

'Money gives a memorable voice to people whose lives have largely been ignored by history and fiction.' *Sunday Times*

'Rip-roaring adventure and unspeakable tragedy . . . However, it's Lucien's voice that steals the show – a mix of raw vigour and high-flown poetry peppered with cleverly deployed creole. If Lucien's charm sweetens a bitter pill, this is ultimately a shaming story of wicked injustice to leave your heart heavy.' *Daily Mail*

'This is not the slave narrative you might expect: readers bracing themselves for scenes of torture and ill-treatment will initially be surprised. Harris's great triumph is Lucien's voice . . . It is in Grenada that Harris makes the brutal reality of slavery utterly plain. The risk of her earlier restraint has paid off and the brief, harrowing scenes towards the novel's climax have an extra power because of it.' *Spectator*

'A vivid, perfectly paced tale of slavery and freedom, innocence and experience, love and despair, *Sugar Money* is told in an unforgettably beautiful language. What a stunning writer Jane Harris is, mastering an extremely harrowing and complex subject and making it into art.' Amanda Craig

'Beautifully written with a taut story-line and shrewd characterisation, *Sugar Money* is singularly impressive.' *Book Riot*

'*Sugar Money* is at times brutal and hard to read, but it's also a story that swells with empathy and hope. Terrific stuff.' *Big Issue*

JANE HARRIS

SUGAR MONEY

A Novel



FABER & FABER

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PART ONE

St Pierre, Martinique, Western Antilles

DECEMBER 1765

Chapter One

I was tethering the cows out by the pond when a boy came into our pasture saying that Father Cléophas himself want to see me tout suite in the morgue. Never having set eyes upon this child before I simply looked at him askance. He must have been somewheres about my own age; a mulatto, like myself, perhaps a shade darker than me, a hair smaller. His jaw hung loose and he had froth at the corners of his mouth from which signs I deem him to be of no startling intelligence. I spat on the muddy ground that lay between us to show my scant regard for him. Then I told him something he could do if he had a mind to.

The boy he scowled and thrust out his hand. There upon his palm lay a silver-mounted rabbit foot. This grisly talisman belong to Cléophas who found it on the Sugar Landing in St Pierre and kept it to remind himself of home, though it were a superstitious charm and most likely inapt to his faith. I had seen that pitiful scrap of fur and claw manys a time hence knew the Father must indeed have sent this chucklehead, now telling me he would tend to my beasts once I had gone. And since I knew no different then, I thought he meant whiles I went to the morgue.

‘Hé! Poté mannèw!’ said the boy, in our kréyòl tongue. *‘Ou kouyon, wi!’*

Though it would be unwise to make Cléophas wait, I refuse to be hurried by this poor fool, and I daresay I took my time strolling over to Victorine to gather in her rope. My chief employment was to tend livestock for the friars and since I would rather do that than toil on their plantation, you can bet I slung to my chores like a Hercules. Those animals so spoil they fancy themselves kings and queen. Victorine she leaned against me, entirely companionable, whiles I moored her up to the stake. She had the fluffiest most velvety ears of any cow you ever did see and her milk always came plentiful and sweet. I had no fancy to abandon her and her sisters to the care of this stranger; some might say a half-wit at that.

Meanwhile, the boy puffed up his cheeks and paced about, inspecting the little herd. The way he strutted and squinted and stroke his chin you would have took him for some Béké colonial cattle-merchant.

‘What’s your name?’ I asked him.

‘Descartes,’ says he.

Now, I might have been a young tom-fool back in those days but whenever the friars discuss the world beyond the islands I kept my ears open and I had heard tell of many great men, René Descartes among them. Seem to me some former master must have name this boy in cruel jest, for I have known game-fowl with more savvy.

I watched him strut about a-whiles then asked him:

‘They name you after the philosopher?’

‘Filo-*kwa*?’ says the boy.

‘The scholar: Descartes. They gave you his name?’

Boy shook his head, emphatic, then dealt an imaginary hand of Piquet.

‘*Mé non*,’ says he. ‘*Dé KARTES, tu vwa?* You damn silly. Playing cards.’

Poor boy had more teeth than brains. I could only hope none of my cattle would suffer whiles in his care.

‘Well, Descartes, you best not harm these ladies,’ I told him. ‘Or else.’ And I showed him my fist, mostly in jest. Then I snatch the rabbit foot from him and took off running like a redshank to the hospital.

The Fathers had constructed the morgue a short distance from the main building in the shade of abundant trees; a stone house in miniature, small enough for to make you laugh had you not known its gruesome purpose. High jalousie windows and walls three feet thick kept the temperature inside cool. I hesitated at the doorway, turning my straw hat in my hands. Not that I felt afraid; I had been in that morgue before. Just the dim light of the interior did blind me awhile. When my eyes adjusted, there stood Father Cléophas and, on the table before him, a naked field hand, dead as a dead herring. Since August they had been perishing at the rate of about one a week, struck down by a raging distemper no amount of prophylactic or purges would cure. For now, the poor dead fellow lay there all of a piece but only a matter of time before Cléophas finish washing him and then he would slice the belly open and haul out the inners. It was a known fact that our surgeon Fathers like to hack up a cadaver, poke around inside. They put our livers and lights in pickle jars and called it Learning. The very thought of it – and the ripe smell of the morgue – would have made a person of delicate disposition queasy. The field hand lips had all shrunk back; his teeth expose; eyes open. There be a fly stood on one of his eyeball but

the poor dumb clod would never blink again; he had gone *kickeraboo*, most certainly.

That corpse had me so hypnotise, it took me a moment to notice my brother Emile stood nearby in the shadows. Blow me tight. The sight of him there made me jump in my linen. I took him for dead too, just propped against the wall – until he opened his eyes. Mary and Joseph! I laughed out loud and was the gladdest kind of boy alive until, slapdash, it occur to me to wonder exactly *why* he might be return to the hospital. Emile gave me a dismal look as much to say: ‘Well, here we are,’ just as Cléophas beckon me in with a ‘*Bonjour*’ and bid me put his rabbit foot on the bench. I set the hairy toes beside some medicine jars. Meanwhile, the old man turn to drop his cloth into a bowl and whiles his gaze averted I whisper to my brother:

‘*Sa ou fè?*’

But before Emile could tell me how he was or explain his presence, Cléophas had stepped around the table toward us, one finger raised as though to reprimand me. He had been with us several month by that time and the sun had tawned his skin such that it now shone like beeswax in the gloom.

‘Prattle all you like in that gibberish,’ says he, in his same-old fussy-fussy French. ‘But I’m reliably informed, Lucien, that you speak another language.’

At first I thought he must mean his own tongue. Our friars hailed from Paris, *Fwance* and wanted us slave to speak as they did but we converse mostly like our mothers, in a hodge-podge of their own languages and French and –

though we knew more of *la langue française* than our elders – we were prone to vex the friars with bombast kréyòl.

‘English,’ says Cléophas. ‘I’m told you speak it like a native.’

Perhaps this knack of mine might be a misdeed for which he would scold me inasmuch as, though the war had ended, we still considered England to be the enemy. I cut a glance at my brother. He seem calm enough but I could spot that his breath came fast and shallow. For what purpose he had been summon now I knew no more than a moth. But life had taught us to expect the worst; we were both full of dread and would have twittered in our shoes, had we worn any.

‘No need to look worried, my son,’ the old man said. ‘I speak a little English myself. I gather you learned it in Grenada from that man-nurse, Calder.’

I nodded.

‘Pray let me hear you,’ said Cléophas. He picked up the rabbit foot and slipped it into the folds of his cassock. ‘Say something in English.’

I thought for a moment and presently did as bid, allowing old phrases to come to my lips just as I remembered them; though I took care to leave out the abundant foul curses I knew and use to spout with relish.

‘Good day, Father. How do you do? My name is Lucien. I am thirteen or fourteen years old or thereabouts. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Where is the ipecac? Good boy. Give this man a medal. Bring me a jug. The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,

but in ourselves, that we are underlings. The fever has broken. The fever has return. They all have a fever. Fetch bandages and hot water. This leg must come off. She is dead. He is dead. They are all—’

Cléophas raise his hand.

‘Enough,’ said he. ‘I believe you.’

For true, I had not sought his belief but it would have been rash to point this out; and since I had deference ingrained in my very bones, I bessy-down and made him an obeisance.

‘Now then,’ says he. ‘There’s something I want you boys to do for me.’

And in this manner here the whole entire enterprise did commence, exactly so.

Some masters are swift to get to the point when they give instructions; you might say they go directly through the main door, cross the threshold, no hesitation. Father Cléophas was not one of these. He would walk around the property first, try the windows, then wander off into the garden to gaze at the roof before eventually he retrace his step to the front of the dwelling and give a tentative knock and – whiles he went on this bumbling circumbendibus – you oblige to go with him, wondering what abominable toil or trouble might be in store for you whenever he finally came around and stated his requirement. With this rigmarole and in other ways, Cléophas like to cultivate the impression of being an absent-minded, kindly fellow and he would beguile you with that bilge awhile until you became better acquainted and began to cognise just how sly he could be, for true. My brother and I had encountered all manner of individual among the friars: a spectrum of humanity, from gentle coves who scarce could bear to swat a musquito to the most heartless bully. Whiles Cléophas might not be the worst kind of tyrant, for true, he was surely as slippery as a worm in a hogshead of eel.

As for my brother, they said he had enough brains for to run a parliament. He was more than twice my age but I

considered myself to be just as much a man, though in those days I lacked his talent with the pigeon peas and mummy apple. Beforetimes, he had slave for our friars, planted their growing grounds, first in Grenada then Martinique, until they sold him to some Dominican monks on the far side of the island, a long-day hike away. He had lost weight since last I saw him, about a year previous, when his masters had sent him back to the hospital with a gift of wine for the Fathers. Beneath his clothes, his body look to be naught but pure muscle and bone; a sculptor could have used him as a model for a fine-figured deity. His skin *peau-chapotille*, like mine – the pale bronze of ripe sapotillier fruit – but on that day his face had a chalky tinge and I fell to wonder about his health. Whiles listening to the Father, he appear to be the embodiment of patient attention but he had a gleam behind his gaze – a gleam such as only I, his brother, could detect – and it struck me that he must be taking the measure of this friar and would soon reach a verdict akin my own.

Meanwhile, Cléophas had finally crept up behind his point. Well, he required us to deliver some few medicinal plant to a colleague on Grenada. My brother and I were no strangers to that island, a former French territory now in English hands. We both had served *les Frères* at the hospital in the main town of Fort Royal and I was born there by all account. What Cléophas describe was a task of some magnitude, a voyage by sea to the place we had once called home. Listening to the old bolus drivel on, I grew thrill to the very marrow. An expedition with Emile to *La Grenade* struck me

as naught but an adventure. Thus, when I turn to my brother, I felt all a-mort to see his shoulders droop. He look twice as miserable as before.

Cléophas must have observe this too, for he said:

'You surprise me, Emile. I was led to believe you might like to see Grenada again.' He awaited a reply but my brother simply composed his features, drew himself upright, so. 'There was a girl, I'm told,' Cléophas continued. 'Her name – perhaps you can remind me . . . Estelle?'

My brother pursed his lips so tight you would have thought he wish them seal for the course of ages but the Father continue to stare at him such that Emile had no choice but to respond.

'Céleste,' said he, his voice hoarse.

'Well,' says Cléophas. 'I expect you'll be glad to fetch her back with you when you return to Martinique.'

Perhaps the old buffer had took leave of his senses for this could scarce be a serious proposition. Céleste – along with our former confreres at the Fort Royal hospital – was now in the hands of the English. What the friar said next did little to dispel our bewilderment.

'You can bring her as well as the others.'

A moment pass, then my brother said:

'Beg pardon, Father – what others?'

Cléophas spread his hands as much to say the matter self-explained.

'Our other Negroes in Grenada. You may as well bring them too.'

' . . . The hospital slaves?' says Emile.

'Indeed, those at the hospital.' The Father gave a careless pout in the French manner. 'And also the field hands from the plantation.'

Emile threw me a startle glance.

'But that would be – please you, Father – many slave.'

'Forty-two, at the last count,' says Cléophas. 'A number of them have perished recently. And some might be too old or sick but the fact is, the healthy ones should be here with us. No need to tell you what brutes those English are; they treat their Negroes so badly. We must get our own slaves back into our possession. We've lost so many this year to fever; we must replenish. There's the rest of our land to clear and plant, not to mention our plans for the new distillery. With so few of us Fathers left, it's too much. Also, we could use those hospital Negroes, the trained nurses, particularly Céleste; I understand she is very skilled. There is free passage to Grenada now and the treaty with England seems to have endured – the time is right to bring these Negroes here to us, to where they rightfully belong. It is the will of God.'

For true, I knew that Cléophas had been buttering the authority in Grenada and had even sail to Fort Royal for parleys with the English, angling to recover those slave. Emile may have heard the same rumour but he still look puzzled entirely.

'Forgive me, Father,' he said. 'Perhaps I misunderstand. You want us to round up the hospital slaves and all the plantation hand and bring them back here with us?'