If it were the Indians of Yemassee Town, surely he would hear them coming from up the river.

His gaze traveled from the river to the sky. High, thin clouds scudded along, covering the full moon, turning its light into a silver haze that glistened like frost on the massive live oaks. Long, thick shrouds of Spanish moss hung from the gnarled branches of the trees. The wind made them sway like tattered battle flags. Only the wind could be heard now. The thud of drums and the fainter sounds of chanting had stopped.

Suddenly the moon broke free from the clouds. A long, shimmering path of golden light stretched as far as his eye could see across the wide mouth of the Coosaw River. Gilly concentrated his gaze on the path of light, wondering if it would reveal a flotilla of war canoes or perhaps a pirate ship, but the river was empty. There was nothing; only the moonlight and the distant hunting cry of an osprey.

Gilly twisted around so that he could look to the south, the direction of the drums. Beyond the wide, dark lawns rose a forest of tall pines and oaks. Thickets of cedar and palmetto scrub clustered beneath the overhanging branches of the tall trees. The edges of the woods were dark and constantly moving with the winds that swept these small Sea Islands off the Carolina coast. When the wind came from the south or from the west, it smelled of the marshes and the forest, pungent and earthy. That was the smell that Papa liked best. But Gilly preferred the tangy smell of the ocean. It was clean and made him feel brave - brave like a pirate.

Pulling himself back in through the window, Gilly sat cross-legged on the cold floorboards. If it was not the Indians, then who was beating the drums? He stood up to take one last look. Just as he was pulling away, his eye caught a movement in the shadowed moonlight. A young Negro, probably in his late teens, was moving quietly across the lawns toward the woods. He was tall, and his muscles were already well developed from hard labor in the fields. The slave turned once and looked up at the house, but Gilly knew he hadn't been spotted in the dark window.

As the clouds parted again, a flood of moonlight illuminated the yard. The child had a clear view of the young buck's face. It was Cudjo, one of the new lot that Papa had purchased some months ago in Charleston. Two long, white scars ran diagonally down each of Cudjo's

cheeks, and a bright band of copper hung about his neck. Gullah Jim had explained that the scars were marks of honor, given to Cudjo by his father when he still lived in Africa. The copper ring warded off sickness and evil.

Gilly knew that the African slave ships were illegal now. Laws had been passed to stop their offensive trade in human beings some years ago. The thousands upon thousands of Africans brought to America over the past two hundred years already far outnumbered their white masters here in the southern states, where slave labor was such a vital part of the economy.

But as young as he was, Gilly also knew that the trade still went on, albeit in secret. These very islands were ideal for such contraband activities. With their vast network of ocean inlets, rivers, and tidal creeks, the Sea Islands could swallow up a swift slaver as though it had never existed.

Cudjo was a product of that trade. He had come from Africa by way of the West Indies. He was strong and quick-witted, and by the time he was on the auction block in Charleston, he carried a chip of burning anger on his shoulder.

This was no way to treat the eldest son of an Ibo chieftain! Cudjo felt no pity for his fellow countrymen who were also being sold into slavery. They were beneath his station and worthy of their lot, but he had been destined to be a great chieftain. As the reality of his fall in status began to sink in, he determined that one day he would have his revenge.

Gilly watched Cudjo move toward the wood line and thought back to the day the young black had been brought to Coosaw by the overseer. The marks of the chains were still on his wrists and ankles, and the long, white scars on his face made him look as savage as any painted Indian. The overseer had obviously used force on the long journey home.

"Keep a sharp eye on that young buck," spit out the overseer as he discussed the latest purchases with Papa. "He's as mean as a crocodile and just about as uppity. Had to keep him chained the entire way down here. Sure wouldn't turn my back on him, not that one!"

Gilly had seen Cudjo look directly at the overseer then. He was too young to know what that look implied. A practiced observer, however, would have recognized it as pure hatred waiting only for the right time and place to erupt. Even Papa had missed it.

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But as the months passed, young Cudjo settled into the routine of the plantation with surprising ease. His quick wits had often caught Gilbert Weldon's attention. The master saw the promise of leadership in the boy. If he failed to notice the calculating smile or the gleam in the eye, like that of a leopard waiting to pounce, it was only due to the fact that Cudjo had a way of worming himself into the master's good graces.

As the master's trust in him grew, Cudjo was given more and more responsibility, and with it a good deal more freedom. Perhaps that was why he was on his way into the forest on this particular night, though it was well past the curfew time, when the slaves were to remain in their quarters.

Gilly moved closer to the window as the last flickering shadows of Cudjo's figure disappeared into the underbrush. Again he heard the distant sound of the drums. Now he knew where Cudjo was going. He was going to the place of the drums!