

ELIZABETH HUTCHISON BERNARD

Temptation

A NOVEL

Rag



BELLE
EPOQUE
PUBLISHING

*For my mother, Helen J. Hutchison,
who gave me the precious gift of song.*

ACT I

1895–1896

*Oh, de white ban' play hits music, an' hit's mighty good
to hyeah,*

An' it sometimes leaves a ticklin' in yo' feet;

But de hea't goes into bus'ness fu' to he'p erlong de eah,

W'en de colo'ed ban' goes marchin' down de street.

—From “The Colored Band,” Paul Laurence Dunbar



Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1872–1906

Threads

**SEDALIA, MISSOURI
NOVEMBER 1895**

When the train pulled into Sedalia, it was evening. Late November was a quiet time of year. The traveling minstrel shows that made stops all through the summer were long gone. They wouldn't be back until spring. That was fine by Strap Hill. He wasn't looking for work. Not with a booking just a few weeks off in the biggest, richest city in the world—or so he'd been told, because he had yet to see New York City for himself. Lately, though, he didn't mind telling anybody who'd listen how New York was the answer to a poor man's prayer. With a good ring shout and a little bit of luck, no telling how far you might go. As for him, he was plenty happy to ride on the coattails of Mr. Ben Harney, the young Kentuckian fast making a name for himself as the originator of ragtime.

Standing on the platform, Strap took a minute to admire the view, the last rays of sun spreading a golden glow over the rolling hills of central Missouri. Looked to him like fine

farmland. A man could probably make a half-decent living around here if he was of a mind to get his hands dirty. But that wasn't the life for him. No sir! His sights were set on making it big. Money was the answer to everything, and he was about to grab onto a whole bunch of it, just as fast as he could.

He buttoned up his brand-new wool frock coat and pushed his bowler down tight on his head so the wind couldn't take it. Carrying his old leather suitcase, he hurried down the steps and turned south.

The railroad meant there were jobs to be had, and the frontier town had grown to a population of about fifteen thousand. A wooden sidewalk ran the length of Main Street, the buildings mostly one- and two-story brick, some with corrugated-iron awnings. Strap passed by a row of storefronts—general store, barber shop, feed store, hardware store. They were already closed for the night, the shopkeepers at home with their families or maybe enjoying a little libation at one of the taverns down the street. Exactly where Strap was headed now.

"Hey, stranger, lookin' for a little fun?"

He eyed the half-open door but kept walking, chuckling to himself. He had no illusions about being a ladies' man. He could imagine how they might write him up for some "Wanted" poster back in Memphis: *Be on the lookout for Strap Hill, short and wiry, black as pitch, nose wide and flat as a pancake, a big gap between his two front teeth*. Not the prettiest picture, but still he figured he'd have plenty of opportunities with the ladies once he got to New York, after he made a name for himself as Ben Harney's sideman.

By the time Strap hit the center of town, it was like a whole different place. The doors to the pool halls and honky-tonks were thrown wide open, lights glowing and sounds of piano music filtering onto the street. Without too much trouble, he found the Maple Leaf Club and went inside. The place was packed, the smoke thick as fog. The crowd was mostly Negroes

and a few whites, mingling together as if there were nothing strange about it. He headed across the room, past the pool and gaming tables, on his way to the bar stretched along the back wall. The colored bartender was sloshing a wet rag across the counter. He looked up and, seeing Strap, tossed it aside.

"What'll you have?"

"Whiskey." Strap settled onto a high stool, unbuttoned his coat, and shoved his suitcase under his boots. "Who's playing tonight?"

"Whoever show up, I reckon."

"You know Otis Saunders?"

"Otis? Sure, he's a regular." The bartender yelled, "Anybody see Otis?"

"Seen him playing pool little while back," somebody called out. "There he is, coming this way!"

Strap swung around on the stool and watched as Otis Saunders strutted toward the bar. His friend was just like Strap remembered him, with the sure step and easy smile of somebody who knows what he's all about. He couldn't help being just a little bit jealous the way all the ladies turned to ogle as Otis sailed by.

"Somebody asking for me?"

Strap jumped up and stuck out his hand. "Good to see you, Otis."

Otis's eyes lit up. "Why, if it ain't Strap Hill! I'll be dogged! What you doing in Sedalia, man?" he said, landing a hearty slap on Strap's back.

"Way you and Joplin was talking about this place, knew someday I have to see it for myself."

Strap had met Saunders and Scott Joplin during the world's fair, the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in the summer of '93. He and Otis ended up in a scrape with a couple of cops on Colored American Day, when twenty-five hundred people gathered in Festival Hall for a celebration of Negro cultural

achievement and the powerful statesman Frederick Douglass seized the occasion to make a fiery speech about how bad things were for his people—no jobs, no respect, no payback for all they had contributed to the country. Afterward, when everybody was streaming out of the big hall, it seemed like the cops were just looking to nab a colored man, with or without reason. Strap and Otis were the unlucky ones.

Strap noticed how Otis was eyeing him up and down, probably wondering what he'd been up to that he could afford fancy threads like he had on. But it turned out Otis already knew.

"Heard you're singing with Ben Harney."

"That's right."

Otis rubbed his chin. "He fessed up yet to where he learned how to rag, or still claiming to invent it all by himself?"

Otis's question put Strap on the defensive. "Don't matter to me if he invented ragging or not. Long as folks like it."

"Don't get me wrong, Strap." Otis rested his hand on Strap's shoulder. "I don't have nothing against Harney. I hear he's a good man, almost like one of us. Fact is, don't know any other white man touring with a colored band. Unless maybe it's that he's got some black in him after all. There's rumors about that, you know. What do *you* say? You seen him up close."

"He look plenty white to me. And the way he talk about his family, seem they's all big shots. Says his grandpa's in the government, a state senator or something. Somebody else a professor at the university, wrote a book about numbers. For Kentucky, the Harneys is kind of like blue bloods, I guess."

"Sure like to know where Ben Harney learned to rag," Otis said, shaking his head.

"What difference it make?"

Otis gave him a look, like he ought to know better. "Just ain't right, Strap. Ragging is *our* invention. That rhythm come straight from Africa, you know as well as me. Straight from the black man's soul. Ain't right for Harney to claim it's all his idea."

Strap didn't say anything. When it came to fancy talking, he figured he was no match for Otis. Besides, maybe his friend was right. But that wasn't going to stop him from playing Tony Pastor's vaudeville theater with Ben Harney billed as the bona-fide originator of ragtime. Why, he'd have to be a fool to pass up a chance like that.

Otis glanced over his shoulder. "Sorry, buddy, but I got to go. The folks are getting restless. I'm on tonight." He gave his fingers a good stretch, then rubbed his palms together fast and hard, like he was trying to start a fire. "How long you going to be in Sedalia?"

"Got to head out to New York pretty soon."

"You'll room with me while you're here. Long as you like."

"You sure I won't be putting you out?"

"Listen, Strap." Otis leaned in close. "I'm going to introduce you to my sister, Bess. She's a real looker and sweet as a tub o' honey."

"That sound mighty good."

"You're going to love it here. Fact is, I could see you getting real comfortable in Sedalia. Settling down with a nice girl? Doing a little singing and shouting on the side?"

Strap couldn't help laughing. No way he was staying in Sedalia! Not with what he had ahead of him in New York City.

Fame, fortune, and everything he thought went with it.

A Secret Life

**NEW YORK CITY
DECEMBER 1895**

May opened the top drawer of her French serpentine commode, inhaling the scent of lavender as she slipped her hand beneath a pile of silk camisoles and wrapped her fingers around the soft tooled-leather cover of her journal. Quickly, because she hadn't much time, she extracted the book and went to the fireplace. Leaning in to catch the light from the crackling blaze, she began to flip through the pages, unable to resist stopping here and there to read a few of her favorite lines. It was funny about her writing. Sometimes it came to her so fast and effortlessly it was almost like magic. At other times, it reminded her of making Christmas taffy, endlessly folding and twisting and pulling at the words until finally they assumed the desired consistency and shape. Her latest poem was like that. She'd still not finished it.

Her journal was one of a number of books she kept hidden in places where her parents would be unlikely to stumble upon them. She was sure neither of them would have any

tolerance, let alone appreciation, for the verses she composed. Or, for that matter, the poets and writers she admired—most of them French and famously debauched. But wasn't it those writers who had taught her most of what she knew about life? Real life, not the kind lived within the sheltered confines of the Converys' Manhattan mansion or their sprawling country estate in neighboring Connecticut.

A few minutes earlier, she had quietly exited the lively party going on downstairs in the ballroom, feeling a sudden spark of inspiration. It would be wonderful if she could complete the poem she'd been composing for her piano teacher, Mr. Bernard, and read it to him before his performance tonight. She knew it might shock him that she would lay bare her feelings so shamelessly. But maybe that was the only way she would know for certain whether he felt the same.

There had been subtle signs that he might. A few times during lessons when by accident their hands touched and she had felt that fluttery sensation in her stomach, he'd quickly moved his hand away as if he, too, sensed the danger. And he often seemed reluctant to look at her directly, a trait she found both annoying and endearing. He appeared to be shy. That could only mean he cared what she thought of him, perhaps as much as she cared what he thought about her.

She recalled again the afternoon, just over a month ago, when she had dared to tell him of her aspirations to become a poet, afraid he might react the same way Teddy had. She'd mentioned her writing to Teddy only once. Casually, as if it didn't matter all that much, as if it wasn't the entire reason she lived and breathed. He'd not even been curious enough to read a single one of her poems so he could judge for himself whether or not her writing had merit. But then, why would she expect anything else? Teddy Livingstone was far more concerned about the next polo match with his buddies at the club than he was about her poetry.

But Mike Bernard . . .

She thought she would never tire of watching him at the piano, his fingers caressing the keys, a look of such tenderness on his face as if he would gladly die for each and every note. At those times, it was like she was peering through a tiny window into the most hidden parts of him. And yet everything else remained dark and mysterious. He'd been her piano teacher for nearly three months now, and still she knew so little about him, not nearly as much as he knew about her. Her poetry had given him exclusive access to her secret life, a glimpse into her private thoughts, her deepest longings. By now, he must know how trapped she felt by society's silly conventions, by her parents' expectation that she would settle for the same empty existence she saw other so-called privileged women endure day after day. How desperately she wanted to be free—like *he* was free! To live the life of an artist.

To fall in love.

Lately she had begun to imagine them together in all sorts of places, most of which she'd never been herself. Paris was her favorite—strolling down the rue des Martyrs where she'd read that the poet Baudelaire used to roam. She could picture them peeking in the windows of interesting little shops, listening to the distant bells of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette church, sipping coffee at a quaint café as the conversation turned to music and poetry. After a blissful day of sightseeing, the moon a silvery ghost in the darkening sky, they'd slip back to their little hotel on the Left Bank and sit on the scrolled-iron balcony drinking champagne until dawn, when they'd finally fall into bed amid giddy laughter and kisses and heartfelt promises of forever.

"May, what are you doing?"

May's younger sister, Emily, stood just inside the bedroom door, dressed in pink chiffon, her hair swept up in a style May argued was too mature for a fifteen-year-old. But Mother, as usual, had ignored her.

"I just came up to refresh my perfume, that's all," May replied, hiding the journal behind the billowy skirt of her silk gown.

"Mother has decided the concert should begin at midnight. She asked me to tell Mr. Bernard, but I can't find him—and it's already eleven thirty. Have you seen him anywhere?"

May knew exactly where he was. After their last lesson, she had made a point of suggesting that he wait in the gentlemen's dressing room until just before his performance. "That way, you can make a dramatic entrance," she'd advised, hoping to sound as if she knew all about such things.

"I'll find him, Emily. Don't worry. You go back down to the ballroom."

"Don't tell"—Emily giggled, covering her mouth with her hand—"but I've already had two whole glasses of champagne!"

May smiled. It amazed her sometimes to think only two years separated them. Emily was such a child. "Just make sure you don't get the hiccups, or certainly they'll figure out what you've been up to."

Emily nodded. Still tittering with guilty delight, she turned and disappeared. Reluctantly, May tucked her journal back in its hiding place, her thoughts again on Mike Bernard. He said the dates of his upcoming concert tour were yet to be announced, but it couldn't be too much longer before he'd leave, maybe never to return. The thought of it worried her. There might be little time left.

Little time to convince him of what she already knew—that they were meant to be together.

The Kiss

Mike scrutinized his image in the tall mirror of the gentlemen's dressing room. He was decked out for the evening in a glossy black tailcoat and formal trousers. His waistcoat was cut low, amply displaying the finely pleated shirtfront decorated with tiny gold studs. A white bow tie, kid gloves, and patent leather boots completed the ensemble, which had taken a sizable chunk out of what he'd earned in his nearly three months of employment with the Converys. But, by now, he was resigned to the fact that investment in one's appearance is a necessary part of climbing the ladder of success. And there was no doubt that tonight was to be a significant step up. Maybe the opportunity of a lifetime.

At that very moment, some of the most important people in New York were downstairs in the ballroom of the Converys' palatial Manhattan residence on Fifth Avenue. They were people with money and the inclination to spend it on worthy causes, such as patronage of extraordinary musical talent. Soon they would be listening to him perform Beethoven,

Chopin, and Franz Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2, a technically difficult selection sure to impress even the least sensitive of listeners.

It was the possibility of a night like tonight that had been uppermost in his mind when he auditioned for a position as piano teacher to the Converys' two daughters, May and Emily. Desperate to make an impression, he'd presented himself as a budding young pianist in the process of preparing for an East Coast concert tour. In truth, though he had auditioned for a number of promoters, everyone told him the same story. He had no name, they said, no following. On top of that, they insisted, Americans believe serious music belongs to the Europeans. Despite his conservatory training, there was no way around the fact that he lacked the Continental mystique.

He came closer to the mirror and studied his face. It was thin but no longer had that underfed look. He recognized its flaws—the jaw was narrow, the nose a little too large, eyes deep set. But when you considered it all together, without separating the parts, maybe it wasn't so bad.

There was a light knock from the hallway. Mike quickly stepped away from the mirror, striking a pose by a small Louis XIV table on which he rested his hand with an air of nonchalance.

"Yes?"

The door swung open.

"Good evening, Mr. Bernard!"

May Convery was stunning in a sky-blue gown with enormous puffed sleeves and a trumpet-bell-shaped skirt, her slender neck adorned with a choker of sparkling diamonds and sapphires. The moody depths of her hazel eyes, her heart-shaped face, and her full lips with their high-arched Cupid's bow might easily make a fellow forget she was only seventeen. Mike recalled how painfully intimidated he used to feel around her, despite that she was a full two years his junior. But since

that morning, a month or so ago, when she first read him her poetry, he'd begun to see her differently. Not as the spoiled daughter of a wealthy financier but as a lonely young woman. Accomplished, defiant, yet also fragile and insecure.

Maybe more like himself than he would have imagined.

"Where's the attendant?" May asked, glancing around the room.

"He was called out momentarily—an urgent problem in the hat room, they said."

"Good." She stepped inside, closing and bolting the door behind her. "I was hoping for a moment alone with you. Are you all right? You're not nervous?"

"Nervous? No, not really." He was, of course, extremely jittery. But admitting it would only have the effect of making him more so.

"I've been busy tonight telling everyone about my fabulous piano teacher and your upcoming concert tour. If I had a hundred tickets, I could have sold them all by now."

Though she obviously intended to put him at ease, her words only served to remind him how much of an imposter he was. Not only had he lied about a pending concert tour, he had claimed an entire life history that bore little resemblance to his own. Mike Bernard was not his name. His family went by Brown, a name derived from Braun, the change having been made on their arrival at Ellis Island. And the story of how he'd been raised by a wealthy uncle in Chicago, owner of a successful music publishing house? Another lie. But how could he possibly have admitted to Mrs. Convery that he grew up in the tenements of New York City's Lower East Side? That his father was a wallpaper hanger and his mother took in piecework.

That he was a Jew.

May glided to the full-length mirror, turning to admire her dress from several angles, though Mike noticed her eyes kept wandering to his face. "They showed this gown in Paris, at one

of the fashion parades just last fall. Mother thought it would suit me well." She paused. "What do *you* think?"

There was no question she looked more beautiful than he'd ever seen her. The fitted bodice of her dress left little doubt as to the perfection of what lay beneath, making it difficult to focus his attention elsewhere. But he was determined not to give her the slightest reason to doubt the purity of his thoughts.

"Mrs. Convery is a woman of impeccable taste."

May swung around, appearing piqued. "I didn't realize you were such an admirer of my mother!"

"I only meant—"

"Men always think Mother is quite something," she continued, with an attitude that was surprisingly pugnacious. "Who knows, maybe they've never met a real Southern belle before."

"But I—"

"However much you may admire my mother now, I could tell you plenty of things that would no doubt change your opinion of her, and not for the better. Like the way she—" May halted, a blush spreading across her cheeks. "I'm sorry, I suppose I shouldn't be speaking so carelessly. Really, you must forgive me. It's just that I had hoped—well, I guess I'm disappointed. You see, I wanted to give you something tonight. Something very special. Personal. But, unfortunately, I couldn't get it ready in time."

Mike couldn't help but be annoyed. Right now, he had more important matters on his mind than childish intrigues. His performance in front of a hundred of New York's elite was in less than an hour. "There's no need for you to apologize—or to give me anything."

"It was just a little gift to wish you luck with your performance."

"That's very kind of you but not at all necessary."

"Obviously a gift is never *necessary*. It's something one *wants* to do." She hesitated. "I might as well tell you, it was a

poem. One that I hoped would express—well, how I’ve come to *feel* about you.” She looked at him intently, fingering the jeweled choker at her throat. “But maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s *not* necessary. There might be a better way.”

She came at him in a rush of rustling silk, enveloping him in a cloud of rose-petal perfume. Before he could realize her intention, she had already kissed him full on the lips. Quickly, she stepped back, regarding him with what could only be feigned innocence. She had ambushed him! “What’s the matter? You don’t like kissing?”

“I-I-I—” He hated how he was stammering like an idiot. But this was *May Convery*, the daughter of one of the richest men in Manhattan! And what was *he*? A lowly piano teacher, only a notch or two up from a servant—and a fraud to boot. He must put a stop to this, and right away!

“Your behavior, Miss Convery, is—”

“*Your* behavior, Mr. Bernard,” she interrupted, “is entirely unacceptable. When a young lady offers a kiss, it’s a gentleman’s duty to respond with a certain enthusiasm.”

Again she flung herself at him, this time throwing her arms around his neck, firmly pressing her mouth against his, her bosom so tight to his chest it was as if they were joined. He wanted to push her away. He knew he must. But it was only a matter of seconds until his will collapsed. He was too intoxicated by her smell, her taste, the feverish warmth of her body to offer even a semblance of resistance. All he could think was, astonishing as it seemed, May Convery *wanted* him.

Or the person she believed him to be.

His hand found the curve of her hip, then the small of her back, the silk of her gown smooth as ivory beneath his fingertips. His eyes were closed, but the blood pounding in his ears made it seem as if everything around him was spinning. He never heard the urgent jiggling of the door handle, not even the sharp knock that followed.

"Hello? Open up in there!"

May wrenched herself away from him. "Oh, no! It's Teddy."

"Teddy?"

"We must act as if I only came to inform you of the change in schedule."

"Change?" he echoed, not comprehending anything.

Hurriedly, she wiped her mouth with the heel of her gloved palm and went to the door. Mike somehow managed to slink to the window. Parting the velvet drapes, he tried to appear as if he were watching for someone's arrival. Yet he remained in a state of confusion, not sure whether to be elated or horrified by what had just happened.

"May! What are *you* doing here?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Mike appraised the intruder, a tall, athletic-looking young man, handsome in that well-bred way he had often envied—wavy blond hair, straight nose, square jaw.

"I was just informing my piano teacher about the schedule for his performance," May replied breathlessly. "Mother changed her mind and wants him on stage at twelve sharp. By the way, I don't suppose you've met Mr. Bernard?"

The young gentleman approached Mike, rolling back his lips in a mechanical smile. "Teddy Livingstone." His handshake was pointedly indifferent.

"My father and Mr. Livingstone's are business partners. Our families have known each other just about forever, or certainly as long as I can remember—which is quite some time," May babbled, noticeably shaken.

Teddy's eyes had not left Mike's face. "Mike Bernard, the illustrious piano teacher. I've heard all about you. Seems Miss Convery imagines you're some sort of genius—or something."

"She's far too generous in her praise."

"You're right. She does tend to exaggerate. But then, that's part of her charm."

“Perhaps so,” May chimed in anxiously, “but I’m afraid my charm won’t count for much if I don’t get downstairs to our guests. Mother will be wondering where I am. And it’s nearly twelve.” She cast a glance at Mike that seemed full of foreboding, as if she were warning him of something more urgent than only the time—and then she turned and hurried out the door.