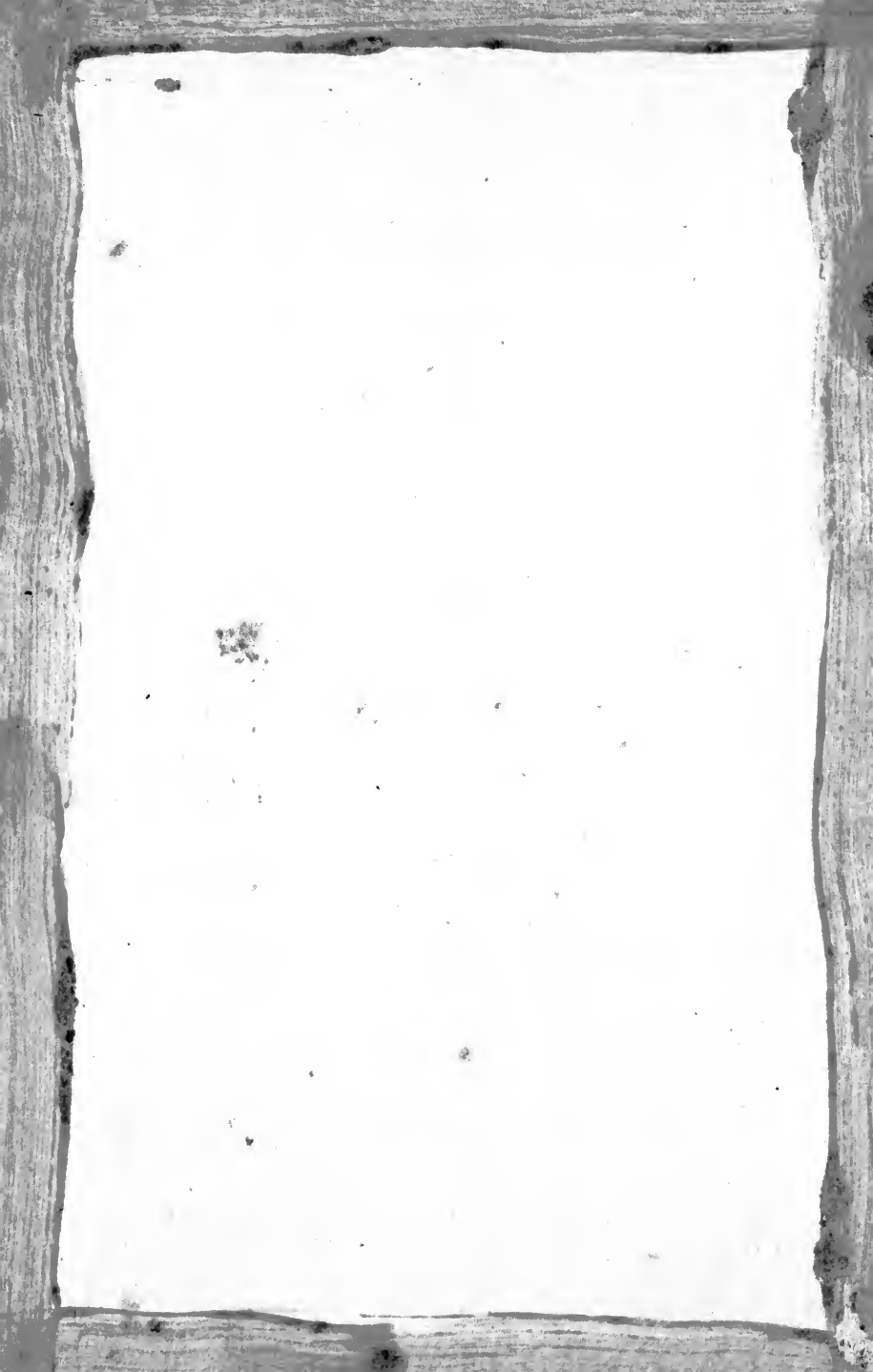
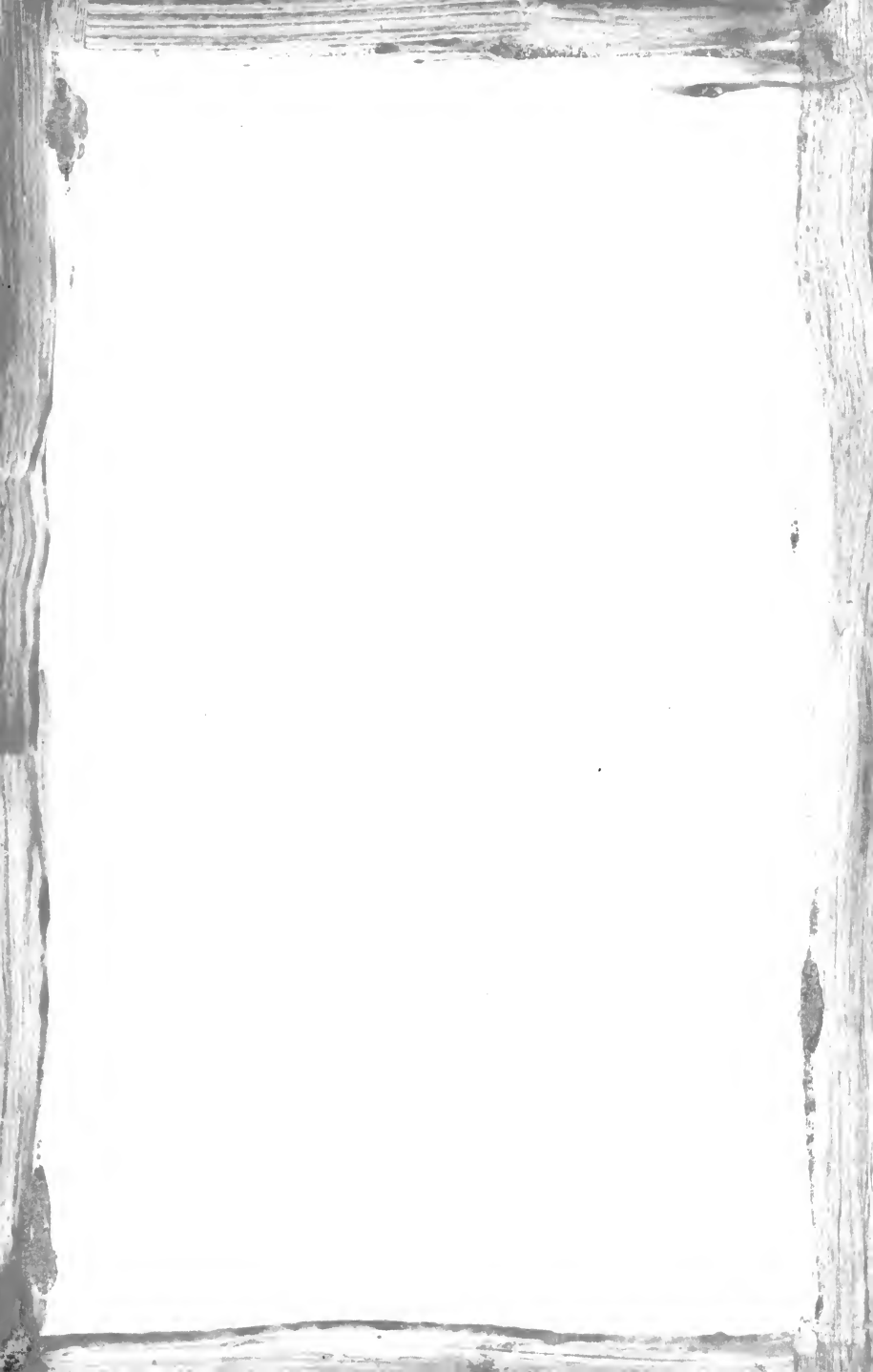


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ALINE OF THE
GRAND WOODS

A Story of Louisiana

BY
NEVIL G. HENSHAW
"



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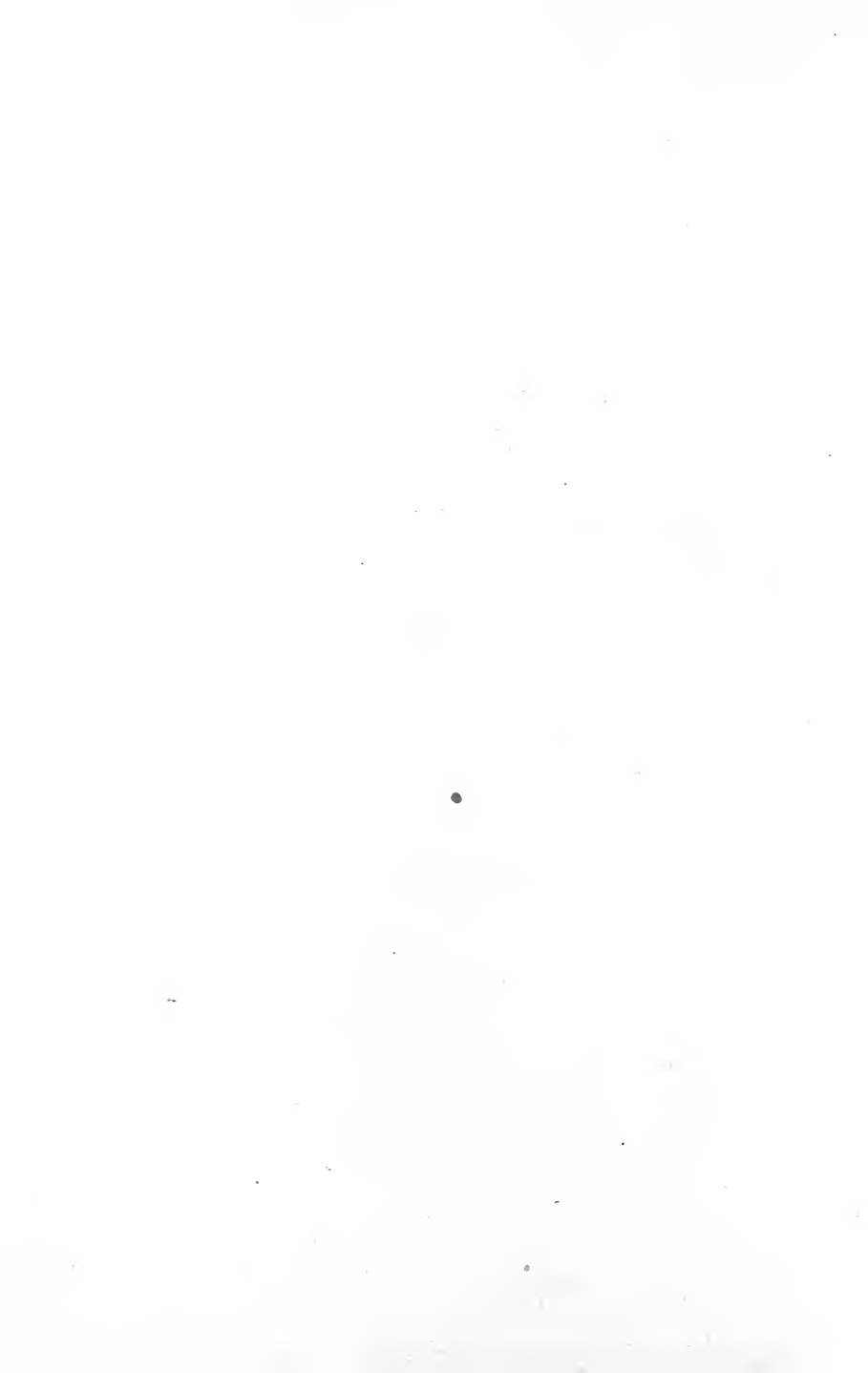
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LOAN STACK

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TO THE MEMORY OF
MY FATHER



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GLOSSARY

Arpent, a measure of land, used in Louisiana in place of the acre.

Banquette, sidewalk.

Bayou, a small river.

Cajun (from Acadian), a name applied to certain of the French people of Louisiana.

Comment ça va? How are you going?

Cottonade, a cotton cloth made by the Cajuns.

Coulée, a pond.

Graine à volée, a large water lily closely resembling the Egyptian Lotus.

Lagniappe, a small gift (usually of candy) given with each purchase.

Pirogue, a canoe.

Pistache Sauvages, a wild flower.

Poule d'eau, a black water fowl, fishy and unpalatable as a food.

Tetrain, slowly.



BOOK ONE

Aline of the Grand Woods

CHAPTER I

THE MAIL IS LATE AT LANDRY

FULL in the glare of the hot June sun stood the store of Monsieur Etienne Landry, its weather-beaten sides seeming to give forth smoke in the intense heat.

The china tree in front, its leaves withered and drooping, bent its branches earthward, as though after a long struggle with heat and drought, it bowed its head to the inevitable. Underneath the store porch a ragged hound, driven there for shelter, panted desperately with lolling tongue and bloodshot eyes, too hot even to snap at the myriad of flies which buzzed about him.

Within the store it was cool and dark, and on entering one was greeted by an odor, mixed indeed, but not unpleasant—an odor as though someone had mixed a great many groceries together, and had then stirred them vigorously. Two long counters ran down the sides of the store, and near the end of the right-hand

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counter was a little place enclosed by a railing, containing a desk and some chairs, where Monsieur Landry kept his accounts, and which was the *sanctum sanctorum* of the place. When Monsieur Landry invited any one to sit with him within this sacred precinct it signified that the invited one was worthy of the honor.

Within this railing now sat Monsieur Landry and Father Martain at a little table playing checkers.

Monsieur Landry was a large man, stout from good living, with a fat red face, upon which nature had set the perpetual seal of good humor. There was also about him a certain air of dignity, a manner as of one in authority, and why should there not be, for was he not the son of old Adrien Landry, the first owner of the store, and the founder of Landry? And also was he not the Postmaster, with an ability to read, and write, and speak English, not excelled by anyone from the Grand Woods to Mouton, excepting, of course, Father Martain? Monsieur Landry was very proud of his English, which indeed he spoke very well, and when conversing with any one who was even slightly acquainted with that language, he never uttered a word of French.

His companion at the little table, Father Martain, was so unlike him in appearance, that the contrast was startling. Small and very thin, the good priest beside the great bulk of Monsieur Landry, appeared to be but the shadow of a man. His long hair, which was of a yellowish white, hung about a face that was the color of old parchment—the nose, long and thin, accentuated its sharpness. The mouth with its thin lips would have

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given an air of severity to the face, were it not for a little line at each corner, faint and shadowy, extending downward, the aftermark of a smile. And what a smile it was! kind and sympathetic, ready at all times to calm the troubles of those who went to the good priest for comfort. His eyes were blue, the faint blue of the robin's egg. Large and innocent they were, and full of a great love for all things, with a look of patient resignation in them, as though their owner had foregone some long-cherished wish, and had foregone it cheerfully.

He was dressed in a rusty black cassock, and in his lap there rested a black hat, with a low crown and a very wide brim. It was an old hat, how old, nobody but Father Martain knew, gray with age, the felt cracked in many places from long usage.

Some of the members of his congregation had sent to New Orleans one Christmas for a new cassock and hat, and had given them to him, with all of the ceremony that is so dear to French people. The good priest had received them with tears, unable in his agitation to utter a word of the thanks that filled his heart. He had worn the cassock with all of the pride of one in new garments, but upon his head he still wore the old hat with its wide brim.

When one of the present givers remarked upon it, he smiled and replied:

“The new hat, my son, is very fine, and I keep it for some great occasion, but this, my old hat—*Ah, mon fils!* I wore that in Paris”; and in the blue eyes there grew for a moment a great longing. Only for a

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moment was it there, and so quickly did it go, and so quickly did the look of resignation take its place, that the questioner never saw it. It meant a life of longing and self-suppression, unknown to any one but Father Martain himself.

And so these two sat at the little table on this hot June day, playing checkers, as they had done every day for years, and on the generally smiling face of Monsieur Landry there was a look of worry that was wholly foreign. He was playing carelessly, and had lost four games, a thing that had never happened before, for whether it was that Monsieur Landry was the better player, or whether it was that Father Martain was too considerate to beat him, he invariably won.

But it was not this that caused the troubled look on Monsieur Landry's face, as his frequent glances at the clock on his desk seemed to certify. The hands of this clock were rapidly approaching the hour of three, and the mail, which should have been brought to the store at twelve, had not yet arrived. Every morning, precisely at seven o'clock, Monsieur Landry's eldest son Adrien, rode over to Mouton for the mail, and every day at twelve o'clock he returned with it. He had been late before, of course, sometimes as much as a half hour, but three hours! such a thing had never happened.

Next to his religion, nothing was more sacred to Monsieur Landry than the mail. The little box, with its glass front and twenty pigeonholes, where the letters for delivery were kept, shone with a radiance that was the outcome of much labor on his part, for he would allow none else to touch it.

THE MAIL IS LATE AT LANDRY

When, after his father's death, he had at first taken the store, Monsieur Landry had not been so particular. He had recognized the importance that his office as Postmaster gave him, and had enjoyed it accordingly, but the dust of many days covered the glass box, and the letters were often left scattered upon the counter while he waited upon a customer. However, there had come a time, when a letter for Colonel Gordon had been mislaid, and could not be found for several days. The Colonel had ridden over, and in language more forcible than polite, had spoken to him of the sacred character and importance of the mail. He had spoken also of people who were in prison for a crime less than that of losing a letter. Monsieur Landry had never forgotten.

And so the mind of Monsieur Landry was in a tumult at this delay in the arrival of the mail, and presently he shoved back his chair from the table, utterly regardless of the fact that it was his move, and mopping his face with a large bandanna handkerchief, sat staring through the open door at the glaring sunshine outside.

"It is no use," said he. "I can play no more. Already the mail is three hours late, and I can find no reason for its being so. Adrien is a good boy, and he would not stay so late unless there is something the matter; and if there is something the matter, what is it?"

"That," said Father Martain, who sat smiling with a timid superiority over his recent victory, "I cannot say. But cheer up, my friend! Adrien will come, and it will all then be well."

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Monsieur Landry shook his head slowly.

"Maybe so, maybe so," said he, "but let us now put up the board, for I cannot play longer, and if Adrien does not soon come, I must get my horse and ride to Mouton."

While speaking, Monsieur Landry had been gathering up the checkers, and now closing the board, he placed it very carefully upon the desk, and turning to the priest, who had also risen, he said with the air of one making an apology long delayed.

"I am sorry, *mon Père*, that I cannot play longer, but you must understand my worry over this matter. So let us sit here and wait for Adrien to come. And we can talk about the church fair that we will have next month." This last was added as though in atonement for his abrupt termination of the game.

"Ah, the fair!" said the priest. "Now that will be something to talk of. We must have the band from Mouton, and perhaps Auguste will——"

But what Auguste would perhaps have done was never told, for at that moment someone who had mounted the porch, unheard by the two speakers, entered the store.

Monsieur Landry, who had gone forward to meet him, now saw that it was a Mr. Lawrence, who owned a small sugar plantation near Landry. Monsieur Landry did not like Mr. Lawrence, because he did not know anything definite about him, and although he had tried very hard to find out something of his antecedents, he had so far been unsuccessful.

He knew one thing about him, as you shall pres-

THE MAIL IS LATE AT LANDRY

ently see, but this one thing only caused him to wish to know more.

In a little community, such as Landry, with its one store, where from miles around people come to supply their simple wants, the storekeeper must naturally know a great deal about each one of them. For, once having made their purchases, they spend many an hour talking of themselves, their crops and their neighbors—talking unreservedly as such simple people do.

And such a storekeeper as Monsieur Landry, with his education and desire for learning something new, must needs learn many things that a less clever man would overlook. If a child were born, if some one died, if even some one were sick, it was not very long before Monsieur Landry knew all the details of the affair, and even more than all, for sometimes he added a little on his own account.

But here was one who to him was a mystery, and therefore, Monsieur Landry did not like him. However, he did not allow his dislike to become visible, and addressing Mr. Lawrence in a very cordial tone he inquired what he could do for him.

Mr. Lawrence, looking past him to the priest, bowed, and then turning to Monsieur Landry said:

“I would like to know if there is a letter for me.”

In the mind of Monsieur Landry there arose a great tumult. Never before had Mr. Lawrence asked for a letter. A few letters had come for him, it was true, but all of them had been business letters, and most of them had been from a firm of lawyers in Mouton. Of course the Postmaster knew that.

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"Here may be a chance," thought Monsieur Landry, "to really find out something if I manage things properly," so putting on an air of polite inquiry, he asked:

"Does Monsieur Lawrence expect a letter?"

"I most certainly do," answered Mr. Lawrence, "otherwise, I would not have asked for one."

An inspiration seized Monsieur Landry. He also remembered that the postmarks were often blotted and illegible.

"The mail is late; very late," said he. "I do not now know when it will arrive, but if you will let me know from where the letter will come, and whether it is a business letter or not, I will send it over by Adrien as soon as it comes. That is, if it does come," he added lamely.

He did not mention the fact that Mr. Lawrence could wait at the store until the mail arrived.

The brow of Mr. Lawrence now grew dark.

"Mr. Landry," said he, "when that letter of mine arrives, I will come and get it, or I will send my colored boy for it; and I would like to say that if it is customary for persons to give descriptions of their letters at this postoffice, before they get them, I will have mine sent to Mouton. It is rather a long ride, but it would save answering a great many unnecessary questions."

Having said this, he bowed again very politely to the priest, and walking out to his horse, mounted it and rode away.

Now this outburst was rather uncalled for, after the polite inquiry and kind offer of Monsieur Landry, but

THE MAIL IS LATE AT LANDRY

only an hour before, old Telesse, Lawrence's man of all work, had told him of an attempt, coupled with bribes of tobacco, made that morning to learn something of his master's life and habits, and the heart of Mr. Lawrence was filled with anger at this speech, inquisitive in the extreme, yet veiled in a cloak of solicitous inquiry. He knew that Monsieur Landry was trying to pry into his affairs, and he also knew that Monsieur Landry knew that he was aware of it.

The red face of Monsieur Landry became a deep crimson, and for a moment he was unable to express the indignation that filled him. Walking to the door, he gazed at the receding figure of the horseman, as though he were going to say something in vindication of himself, but the horse of Mr. Lawrence had now carried its owner beyond speaking distance, so that, had the storekeeper said what was in his mind, he would have been obliged to shout, and he did not care to shout about an affair of this kind. So he turned slowly toward the priest, who instantly removed from his countenance the smile of amusement, which had been broadening during every moment of the conversation between the two men.

He knew well the curiosity of Monsieur Landry, and he had enjoyed the discomfiture of that gentleman immensely, especially as he considered curiosity a very undesirable trait.

Monsieur Landry now forgot his English, and lapsing into his mother tongue, as one is apt to do in moments of great excitement, exclaimed, "*Canaille!*"

The good priest shook his head sadly.

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"You must not say that," he remonstrated. "It is not right my friend. He spoke rudely, it is true, but one must overlook such things as a quick temper and a sharp tongue. Calm yourself, and remember that it does no good to call people names."

Monsieur Landry said never a word to this, but seating himself, he drew from his pocket paper and tobacco, rolled himself a cigarette, and lighting it, sat for a while inhaling the smoke and blowing it forth in great volumes.

Gradually the deep crimson began to fade from his face, his eyes lost their sparkling anger, and in a few moments the countenance of the storekeeper assumed its usual genial expression.

Father Martain nodded his head approvingly.

"That is right, my friend," said he. "It is not worth being angry about."

Monsieur Landry smiled magnanimously.

"No, *mon Père*, it is not," he replied, all feeling of rancor seeming to have disappeared: but Lawrence, riding home in the hot sunlight, knew that he had doubled the storekeeper's curiosity, and what is more, Monsieur Landry knew it also.

CHAPTER II

FATHER MARTAIN FORGIVES A SINNER

MONSIEUR LANDRY, having recovered from his anger, returned to his first grievance, the lateness of the mail. Bidding Father Martain excuse him for a moment, he went to the open door and gazed far down the hot, dusty road that led to Mouton.

But his search was rewarded with nothing more than the sight of a battered wagon, which, moving slowly through the heavy dust clouds, finally pulled up at the store.

In the bottom of the wagon there lay a man stretched out at full length, one arm hanging helplessly over the side, the other doubled under him. He was lying on his back, full in the glare of the sun, a hat over his face, and in the crook of the arm that dangled over the side of the wagon there was a large demijohn, which spoke eloquently of his condition. On the seat in front there sat a boy, who, throwing the rope reins in the bottom of the wagon, jumped out and entered the store.

Monsieur Landry, addressing him in French, asked him what he wanted.

“Tobacco,” answered the boy in the same language; “four packs.”

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He might have been fifteen or sixteen years of age, and as he stood in the shadow of the door, Monsieur Landry saw that he was a very handsome boy, tall and lithe and very graceful, with black hair and eyes, a long straight nose, and a very red, full mouth. His hands and bare legs were burned red by the sun, but his arms and chest (which one could see through his torn shirt) were an olive-brown—the brown of the Spaniard.

Having made up the packages of tobacco into a small bundle, the storekeeper, who was curious to know more of this boy, now took from a glass jar a large stick of peppermint candy, and handing it to him with the tobacco, said:

“There is your *lagniappe*. Won't you come in here and eat it where it is cool? Your horse will also get a rest, and will be fresh again when you are ready to go.”

The boy eyed the stick of candy scornfully.

“Candy is for children,” said he. “I want chewing tobacco for my *lagniappe*.”

Monsieur Landry's eyebrows went up in surprise.

“Very well,” said he; “come in and sit down, and I will get it for you.”

Taking the candy, he put it back in the jar, and brought the boy a square piece of tobacco. The tobacco was worth five cents, the candy one, but the curiosity of the storekeeper was aroused.

Seated upon the counter, and swinging his bare legs vigorously, the boy bit off a large piece of the tobacco, and chewing it for a moment spat viciously at a fly upon

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the floor, his face beaming with contentment, apparently oblivious of the man in the scorching heat outside.

But Monsieur Landry was not so forgetful.

"The man outside in the wagon," said he. "The sun will kill him."

The boy smiled.

"He is used to it," he replied; "besides I put his hat over his face. He has lain all day in the sun before, and it won't hurt him now."

Monsieur Landry now thought it time to ask a few questions.

"Who is the man in the wagon?" he inquired.

"He is my father," answered the boy.

"And your name is—?" began the storekeeper.

"Numa," answered the boy. "Numa Le Blanc."

"A very pretty name," said Monsieur Landry, "although," looking at the boy's brown skin, "it is not very appropriate. Numa," he repeated thoughtfully; "that is Spanish."

"My mother was Spanish; she is dead," said the boy laconically.

"That is sad," the priest here remarked; "for your father does not seem to be a good man."

The boy's face flushed, and he raised his head proudly.

"My father is not a bad man when he is not drunk," said he. "He treats me well, and lets me hunt with his gun. I do not blame him for getting drunk, either, for the doctor has told him that he must die very soon, and he drinks to keep from suffering. Perhaps, if you suffered as he does, you might want to drink, too, *mon*

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Père, and forget the pain. We live in the Grand Woods," he continued, "and it is very lonesome there at night. When my father groans from his pain, it is terrible. Often I have ridden in the night to get him a drink and the little powders that he takes to make him sleep. When the pain is very great, he sometimes strikes me, but I do not mind it, for when he is better, he is sorry. See, here is where he struck me last night."

He rolled back his torn sleeve as he spoke.

The good priest gave a little gasp of horror, as he saw a ragged cut, reaching from shoulder to elbow. Monsieur Landry's heart was touched. His sympathy was at once aroused.

"Let me bind it up for you, and put some salve upon it," said he, and suiting the action to the word, he went behind the counter, presently reappearing with a piece of cloth and a large, tin box of salve.

"How did it happen?" he asked, rubbing some of the salve upon the cut, with a touch as tender as a woman's.

"He struck me with a plank; there was a nail in it," said the boy, flinching a little as Monsieur Landry began to wind the bandage tightly around his arm.

The storekeeper now thought it time to ask another question.

"Where have you been?" he inquired, tying the bandage deftly, and pulling down the sleeve again.

"To Mr. Lawrence's place," replied the boy.

"Your father knows Monsieur Lawrence, eh?" asked the storekeeper, with a gleam of hope that he might learn something of the latter gentleman.

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“No,” answered the boy; “he went to see old man Telesse. My father lives at his house in the Grand Woods. He is keeping it for him while he works for Mr. Lawrence. He gives my father money when he goes to see him; I do not know why, and he——”

The boy paused, for at this moment there arose from the outside a most horrible uproar, and those in the store, turning to see the cause, beheld a strange sight.

The man in the wagon had risen to his feet, and was making the most violent attempt to reach the ground. Suddenly, by a great effort, he threw himself from the wagon, and falling heavily to the ground, raised such a cloud of dust, that for a moment both man and wagon became invisible to those in the store.

The two men, closely followed by the boy, now started forward to help the unfortunate one, when from the dust there emerged a horrible figure, which made directly for them, uttering such terrible curses, that Father Martain placed his fingers in his ears and shrank behind the huge form of the storekeeper. The boy also shrank behind Monsieur Landry, who being thus, as it were, left alone to face the enemy, seized a hatchet that lay upon the counter, and bade the infuriated man to keep his distance.

“Numa!” shrieked the man, with a volley of oaths. “I will kill him this time. In the store talking, was he? He will talk no more when I am through with him.”

This speech, plentifully interlarded with oaths, was delivered in the French of the Acadian, or Cajun, as the people of Evangeline are more generally known in

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Louisiana. After this outburst, the angry father stood panting for breath, and swaying unsteadily, as though he had used up his little store of strength in his endeavor to reach the trembling boy, who shrank closer to the storekeeper at every word.

As he stood making desperate efforts to reach his son, yet ever watchful of the hatchet in the hands of Monsieur Landry, this drunken man seemed the very incarnation of anger. His hair, long and matted, filled with dust and dirt from the bottom of the wagon, fell about a face that was wasted and worn by disease and dissipation. His mouth, the lips curled back in a savage snarl, displayed an array of yellow, uneven teeth, and between his ragged locks shone a pair of eyes gleaming with rage—the eyes of a wild beast.

Suddenly he made a savage spring forward, regardless of the hatchet, and in a moment the storekeeper would have been obliged to defend himself, but at this movement, Father Martain, coming from behind him, advanced upon the infuriated man, his arm outstretched.

“Peace, my son,” said he. “The boy has done no wrong.”

Instantly, over this cursing, furious man, there came a great change. His face composed itself, his eyes lost their savage glare, and in a moment there stood before the priest, a cringing, docile creature, his whole attitude speaking of submission and repentance.

“I am sorry, *mon Père*,” he faltered. “I did not see you. It is the drink that makes me crazy. Forgive me, *mon Père*, for I am sorry.”

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For a moment the good priest gazed upon this strange apparition sorrowfully, and then laid his hands upon the matted locks.

"God bless you, my son," he said, "you have suffered much, and I forgive you. Go in peace, and spare the boy, for he loves you as a son should love a father."

The man turned to his son weakly.

"Come," said he; "it is late, and the woods are far away."

The boy coming forth, placed his arm about his father, who now seemed utterly exhausted, and thus supporting him, passed slowly out to the wagon and drove away.

For several moments the priest and Monsieur Landry stood looking after the wagon as it rattled away, Monsieur Landry still holding the hatchet, which he had forgotten in his excitement. He now placed it upon the counter, and turning to the priest said:

"You were just in time, *mon Père*. Had you been a moment later, I should have obliged to do him an injury. It is strange how quickly he became calm when you spoke to him."

The priest smiled, as if in appreciation of a Divine favor done for him.

"He has forgotten all but his religion," said he. "When he loses that, there will be nothing left. I must try and see him for the boy's sake, as well as for his own."

The storekeeper said nothing to this, and resuming his chair, sat for a while in silence, his mind going

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rapidly over the past events, until it came to the boy's telling of his visit to Mr. Lawrence's plantation, and there it stopped.

As if speaking more to himself than to the priest, he said:

"Again that Monsieur Lawrence, about whom no one knows anything, and yet I will know something of him before very long, even though I am obliged to go to his house to find it out. He has no right to be so mysterious, *mon Père*," continued he, now speaking directly to the priest. "It does not look well. Perhaps he has committed some crime, and is in hiding. If that is the case, we should know about it."

"If the man does not wish to speak of himself," replied the priest slowly, "it is his privilege not to do so, and you should not say that he has possibly committed some crime. You have no reason for thinking so, and you should not judge others harshly."

"But I have reasons for thinking so!" said the storekeeper vehemently. "Does not his coming here as he did look strange? As for myself, had I come to a place in such a manner, I should have given my reasons for doing so, you may be sure. Did he not come to my store the night of the great storm three years ago, bringing with him a little child, and asking for shelter? And after I had taken him in, and fed him, would he answer the few simple questions that I asked him? No, *mon Père*, he would not. He told me that he had bought my old place near here from Monsieur Parker of New Orleans, that he had missed it in the storm and darkness, and that he would go to it in the

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morning. This he told me, and no more. To my wife he said that the child was a girl, and that her name was Aline. *C'est tout.*

“And think of the way he looked, *mon Père*. His face was white and drawn, and his eye—his eyes, *mon Père*, were like those of the souls in torment. When he spoke, which was not often, his voice, I assure you, trembled as with some great emotion.

“It is true that he may have been tired from his journey, as he looked better the next morning, but he spoke then even less than he had spoken the night before. In the store we met old Telesse, who was in from the Grand Woods. There were no fish in the bayou, he said. His back was so bad that he could no longer cut down trees. What was he to do to make a living? This Lawrence engaged him to work at his place, put him in his buggy with the child, and thanking me, drove away.

“And this, *mon Père*, is how he came to Landry. Unknown he came, and unknown he has lived here for three years. I know no more of him at this moment than I did the morning that he drove away with old Telesse. What is more, I know of no one in Landry who knows as much of him as I do, and after my being so kind to him that stormy night, he speaks to me harshly just now. Do you blame me for saying of him what I did? What do you think, *mon Père?*”

“I think,” said Father Martain, who for the last few minutes had been gazing through the open door, “I think that I see your son Adrien coming with the mail.”

CHAPTER III

HOW THE MAIL CAME TO LANDRY

AT this answer to his question Monsieur Landry sprang to his feet in such haste that he overturned his chair, and not waiting to set it upon its feet again, he rushed out upon the porch.

Far down the road, at a point where it turned to the left, he saw a gathering cloud of dust; and as he gazed it continued to assume greater proportions. The person was undoubtedly approaching at a great speed.

Father Martain, who had righted the overturned chair, now joined the storekeeper, who, taking from his pocket a large silver watch, gazed at it thoughtfully for a moment.

“Five o’clock,” said he. “The mail is indeed late, but we shall soon know, that is if it is Adrien coming—” And then, “It is Adrien!” he shouted. “I can see the horse!”

The cloud of dust had by this time approached very near, and in its midst the watchers were now able to see plainly a small creole pony, which was being urged to its utmost speed by a boy, who was lashing it unmercifully with a long switch.

The storekeeper turned excitedly to Father Martain.

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“Whipping a horse in this heat!” he cried. “Adrien will kill him. If he does, I shall whip him worse than he has whipped the horse.”

“It is cruel,” said the priest. “He should not do it with all this heat and dust.”

He would have said more on the subject of cruelty, but at this moment Adrien had come within hailing distance, and Monsieur Landry yelled at him angrily in French:

“Do not beat that horse!” he called. “Do you want to kill him?”

But the boy paid no attention to his command, and continued lashing the horse savagely, until he dashed madly up to the porch. Without waiting to bring the animal to a full stop, Adrien slipped from the saddle, and rushing up the steps to his father, clasped him convulsively around the knees, sobbing loudly in a perfect frenzy of terror.

Monsieur Landry placed his arm tenderly about his trembling, sobbing son, and patted him affectionately upon the head.

“What is it, my boy?” he asked. “Come, do not be afraid; you are at home now. And the mail, my son, we must get that, and then you must tell me your trouble.”

Gently releasing the boy's hold, the storekeeper stepped down to the horse, who stood where the boy had left him, blowing loudly, his brown coat covered with a lather of sweat and dirt. Behind the saddle, and fastened to it with strips of rawhide, was the cause of Monsieur Landry's anxiety for the past four

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hours—the mail bag, its brown leather sides white with dust. Mons. Landry carefully unfastened it, tucked it under his arm, and then leading the horse over to the rack, he hurried back to the porch, where Father Martain had almost succeeded in calming the terrors of the excited Adrien.

It was now getting late in the day and the sun did not shine so fiercely upon the porch, therefore Monsieur Landry motioned the priest to one of the chairs that stood there. Taking the seat nearest himself, and, drawing Adrien to his side, he asked for the reason of his fright.

The boy, on being questioned by his father, began with an outburst in French, almost incoherent, and punctuated with sobs.

“He shot at me!” he cried wildly. “Yes, he shot at me, and the bullet it came so close. He hit the mail bag, and if he had hit me I should now be dead—dead like Armand, when he fell in the bayou.”

“Wait, my son,” interposed Monsieur Landry. “Calm yourself, and tell us all about it from the beginning, so that we shall know just what has happened. You say that the bullet struck the mail bag? Let us see.”

Reaching down to where he had placed it, by the side of his chair, Monsieur Landry picked up the mail bag and examined it intently. On the side which had been on top of the saddle, there was a long groove cut in the leather, as cleanly as though one had done it with a knife. The edges of this cut were the reddish brown of new leather, in marked contrast to the deep

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brown of the rest of the bag, and through these edges the storekeeper saw the back of a letter, its top furrowed by the same bullet that had made the groove in the bag's side.

Father Martain, who had also been examining the bag, his face alive with interest and curiosity, now exclaimed excitedly:

"This is serious, my friend. Tell us quickly, Adrien! There is nothing to be afraid of now; you are safe at home."

"Yes, go on and tell us, Adrien!" cried Monsieur Landry, who by this time was also wild with curiosity and excitement. "Stop your crying instantly, or I shall give you something to cry for. Begin at the beginning and tell me all about it, leaving out nothing, for some one has tampered with the mail, and that is a very serious thing, I can tell you."

Thus adjured, Adrien ceased his sobbing, and in a high nasal voice began the story of his difficulties.

"You know, *mon père*," said he, "that every day when I ride over for the mail to Mouton, I go as quickly as I can, and I only wait long enough to get the letters before I come back again. I do not go into the town by the public road, for there is a footpath about half a mile outside that leads directly to the post office, and I always go that way.

"To-day, when I had ridden on this footpath for a little ways, a man in the road, not far off, yelled at me. This man had a gun, and I thought that he was hunting, although there is nothing to hunt just now. I was riding very fast when he yelled at me, and so I did not

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stop to hear what he had to say, but yelled back at him that I was in a hurry, and rode on into Mouton.

“When I came to the post office Monsieur Brousard, the postmaster, gave me the letters, and I put them in my bag. When I started to go out he came to the door with me, and asked me who was going to take the mail to Landry.

“‘I am,’ I told him.

“‘But you cannot,’ he said.

“I asked him why.

“‘There is yellow fever at Mouton, six cases,’ said he. ‘You must know of it; the guard must have told you.’

“I told him about the footpath, and about the man with the gun, whom I thought was out hunting.

“‘That was the guard,’ he said, and I should have ridden up to him, and told him about the mail. He would have sent in for it, and given it to me, so that I could have gotten the mail without going into the town. Now that I had come into the town, I could not go out again.

“‘But the guard was not there yesterday morning,’ I said; ‘and why is it that we have not heard of the fever from people who have stopped at the store on their way from Mouton?’

“‘The guards only came on last night,’ he told me. The people at Mouton did not say anything about the fever, because they were afraid of being quarantined. The planters about the town found out about the fever last night, and they put guards on every road, so that those in the town could not come out. People could

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come in, but the guards would tell them of the fever, and when they were once in, they could not go out again.

“‘But the mail?’ I asked; ‘surely the mail can go out?’”

“‘Yes,’ said Monsieur Broussard, ‘the mail could go out, if some one from Landry were to come as far as the guard and get it.’ I had better wait until the next day about the mail, when some one coming from Landry to look for me, could bring it back. As for myself, he did not know when I would be able to leave.

“Then Monsieur Broussard went into the post office, and left me.

“I did not know what to do, but I took the mail bag and tied it on my saddle. I made up my mind that I would leave Mouton that day. I did not know how I was going to do it, but I made up my mind that I was going to leave, and I was very much frightened. Do you blame me, *mon père?*”

The boy paused for breath.

“No, no,” said Monsieur Landry, who looked very grave at the mention of the yellow fever.

Father Martain looked very grave, also, and in his interest for what was to follow, he paid no attention to Monsieur Landry, who was about to speak to his son.

Seizing Adrien by the shoulder, he cried: “Go on, Adrien!”

Monsieur Landry, in his excitement, did not notice this little piece of pardonable rudeness, and forgetting what he had to say, seized the boy’s other shoulder and demanded the rest of the story.

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“Do not shake me so,” said Adrien; and then he continued:

“I tied my horse to a tree, and sat down for quite a long while, thinking of how I should get away from Mouton. After a while I got on my horse and rode out to the guard. I told him that I had the mail, but he would not let me pass. He wanted to take the letters, and give them to some one who would try to get into the town, but I would not let him have them, for you have told me, *mon père*, that I must never let anyone touch the mail. So I rode back into the town again, and sat down under a tree.

“This time I sat for a long while, and it was late in the evening when I saw a woman walking along the street crying. When she saw me, she asked me if I would help her, for she was in trouble. I felt so sorry for her that I said that I would, and I rode to her house, tied my horse, and went inside.

We walked down the hall until we came to a door, and the woman, pushing it open, told me to enter. When I first went in I could not see very well, because the shades in the room were pulled down, but after a moment I saw a large bed, and on that bed I saw—Oh! *mon père*—I saw——”

Here the boy, trembling and shaking as with an ague, fell upon his knees, burying his face in his father's lap, his hands tightly pressed over his eyes, as though to shut out some terrible sight.

Monsieur Landry stroked his head tenderly.

“Calm yourself, my son,” said he, “and tell us what you saw.”

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Slowly the boy raised his head, his eyes wide with the terror of what he had seen, and without rising from his kneeling posture, said, in a low voice:

“ I saw on the bed, *mon père*, a man—a dead man! He was lying with nothing on him but his nightshirt, which was almost torn off his body, and his face was the most terrible thing that I have ever seen. It was all bony and yellow—but I cannot tell you what it looked like, *mon père*. It was too horrible.

“ The woman seemed to be almost crazy, because of grief, I suppose.

“ ‘ There he is,’ said she; ‘ my husband—dead. There he lies dead, I say, and none will come near him. No one will help me, and why? Is this yellow fever then so bad, that a poor weak woman is left alone in her trouble? Other men die and there is mourning. People come to help the wife, while I am left alone with my dead. But you must help me. Together we will dress him in his black clothes, that he may not look so dreadful as he does now. You will help me, will you not, my boy? ’

“ While this woman was speaking, I was so scared of her, because she spoke so wildly, and at the dead man on the bed, that I could not speak or move; but when she had finished, I rushed out of that room and out of that house, and jumping on my horse I struck him with my whip, letting him go where he wanted to.

“ He started off as fast as he could go, and presently he came to the footpath and went out upon it, for I always come home that way. I was so scared that I hardly noticed where he was going, and I kept on whip-

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ping him as hard as I could. All of a sudden, when I was near the place where the footpath turns into the road, I saw the guard (who had seen me coming) leave his place on the road, and run toward me to cut me off. I tried now to stop my horse, but I could do nothing with him, so I whipped him as hard as I could, and shut my eyes, waiting for the guard to shoot me. I heard him yell at me to halt, and then I heard his gun go off.

“When I heard the bullet strike the mail bag, I thought that it had hit me, and I was so afraid that I would fall to the ground, and that they would take me back to Mouton, that I kept on whipping my horse, and I do not remember anything else until I saw you, *mon père*, and Père Martain standing on the porch.”

The boy paused for a moment, and then said:

“That is all, *mon père*. And now may I go to the house and have my mother give me something to eat? I have eaten nothing since early this morning.”

“You may go, my son,” answered Monsieur Landry gravely, and as the boy walked slowly through the store, he followed the retreating figure of his eyes until it had vanished from his sight.

For a long time he and Father Martain sat thinking of what the boy had told them, each of them dreading to speak of this threatened calamity. Finally the silence was broken by Father Martain, who holding his old hat upon his lap, caressed it tenderly for a moment, and then said:

“This is bad, my friend; very bad. And Adrien

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was in the room with the man who had the fever. We are in the hands of God, and His mercy is very great. Perhaps all will yet be well."

"Perhaps so," said Monsieur Landry, but his voice lacked the ring of faith that had accompanied the words of the good priest.

Again there was a long silence, and in the mind of Monsieur Landry the words of Father Martain kept repeating themselves with merciless insistence:

"And Adrien was in the room with the man who had the fever."

Away there, where the road turned to the left, lay Mouton, with its railroad, its big postoffice, and its stores of every description. It was their mother city, the source of their mail, their news, their connection with the outside world.

Only a week ago Monsieur Landry had been there, buying at the stores, calling upon old friends, and meeting new ones. Then all had been peaceful and happy. The people in the streets had joked and laughed, their minds free from care.

And now, into this peace, into this happiness, had come a vague terror, a thing to make the bravest heart quail at its very awfulness, a thing which none could see, none could grapple with, stealing unawares into the town, unknown until heralded by death, by despair, by terror, it had made its presence felt. A thing which none could stop, none could swerve, destroying young and old, rich and poor; a thing insatiable and relentless.

And now out of this terror, this despair, had come Adrien, bringing with him, perhaps, the seeds of this

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destroyer, to plant them unwillingly amid the peace and quiet of Landry.

Monsieur Landry bowed his head, the words of the priest still repeating themselves, as though burned into his brain with letters of fire.

Very slowly Father Martain arose from his chair, and very slowly he placed the old hat upon his head. Going over to the storekeeper, he laid his hand affectionately upon his shoulder.

“You must put your trust in God,” said he. “We are in His hands. I would not let anyone come near Adrien until—” The good priest hesitated for a moment. “Until we know what is going to happen,” he finished softly.

“I am going now to the church to pray. It is all that we can do. So good-bye, my friend, and hope for the best.”

Monsieur Landry rose to his feet slowly and with difficulty. He seemed to have grown old in the last few moments, and his ruddy face now had an ashy hue. Without a word he held out his hand, and Father Martain, shaking it warmly for a moment, left the porch, and walked slowly toward the church, his head bent low.

CHAPTER IV

MONSIEUR LANDRY MAKES A DISCOVERY

FOR a long time Monsieur Landry stood where the good priest had left him, staring down the road, his mind numbed by this totally unexpected piece of news.

Thus he stood, seeing nothing, hearing nothing knowing nothing, until suddenly he saw the mail bag, lying where he had left it, by the side of his chair, and the sight of this mail bag destroyed the frozen condition of Monsieur Landry's brain, just as a stone thrown into an ice-covered pool will destroy the frozen condition of its surface. As if by magic it removed from his mind the grewsome thoughts with which it had been filled, and this man, who had been a moment before as one made of stone, was now the postmaster, eager to sort his letters, and curious to see for whom they were intended.

Picking up the bag he walked briskly into the store and behind the counter to the little glass mail box. Here he unlocked the padlock of the bag, and thrusting his hand inside drew out the letters.

There were very few of them, eight or ten in all, and when he had taken them out, the storekeeper laid them upon the counter in a little pile. Now the top

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letter on this pile was addressed to Monsieur Landry himself, and without looking at the others, he opened it and read it. It was from a firm of commission merchants in New Orleans that wished to sell his cotton crop for that year. The letter was strictly a business one, giving the rates for cotton together with the commissions, but at the end there was a sentence that made Monsieur Landry start. It ran:

“We would like to sell your entire crop, and if you wish references, I know of no better one than to tell you that for years we have sold all of the sugar that Major William H. Lawrence has made at Lawrence Hall plantation.”

Monsieur Landry read this sentence several times. He had heard of Major Lawrence and of Lawrence Hall plantation; who had not? One of the wealthiest sugar planters in the state, Major Lawrence was known by every one, as was Lawrence Hall, famed for its huge mill and wonderful crops. But Monsieur Landry had not known that Major Lawrence's initials were “W. H.,” and as he thought of this he remembered that those of the other Lawrence were the same. Never in his wildest thoughts had the storekeeper connected the wealthy planter with the mysterious stranger, but now it seemed as though there might be some connection. The more Monsieur Landry thought of this, the less he could make of it; and finally he said, “It is a mere coincidence,” and dismissed the matter from his mind. However, he carefully placed the letter in his pocket for future reference.

He now turned his attention to the other letters,

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sorting them and putting them, each in its proper pigeonhole, until he came to the last one. This letter was lying face downward, and as Monsieur Landry picked it up, he saw that it was the one that had been hit by the guard who shot at Adrien. The bullet had passed along the top of the letter, tearing it almost off, and it was only kept closed by a little piece of paper on one side.

The sun had set, and it was quite dark in the store, so dark, in fact, that Monsieur Landry was obliged to hold this letter very close to his eyes to read the address. And holding it close to his face, with his back to the window, that the few remaining rays of light might reach it, he read, "William H. Lawrence, Jr., Landry P. O., La."

In his excitement Monsieur Landry dropped the letter. He had seen many letters for Mr. Lawrence, but this was the first one that had ever had "Jr." after the name in the address. The storekeeper was now almost wild with curiosity.

"This proves that Major Lawrence is his relative, possibly his father," said he; "but if only I knew more. If I could see the letter inside."

Suddenly he thought of the torn top, where the bullet had passed, and picking up the letter he examined it carefully. By breaking the little piece of paper at the side, the envelope could be opened, and its contents taken out.

"It is only a very small piece of paper," thought Monsieur Landry, "and I cannot imagine how the bullet missed tearing it also. One could tear it himself,

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and who would know the difference? The bullet tore it, of course, the hole in the mail bag will prove that, and Father Martain saw the torn letter in the bag before it was opened. It is not wrong to do this when one is as mysterious as this Lawrence. What can be easier than to tear the piece of paper, and learn all that I wish to know?" and the fingers of the storekeeper closed nervously upon the letter, about to do their owner's bidding.

Suddenly he paused. What if Mr. Lawrence should call for his letter at the moment when he was reading it?

A thought struck Monsieur Landry.

"It is dark," said he. "I will close the store so that none can disturb me." And suiting the action to the word, he went quickly about the building, barring the door and shutting the windows. When he had finished, it was pitch dark inside, and groping his way to the counter, he lit a lamp, whose small flame gave but scant light in the black interior.

Taking the letter, he tore the envelope quickly with a jerk of his finger, and drawing out the enclosure, he laid it on the counter in the lamplight.

Instead of the letter that he had expected, there was another envelope stamped, sealed and postmarked from Mouton, showing that whoever had sent back the letter, had sent it back unread. But it was the address on this envelope that caused Monsieur Landry to cry out in his triumph, for there, showing black in the light of the lamp, and written in the hand of the mysterious Lawrence, was this inscription, "Major William H. Lawrence, Lawrence Hall Plantation, La."

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With a cautious glance over his shoulder, as though he were afraid that some one was watching him, Monsieur Landry shoved the sealed envelope in the torn one, and thrust it hurriedly into one of the pigeonholes in the glass box. Then dragging a chair into the light, he sat down to think over his discovery.

For a long while he sat, wrapped in thought, and then, bringing his fist down upon the counter, he said loudly, as though addressing some one, his voice ringing with triumph:

“If this mysterious man is not the son of Major Lawrence, of Lawrence Hall plantation, then am I the most mistaken man in Louisiana.”

And as he sat thus, in the little circle of light cast by the lamp, his face beaming with gratified curiosity, the words of Father Martain came into his mind as suddenly and as clearly as though some one had shouted them in his ear, “*And Adrien was in the room with the man who had the fever.*”

Gone instantly were the joy and the triumph, and in their place was the horror of the evening. Monsieur Landry gazed into the dark corners and shuddered. He thought of Adrien's story, of Father Martain who had gone to pray for his safety, for the safety of Landry.

And while this good man was invoking the Divine aid, what had he been doing? Had he prayed for deliverance from this great evil? No, not he. In the dark of the store, like any criminal, he had done a wicked deed, a crime, for which he should be punished. And at this time, when he should have been at peace

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with God, he had done it. Was it right for him to ask for favors now? Would God now be merciful?

These thoughts, together with the terrors of the evening, filled the mind of Monsieur Landry, and, his overwrought nerves giving way, he bowed his head upon his hands, and abandoned himself to his emotion.

CHAPTER V

MR. LAWRENCE RECEIVES A LETTER

THE sun was well up, and already its warm rays were beginning to tell of the heat to come, when Lawrence rode homeward from Landry with his mail.

His attitude toward the storekeeper that morning had been formal indeed, and would have rapidly increased to anger at sight of the torn envelope had not Monsieur Landry hastened to explain. Long and eloquently had the storekeeper held forth upon the trials of Adrien, adding to them many little details of his own, and when he had finished, Lawrence had forgotten the letter, his anger, and everything save this impending calamity.

To his many anxious questions Monsieur Landry had replied that Adrien was safely quarantined in an out-house, and that the doctor would be unable to say anything about him until the disease had time to develop.

So therefore it was that Lawrence set forth from Landry a very downcast man, only to be more downcast still when he suddenly remembered his letter.

This letter, the most important one that he had ever received, had been driven from his mind by the news

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of the fever, so now when he had a chance to think of it, he quickly tore off the envelope and examined the inclosure.

As he looked at the letter addressed by himself, its seal unbroken, there came into his eyes a look of despair—the despair of one who has staked all upon a single desperate chance, and has lost.

So this was the fate of the letter from which he had hoped so much, upon which he had staked the future of his child. His father had not even opened it, had looked upon it as an appeal for aid for himself, and had sent it back unread.

The thought of this only hurt Lawrence's pride the more, for he had written with no thought or mention of himself, sending only a plea for his little girl. A short, passionate plea, asking that in case of his death, the child's grandfather would give her his protection. And here was the letter thrown back at him, unopened and unread.

Slowly he tore it into small pieces which he dropped by the roadside as his horse plodded lazily along—the bridle hung loosely on the pommel of the saddle. Thus sitting very straight and still, he went on between the tall Cherokee hedges until he came to his home, where the horse went to the gate, stopped of his own accord, and waited patiently for his master to open it.

Lawrence's house was comfortably long, and white, and green-shuttered, but its paint was cracked and peeling, and there was an air of dilapidation about it that showed that its owner was not in the best of circumstances. The fence in front had many a gap and break

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in its long, sagging line of pickets, and the little gate swung loosely upon one hinge. On entering this gate, one passed through a thick row of china trees, which grew on either side of the path that led to the house, and at the end of this path were two huge water oaks. All of these trees combined to shut out a great deal of light, but they also added a great deal of shade and coolness to the long porch which ran the entire length of the house in front.

It was here that Lawrence came after having unsaddled his horse, and dragging a chair into a shady corner, he sat down to think of what he should do in this, the time of his misfortune. For a while he sat, and tried to find some gleam of light amid the darkness in which his soul was plunged, but his tired brain refused to work.

Rising wearily he went to the edge of the porch and called for his daughter, called again and again, until a faint voice answered him from far back in the field. Then he went into the house, and returned in a moment with something that he held in his tightly closed hand, as he waited for the arrival of his little girl.

Around the corner of the house there came presently a pointer dog, shambling along in the ungraceful gait of puppyhood, his great, clumsy paws sprawling out from his body as though he had lost control of them, and behind him, running hard, her little blue apron flaring out behind her, came the child.

The careworn face of Lawrence was lit with a smile for an instant, as he beheld her approaching. He loved his little daughter very dearly, and she, returning that

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love a hundred-fold, was the one bright spot in a very dreary life.

Running quickly to the steps of the porch the child climbed upon her father's knee, where, breathing hard from her recent exertions, she looked up at him inquiringly.

Lawrence stroked her hair softly, his face glowing with his great love for her.

"Where have you been, my daughter?" questioned he.

"Chicot and I have been in the field with old Telesse, *mon père*," she answered.

Lawrence frowned.

"Have I not told you that you must not speak French to me?" he asked. The child's face became grave for a moment.

"I am sorry, father," she answered. "I have been with old Telesse all morning, and he only understands French. I am sorry father; I forgot."

"Poor little girl," said Lawrence, speaking more to himself than to the child, "it will not be long before you will forget to speak English entirely, living where none can speak it. And what is Telesse doing in the field?"

"He is plowing, and so are the nigger boys," answered the child. "And Telesse let me ride on one of the mules. And Chicot caught a rat," she added proudly.

At the mention of his name, the dog wagged his tail vigorously, and rose up and put his front paws upon Lawrence's knees. The little girl patted him

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upon his head, and praised him loudly for his skill in hunting.

Lawrence smiled at this for a moment, and then pushing the dog away from him, opened his hand, disclosing what he had brought with him from the house—a long, slender chain made of innumerable tiny links of gold.

The child clapped her hands.

“Isn't it pretty; is it for me?” she cried.

“Yes,” answered Lawrence gravely, “it is for you, but I want you to listen very carefully to what I am going to tell you, and you must never forget it.”

“Yes,” said the child solemnly, “I won't never forget it.”

Lawrence now drew a ring from his finger. He opened the clasp of the chain and slipped the ring upon it, where it hung, swinging from side to side, with the sunlight glancing from the polished setting.

The ring was a band of chased gold, set with a large stone of reddish-brown color, mottled with white, and upon the polished surface of the stone was cut a crest, whose delicate lines and tracery showed the work of a master hand.

Lawrence now held up the chain with its dangling ring, and said, slowly and impressively:

“This chain was your mother's, and from it hung the holy medals which she always wore. The medals I cannot give you now, my daughter, for I prize them too much. But I am going to give you the chain, and I want you to wear it always.

“This ring,” he continued, holding it up as he spoke,

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“ was given to me by my father when I was twenty-one years of age. He gave one like it to my brother on his twenty-first birthday, and the two rings are so much alike, that when you put them side by side you can hardly tell them apart. The stones are two carnelians that your grandfather found in a gully on his plantation, and the family crest upon them was engraved in Paris by one of the greatest lapidaries in that city. The two rings are made from an old brooch that belonged to your great-grandmother, so they are very valuable for family reasons. This is the first time that mine has left my finger since my father gave it to me nine years ago—but my little girl, what have I been talking about? You have not understood a word of what I have said, and I have gone on talking, forgetting all about what a very little child you are.”

When Lawrence had started speaking, the child had followed every word, trying vainly to understand what he was talking about, but as he went on, his mind now back in the past of which he was speaking, utterly oblivious to the age of his listener, she gave up in despair, and sat with a puzzled look upon her face, her little nose wrinkled up in bewilderment. It was this puzzled look that now caused Lawrence to stop short in his narrative, and taking the chain, he clasped it about the child's neck, tucking it under the collar of her dress, so that it was completely hidden from sight.

“ Now listen, Aline,” said he, “ this is what you must remember. Do not try to think of what I have just said, but listen to me carefully. You must wear this ring with the chain always, and you must never

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show it to any one, unless you are in a great deal of trouble. Do you understand?"

The child nodded.

"Now say it after me," said Lawrence.

Very slowly they repeated it together, until the child could say it alone, when Lawrence kissed her, and putting her down upon her feet said:

"That's a good girl; never forget what I have told you. Run away and play with Chicot now, for father wants to be alone."

He watched her as she ran away to the field, the dog following clumsily after her.

"Poor little child," said he, "what will your future be, I wonder? How happy and how free from care you are now—what will you be ten years hence? Who will care for you when I am gone? Who will know who you really are? Your grandfather, your own flesh and blood, has cast you off—you, an innocent little child who never harmed a soul in your blameless life. And why should you suffer for the wrong of your father, who loves you so dearly?"

Many thoughts such as these filled the mind of Lawrence, and his heart was very bitter.

"Some one must know who she is, who I am," thought he; "it is her right. If I were to die, she with her French, that she must speak to make herself understood, would be thought a Cajun. With none to care for her but Telesse, she would be looked upon as his daughter. But who is there to whom I can turn, to whom I can tell my story? Since my father has refused her aid, in whom can I confide?"

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“There is Colonel Gordon at Belrive—but no, I could not tell him. My pride would prevent me. Then there is Landry with Doctor Lemaire. He would not do; he is too old to outlive me. And Mr. Landry? He is too curious. I could not trust to his discretion.

“And is there not one soul in all this country to whom I can tell my story?”

Lawrence bowed his head in despair, and the bitterness within his heart was very great. Slowly he placed his arm upon the railing, and sinking his head upon his hands, pressed his palms against it as though he would drive into it by force the name of the person that he wanted.

And as he sat thus, plunged in despair, there came suddenly before him a face.

It was an old face, the skin cracked and wrinkled like parchment, framed by long locks of yellowish white hair. The face had eyes of a faint blue, eyes that beamed with a great love for all things, and the mouth bore a smile that was a balm to all suffering souls. Crowning the white hair and shading the face was an old hat—an old, black hat with a wide brim.

Very quietly Lawrence raised his head, and upon his face there was a great calm. Very quietly he rose from his chair and smiled with satisfaction, for he had found his man.

CHAPTER VI

NUMA ASKS A PRICE FOR SILENCE

DOWN in the field, back of the house, old Telesse was at work harvesting Lawrence's cane crop. He was an old man, his hair just turned a yellowish white, which made him look much older than he really was, but in his gray eyes there was a twinkle, which spoke of a vitality that was far from being extinguished.

As he followed behind the plow, his bare feet sinking ankle-deep in the rich, black earth, his voice rising every now and then as he urged his mules on to their work, he was a Cajun of the Cajuns, speaking no language but their French *patois*, his English being barely intelligible.

For this simple old man, whose thoughts never strayed beyond the present, this world held but three things which counted.

First there was his religion, the religion of his people, of his friends, the religion that brought them from the far-off prairies Sunday after Sunday to worship in the little church at Landry. Wholly illiterate, his mind untutored beyond the simple necessities of life, to this old man his religion meant everything. To the good priest he went in happiness, to rejoice with him at his

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good fortune, and to him he went in sorrow, for sympathy, for comfort.

After his religion came the old man's master. To him he gave his respect, his obedience, his submission. Had anyone asked him to tell who the greatest man in the world was, he would have answered instantly, "The good Father Martain," but he would have added, "Monsieur Lawrence is a very great man also." His love for his master was very great, but it was tempered with a great respect, the respect of the weaker mind for the stronger one.

And last, there came the little girl, Aline. The old man loved her with his whole heart, loved her above all else in the world.

He loved his religion, but he stood in awe of it. There was much that he could not understand. He loved his master also, but at times he feared him because of his knowledge. But the little girl, with her simple, childish mind, simple and childish like his own, was loved by him freely, unrestrainedly, loved with the faithful, undying love that the dog has for its master—the love that has no reason, beginning without cause, and lasting forever.

On and on went the old man, finishing one furrow, only to start another, the mules plodding patiently along, the bright blade of the plow turning back the warm earth, which broke and scattered like ashes.

Seated high upon one of the cane rows, the green leaves making a canopy above her, sat the little girl, her blue apron a pleasing bit of color against the brown and green of the field. By her side lay the dog, his

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nose between his paws, one eye open in quest of a possible rat. The little girl, like a princess seated upon her throne, divided her conversation between the old man and the dog, chatting merrily with the former whenever he came by, and talking softly to the latter when the plow had passed.

Suddenly the dog started up growling, his hair rising upon his back in little ridges, and the child, looking for the cause of it, saw a boy carefully crawling through the barbed wire fence that separated the field from the road.

Paying no attention to the little girl, who was quieting the dog with sundry soft pats upon his head, the boy walked quickly to the end of the row which old Telesse was plowing, and waited for him to approach.

When the old man saw this boy his face became troubled. Drawing up his mules at the end of the furrow, he confronted him defiantly, one hand still holding the plow, as though he expected the conversation to be a brief one.

“Well, Numa,” he asked in French, “what is it now?”

The boy did not answer for a moment, but stood silent, his brown face twisting with emotion. Within him pride and grief were struggling, and it was some little time before pride was triumphant.

“My father is dead,” he answered finally. “He died last night. I am a man now, and the horse, the wagon, even the gun, are mine. Everything belongs to me.”

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Old Telesse nodded his head thoughtfully.

"Your father is dead; he died last night? That is bad," said he slowly; "that is very bad." But the expression upon his face belied his words, for, if ever a man looked relieved, if ever a man looked pleased at hearing a piece of news, that man was old Telesse.

"When will you bury him?" he asked.

"Late this afternoon," answered the boy. "Father Martain is coming to the woods, and we will bury him there."

The old man nodded again, and then, as though he considered the conversation at an end, prepared to move the plow to the next row.

"Wait a moment!" yelled the boy; "that is not all. I must have some money for the burial, for the——"

The old man turned upon him fiercely.

"It was always money, and more money with your father, and now do you expect to keep on with the same thing?" he cried. "If you do not leave the field at once, I will try this whip upon you," and he made a threatening gesture.

Into the black eyes of the boy there came a crafty look, the look of one who, having another in his power, grinds him without mercy.

"Before my father died," said he slowly, "he told me of the man that you——"

The old man's arms shot out in a beseeching gesture, his whole being pleading for mercy.

"Stop!" he cried. "It is all right. You shall have the money, only keep still. How much is it that you want?"

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The boy smiled with satisfaction.

"Ten dollars," answered he. "I must buy some things at the store, besides paying for the burial."

The old man scratched his head thoughtfully for a moment.

"That is a great deal of money," said he, "but I will see what I can do. Come up to the house and wait outside for me. Did you come in the wagon?"

"No," answered the boy. "I walked all the way. They are going to use the wagon to carry my father in, and they are painting it. Painting it black—for death," he added grimly.

Up from the field went the old man and the boy, the little girl following behind them, and when they reached the house Telesse went inside, leaving the boy upon the back steps.

The old man was inside a long time, and when he came out he handed the boy a handful of silver.

"Now go!" said he. "And I hope that your father is suffering in hell!" he added under his breath.

Without a word of thanks the boy thrust the money into the pocket of his ragged trousers and started off toward the front gate, whistling as he went.

The old man looked after him angrily until he turned the corner of the house, and then, with a shrug of his shoulders, went back to his plowing again.

The boy went his way, whistling loudly until he reached the front gate, where he found the little girl playing with her dog in the shade of the thickly-growing china trees. Half way through the gate he paused, struck with the beauty of the child, and leaning against

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one of the posts, he took off his battered hat with a great sweep.

“Good-by, Aline,” said he. “You are a pretty child, and I like you.”

The little maid, seated demurely upon the ground, eyed him scornfully.

“I will say good-by, Numa,” she answered, “but you are a bad, ugly boy; my father says so, and you look like Tony, the dago.”

Into Numa’s brown cheeks there flashed a streak of red.

“I am not a dago,” he answered proudly; “I am half Spanish. And I am not bad or ugly either; your father does not tell the truth when he says so. You called me a boy, but I am not a boy; I am a man. My father is dead, and all his things belong to me. I am going to the woods now, to hunt, to work like a man, but some day I am going to come back and marry you, for you are the prettiest little girl that I have ever seen, and I like you. And now won’t you kiss me good-by?” he asked teasingly.

The little girl drew her short skirt about her, as though she did not wish it to rest upon the ground that he had trod.

“No, Numa,” answered she. “You are a wicked boy, and you are a brown boy, too. Father has told me never to kiss anybody that is not white like I am.”

Numa’s face flushed with anger.

“I am going to make you kiss me now, whether you want to or not!” he cried, and seizing her by the hand, he drew her roughly through the gate into the road.

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Then ensued a struggle in the hot, dusty highway: Numa trying to bring the angry little face up to his own, the child digging her head stubbornly downward, and striking at him with her little pink fists.

So engrossed was Numa in the conflict that he did not hear a horse rapidly approaching, and just as he was about to drag the tired little head triumphantly upward, a hand seized his collar, almost jerking him backward into the dust. Looking up angrily he saw a boy younger than himself, handsomely dressed, and astride a small black pony.

"You are a coward to fight a girl, and such a little girl, too," said the boy.

The culprit eyed him sullenly for a moment.

"Well, it is none of your business," replied he. "You go away and leave me alone."

"But it is my business," said the boy, "and if you don't go away and leave this little girl alone, I'll get off my horse and give you a good beating."

Numa answered never a word to this, and walked sullenly away behind the horse, as though he were going to follow its rider's instructions, but no sooner was the boy's back toward him, than, stooping, he picked up a large clod of dirt, and threw it with all his might at his enemy. The clod struck him fairly between the shoulders, almost knocking him from his horse, but not waiting to see the effects of his throw, Numa ran quickly across the road, and diving through the barbed wire fence on the other side he darted out across the fields, where it was impossible for the boy to follow him upon his horse.

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The newcomer screwed up his handsome face and winked bravely, in the effort to keep back the tears that rose to his eyes, for the blow had been a hard one. One quick glance showed him that to pursue this cowardly assailant would be impossible, so after rubbing his aching back vigorously for a moment, he turned his attention to the little girl.

She stood with her hand upon the gate, prepared for instant retreat, should it be necessary, her face still flushed from her recent exertions.

When the boy now turned toward her, she nodded at him, smiling.

"Thank you, boy," said she simply.

"Oh, that's all right," answered he. "I won't let any boy hurt a girl, if I can help it. But that boy is a coward, for he hit me behind my back."

"Yes," said the little girl, "Numa is a coward, and I hate him. But I like you," she finished, smiling at him again.

The boy's face became red with embarrassment.

"I like you, too," said he. "You are a very pretty little girl, and I am coming to see you some time. I am going to catch that boy some day and beat him well, and if he ever bothers you again you must let me know."

The child nodded, and with a good-by and a wave of his hand, the boy started off up the road. He went only a little way, the child following him with her eyes, when he suddenly turned his pony and came riding back. Reaching the gate he stopped for a moment and said:

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“ I just thought I would come back and tell you my name, and where I live, for if I do not do so, you will not know where to send for me if that boy bothers you again. I live at Belrive plantation, and my name is Gordon, Carey Gordon,” and waving his hand again, he rode swiftly up the road and out of sight.

The little girl went back to the dog, who lay sprawling under the trees. Sitting down, she put his head in her lap, stroked the animal softly and said:

“ I like that boy. He is a pretty boy, and I hope that he will come and see me soon; don't you, Chicot? ”

And sitting there in the shade of the trees, little Aline found her first love, found him, and she did not know it.

CHAPTER VII

MR. LAWRENCE SEES HIS MAN

IT was late in the afternoon, and it was very warm at Landry; so warm, in fact, that Father Martain had forsaken the stuffy atmosphere of his house, and had come into his little garden for shade and comfort.

This garden (which was the pride of Father Martain's heart, and which he considered the very finest garden in the world) would have caused a real gardener to open his eyes in amazement. Flowers, and fruits, and vegetables grew here in the greatest profusion, presenting such a confused and mixed appearance that for a moment one would have been at a loss to know how all of these different vines, plants and bushes came to be growing together.

And in the very midst of it all stood a huge fig tree, its heavy foliage casting a deep shade, its wilderness of branches the haunt of a multitude of birds who chattered shrilly as they fought for the cool brown fruit that grew in the greatest abundance.

In the shade of this tree sat the good priest. He was thinking of the boy Adrien, and his heart was calling out to God for a speedy deliverance from the fever. An unopened book on the table beside him was an

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indication that he had come out to read, but his thoughts were far from any such diversion, and he gazed absently before him.

Beyond the white picket fence which enclosed his garden lay Landry, basking drowsily in the sun.

There was the store of Monsieur Landry, its little porch deserted, a few creole ponies standing sleepily at the rack in front, while their owners talked to the storekeeper in the cool interior of the building.

There, further down the road, was the house of Doctor Lemaire, rising white and cool amid its setting of green, the little drug store beside it standing with closed door and barred windows, telling of the doctor's absence.

And beyond the drug store, the dilapidated blacksmith shop, with the cabin back of it, was silent and deserted, the blacksmith stretched lazily beneath a tree, sleeping away the hot summer afternoon.

All was quiet with the silence of contentment.

From the blacksmith shop a little girl came walking, a bright tin pail swinging in her hand, her steps turned toward the store. From the chimney of Monsieur Landry's house came a faint wisp of smoke, the herald of an early supper.

All seemed peaceful and happy in the little town of Landry.

Father Martain watched the girl with the pail, and presently he himself became drowsy. He wondered what she would buy when she came to the store, and what she would pay for it, and while doing this the good priest fell asleep.

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And while he slept, a man who had ridden up the Mouton road came down his little brick walk to where he sat beneath the fig tree.

For a moment the man stood beside the sleeping priest, wondering whether he should disturb him or not, and then he saw a chair placed at the other side of the table from the sleeping man—placed there as though in expectation of a visitor. The newcomer went over to this chair, and, seating himself, waited for Father Martain to awake. For a while he sat thus, his eyes traveling over the garden, which seemed to amuse him very much, and then Father Martain, suddenly giving a little jump, sat up straight in his chair, his eyes open, wide awake.

He did not immediately see his visitor, but stretching himself as though very well satisfied with his nap, he stooped to pick up his book, which had fallen at his feet. As he raised himself, he saw for the first time the newcomer, who sat across the table smiling at him.

Father Martain gave a little start of surprise, and held out his hand.

“Mr. Lawrence!” he cried, “I am glad to see you. But how did you come here? You surprised me.”

Lawrence smiled.

“You were asleep when I came,” he replied, “and I did not want to wake you up, so I just sat down, and waited for you to wake up yourself.”

“That was very kind of you,” said Father Martain, “but I should not have minded. The next time that you come, if I am asleep, you must wake me. And now let me offer you some figs. They are very nice,

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and we must eat them while we have them, for next month I will not be able to give you any when you come to see me."

As he spoke he pushed the dish of figs across the table to Lawrence, who appearing to be embarrassed for some reason, began eating them as though his life depended upon his emptying the dish.

Father Martain had spoken to Lawrence as though he had not only paid him a great many visits before, but he expected to see him pay a great many more visits in the future. Now the truth of the matter was, that Lawrence had never before paid the priest a visit, but Father Martain had seen that he was embarrassed, and he wished to put him at his ease.

Therefore, he spoke to him in this manner, and in the mind of the good priest there was no great curiosity. He knew that Lawrence had some very good reason for coming to see him, and he also knew that he would find out what that reason was before very long. He was content to wait until Lawrence should tell him what it was.

For a moment the two men sat in silence, Lawrence peeling and eating the figs in apparent enjoyment, until finally he waved his arm about him as though to take in the entire garden.

"That is a fine garden you have," said he.

Father Martain smiled, for he liked to have his garden praised.

"Yes," said he, "it is a nice garden, and I like it very much, but some people do not like it because I have my flowers and vegetables mixed up together."

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“It is rather a peculiar way to make a garden,” replied Lawrence. “Why did you plant it in that manner?”

“I planted my garden that way,” replied Father Martain slowly, “for two reasons. The first one is, that I can sit here in my chair beneath this tree, and can look at the same time at my flower garden, my vegetable garden, and my orchard,” and the good priest laughed heartily at his joke—the joke that he had told to every one for years, and at which he laughed more heartily each time he told it.

Lawrence laughed also, apparently more at his ease.

“And your second reason?” he inquired. “If it is as good as your first one, no one could blame you for planting your garden upside down, if you wanted to.”

Into the eyes of Father Martain there came a look of tenderness, and he laid his hand affectionately upon the knotted trunk of the fig tree, as one caressing an old and tried friend.

“To me,” said he softly, “all the growing things which are planted in a garden are like people. I do not mean the weeds, of course, for they are harmful and choke out the useful plants, so I kill them when it is necessary to do so.

“Now as I have told you, I look upon all plants as people, and they all belong to one family. They live, they grow, and each has its little part to play in the world. People, to be good and to love one another, must live together, where each can see the other and take an interest in his welfare. So, to me, it is with the plants, and I really believe that they love one

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another. See how that sweet pea vine clings to the cornstalk as tenderly as a child clings to its mother. Should you tear the child from its mother's arms it would die, and so would die the vine, were I to tear it away.

"Therefore, I plant my flowers and vegetables together, and they love and help one another through their short lives, just as we should do."

The good priest stopped speaking, and Lawrence was silent for a moment thinking of what he had said.

"That is a very pretty thought," he observed, "and one that should be a lesson to all men. But who would have conceived such an idea save yourself, Father Martain?"

"Very many would have done so," replied the priest. Lawrence laughed.

"No one but yourself could have thought of such a thing," said he. "And now I should like to speak to you about the business that I have come upon. I don't suppose that you imagined that I came to ask about your garden?"

"No," said Father Martain, "I did not."

"Then to begin with, I have come to ask a favor of you," said Lawrence. "Why I should ask it of you seems I suppose strange, as I am not of your religion, but I have no one to turn to, and I have heard from every one of your kindness and sympathy. Therefore, I have come to you with my trouble."

"I am glad that you came, my son," replied the good priest, "and your religion will play no part in what you have to say. It is our mission in life to

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help all who are in trouble, regardless of everything. And now, my son, what is it that you have to tell me?"

"I have come to see you for my little girl's sake more than for my own," began Lawrence, "and as she is to be brought up in your faith, who better than yourself should know of her past, and look to her future? As you know, I am friendless here, and should anything happen to me, my child would be left alone without any one knowing who she really is, and who she is you will know when I have finished my story. Have you ever heard of Major Lawrence, of Lawrence Hall plantation?"

Father Martain nodded.

"I have lived for years in this little place, where one hears of but few people," answered he, "but even in Landry is Major Lawrence known."

"He is my father," said Lawrence simply.

Father Martain's eyes opened wide in amazement.

"Is it possible?" he cried. "And how is it that you are living in this little house by yourself?"

"That," replied Lawrence, "is what I am going to tell you. I will not speak of my youth at Lawrence Hall, with its army of servants, its fields, and the big sugar house, for that would take too long. It will be enough to tell you that I was the oldest, and my father's favorite child. I had one sister, who died, and there is a brother younger than myself.

"My mother died when I was very small, and my father seemed to give to me all of the love that he had lavished upon her. My slightest wish was obeyed;

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there was nothing that I desired that was not given me immediately, and so, as you can imagine, I grew up a spoiled headstrong boy, who never counted the cost of anything.

“When I was nineteen years of age I was sent to college, where I stayed for four years, doing little but spend my father’s money and get myself into all manner of trouble. Upon my return home, after having finished my college career, my father determined to celebrate the event in what he considered an appropriate manner, and for three days there was feasting and merry-making on the plantation.

“There were barbecues, dancing, picnics, and everything that you can think of that would amuse the field hands and their families. The big house was filled with guests also, and they had their amusements as well as the hands, so that, for all, the three days was one continuous round of merriment.

“Now, among the many guests that came to Lawrence Hall at this time was a young girl, whom my father was very anxious I should marry. She was a pretty girl, her family was one of the oldest and best in this country, and she was an only child, heiress to a very large and valuable estate, so in every way she was a young person with whom a matrimonial alliance would be very desirable. Her father was also an old friend of my father, and it was the earnest desire of both of the old gentlemen that we should marry.

“On the day preceding the arrival of the guests my father called me into his study and spoke to me of this

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matter, and so great was his desire that this marriage should take place, that I promised him that I would do all in my power to bring it about.

“ So the guests arrived, and the plantation was filled with merry-making, one amusement ending only to give place to another, and every morning I would make up my mind to speak to this girl before the day was ended, only to go to my rest at night with my purpose unaccomplished.

“ Finally the third and last day arrived, and I had not spoken. On the morrow the guests would depart, and with them would go the girl upon whom my father had set his heart. Why I had not spoken to her I did not know then, and I do not think that I can tell you now, but I suppose that the excitement and bustle on the plantation banished all thoughts of anything but enjoying myself from my mind.

“ The evening of the last day arrived, and as I dressed myself for dinner I made up my mind that I would speak to her that night. The negroes were to have a barbecue, to which every one was going, and I thought that it would be a very good time and place to make my proposal.

“ My father gave a very fine dinner that night, and when the wine was served he rose from his chair and proposed a toast to the future mistress of Lawrence Hall, whoever she might be. As we all rose to drink it standing, my father gazed across the table at the girl, who had been placed next to me, and when she, catching his eye, blushed a fiery red, I do not think that there was a person at that table that had any

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doubts as to who the mistress of Lawrence Hall would be."

Here Lawrence paused for breath, his eyes sparkling with the memories of days long past, his mind apparently back amid the scenes which he was describing. Father Martain said never a word, but waited patiently for the speaker to continue.

"After the dinner was over," said Lawrence in a moment, "we all went over to the quarters to see the barbecue, and it was so arranged that the girl walked with me. The negroes had built a great fire, and were roasting the ox, which would have made us hungry with its tempting odor had we not just risen from the table. Around the fire there was a large number of negroes from Lawrence Hall and from other plantations for miles around, and they all seemed to be having the happiest time of their lives, dancing, singing, and cheering for me, every one of them with his or her eye upon the ox, which was now nearly done.

"Standing back from the circle of fire was a group of white people gazing like ourselves at the antics of the negroes, but unlike ourselves, waiting to eat some of the savory animal. They were Cajun tenants upon my father's plantation and the plantations nearby.

"While we were viewing this strange scene, one of the best dancers on the plantation began to dance, and as we could not see very well from where we stood, I called to the girl to follow me, and walked into the circle of negroes opposite the place where the Cajuns stood.

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“ For a few moments I watched the dancer, and then, looking over the fire toward the group upon the other side, I saw the most beautiful girl that I had ever seen in my life. I will not try to describe her to you, for I could not find words fit to do so, but at this moment, after several years, I can see her as plainly and as clearly as I saw her that night.

“ She was standing amid the group of roughly clad people, like some angel descended to earth, her head thrown back, her lips smiling at me, the fire lighting up her glorious face until it shone as the faces of the saints are said to shine in heaven. For a moment we gazed at each other across the fire. Then a group of negroes passing in front of me shut her from my sight, but in that moment I knew that I should never love any woman save this glorious creature. Even in my newborn love I thought that it would be easier for me to cross the barrier of flame than to cross the gulf that must separate our two lives.

“ My companion now tugged my coat sleeve, asking me to take her back to the rest of the party, and when I turned to her, I found that instead of being beautiful, as I had thought she was, she was plain and ugly in comparison with the other girl. I also thought of my promise to my father as we walked back, and in vindication of myself I must tell you that I tried to say to her what he wished me to, but the words would not come, and when we joined the other guests I knew that I would never speak to her.

“ As soon as I could, I excused myself from the company, saying that I wished to speak to one of the

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tenants, and going over to the group of Cajuns I spoke to old Hypolite, my father's head plowman.

" 'Everyone is having a good time,' I said to him.

" 'Yes,' said he, 'and we all have you to thank, *M'sieu*, for our pleasure. Had you not come home from school there would have been no celebration.'

" 'There are many strange faces here to-night,' said I. 'I should like to meet some of the visitors and give them welcome,' and I began to ask him the names of those about me, until finally I pointed to the girl.

"When I asked of her, he frowned.

" 'That is the daughter of old Edmond Varain,' said he. 'She had been visiting on *M'sieu* Lowry's plantation, and came over here with her friend. She should not have come. Her father would be furious did he know of it. I also think that Major Lawrence would be displeased did he know that she was here.'

"Now when old Hypolite told me this, my heart sank, for it seemed to me as though everything was going against me. Years ago Edmond Varain had worked for my father, had been his overseer and right-hand man. But one day there had been a quarrel between them, and Varain had left Lawrence Hall cursing my father and threatening vengeance. He even threatened to kill my father, but after a time he left our parish, and opened a store near Mouton. My father never heard from him after he left Lawrence Hall, but the news came to us that he had made a good deal of money out of his business and was well off.

"So you can understand how I felt when old Hypo-

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lite told me that this beautiful girl was the daughter of my father's enemy.

“ I went around meeting the different visitors, old Hypolite introducing me with as much ceremony as if I had been a king, until we came to the girl. Hypolite wished to pass her by, but I made him stop and introduce me, much against his will, and it was then, in the light of the fire, with the dancing, singing negroes all about us, that I met Aline Varain, the woman who was afterward my wife.”

Again Lawrence paused for breath, while Father Martain gazed at him in amazement.

CHAPTER VIII

A FLAG IS RAISED AT LANDRY

AND do you mean to tell me that the father of your dead wife is Monsieur Varain, the owner of the big store in Mouton?" asked Father Martain, when he had recovered from his surprise.

"I do," answered Lawrence, "and I hear that he is now a very rich man."

Father Martain nodded.

"Well, to go on with my story," said Lawrence; "I talked to Aline Varain for a few moments, and when I left her I was madly in love, so madly in love that I felt that if I could not have this girl I would die.

"I returned to the house with the other guests, and spent the night walking the floor, the image of Aline Varain ever before me.

"The next morning all of the guests left, and Lawrence Hall settled down to its usual routine.

"No sooner had the last carriage driven away than I ordered my horse and rode to Mr. Lowry's plantation. I did not know what I would say when I met the girl; I had no excuse to make, my mind being filled with one great desire—the desire to see her, and to see her at once.

"When I reached the house where Aline was staying they told me that she had gone walking in the woods

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with her friend, so to the woods I went, where I found the girls gathering berries. After talking to them for a while, I sent the friend away upon some pretext, and I then had Aline alone, where I could speak to her of what was in my heart.

“What I said—what she said—I cannot tell you. It was all like some beautiful dream. I was young, romantic, filled with the joy of a first love. She was still but a child, an affectionate child, of a stern, unloving father, her whole being crying out for love, her heart starving for a tender word, a caress, and in the daylight I found her more beautiful than she had been the night before.

“Can you wonder that we loved one another at the end of our brief meeting?

“The friend was taken into our confidence and promised her assistance in every way.

“When I kissed my pretty Aline and bade her good-by, promising to see her on the morrow, I felt as though I had left this earth and was in Paradise. My horse carried me home, his bridle dragging in the dust, where I let it stay in my abstraction.

“On reaching Lawrence Hall, my father called me into his study and asked me if I had spoken to the girl that he had chosen for my wife.

“I was aghast, for in my new-found love I had forgotten all about her. Why I lied to him I do not know, as I could have told him that I did not have a good chance to speak to her, but I suppose that in my confusion I forgot everything, and said the first thing that came into my mind, to shield myself.

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“ I told him that I had proposed to her, and that she had refused me.

“ My father looked very sad.

“ ‘ It was the one great wish of my life, but you did all that you could, my son,’ said he. ‘ I thank you.’

“ I left him, feeling the most miserable creature on earth, and for a moment I thought of going to him and telling him the whole truth, but thoughts of Aline forbade me, and I went instead to my room to dream of my love.

“ Every day I went to meet Aline, and every day I grew more in love with her and she with me. So a week passed, and on the next day Aline was obliged to return home.

“ Up to that time I had gone on loving this girl regardless of the future, thinking only of the happy present, but now something must be done, and must be done at once.

“ No hope could be had from my father; Aline’s father was more hopeless still.

“ All morning we three strove for some solution of this problem, making one plan only to abandon it for another, more useless than the first.

“ Finally it was time for the girls to go, and Aline was telling me, between her sobs, that she would always love me, when the friend said suddenly:

“ ‘ I have it! There is but one way. You must marry this evening. Your fathers may storm as much as they please, but they cannot untie the knot that God has tied.’

“ We followed her advice, and that evening we rode

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over to the town, where we were married in the little church, the friend and the priest's housekeeper acting as witnesses. There in the little church, with its rows of empty pews staring at us, as though in mockery, with the friend praying for us while the gentle old priest mumbled through the service, I married Aline Varain. Married the daughter of my father's enemy, of my father's overseer, a girl far below me in station, bringing naught with her but her father's curse—married her though it cost me my heritage, and there has never been a moment in my life when I have regretted it! If ever there has been a saint on earth, that saint was my Aline. In the long, sad days that followed, days of darkness without a single gleam of hope, she was my only comfort. Aline she was called, angel she was, kind and loving always, with a beauty that none could match.

“After we were married, we returned to our meeting-place in the woods, where we considered what was to be done next. The priest had been warned about speaking of the wedding, and the housekeeper did not know us, so for the present our secret was safe.

“After talking long and earnestly, we decided that the wedding should be kept quiet for the present, and that Aline should return home in the morning as she had intended doing. I was to stay at Lawrence Hall and arrange my affairs before speaking to my father, so that when the crash came we would not be left destitute.

“So I kissed my weeping bride, and started for

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home, my heart heavy within me, my grief at leaving my newly made wife almost more than I could bear.

“My father met me upon the front porch, his face white with anger, and called me to come to his study at once.

“When I entered the room, I found him at his desk, a letter before him, and in a voice trembling with rage he read it to me. It was from his friend, whose daughter he wished me to marry, and in it the writer said that on receiving my father’s letter, containing his news of the refusal of my offer of marriage, he had spoken to his daughter, asking for an explanation. She had told him that there had been no proposal made, and he wished an explanation of the matter immediately.

“‘And now, sir,’ said my father, when he had finished the letter, ‘what have you to say for yourself?’

“I was dumfounded. I saw that concealment would now be impossible. I told him of my intention of keeping my promise, of my meeting with Aline Varain, of my love for her, of my marriage. I told him the whole story and begged his pardon—begged for forgiveness, kneeling at the foot of his chair.

“When I had finished, he rose to his feet, his face white as death, his whole body shaking as with a palsy.

“‘Go!’ said he, pointing his trembling finger at the door. ‘Go! and never let me hear of you again. Never let me see you again in life, or in death. You have disgraced your name, and you have broken your father’s heart. For these things I might forgive you, but you have lied to me also. That I can never forgive. Now go, and never let me see your face again.’

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“ I passed through the door at which he pointed, my heart full of bitterness, but never a word did I answer. I loved my father, even as I love him now, and I could not bring myself to speak to him in anger.

“ Slowly I went to my room and packed what few things I could carry on my horse. As I came down the stairway I met my brother, and to him I poured out my troubles, knowing that I would receive sympathy. We loved each other dearly, and when I told him what had happened he cried like a child. He insisted on my taking what money he had, and before I left he slipped it into my pocket.

“ He walked with me to the plantation gate, where, blinded by tears, I shook his hand and rode away. Thus I left Lawrence Hall, the place that had been my home all my life, the place where my people have lived and died for generations. I have never been back.

“ And so I rode away, and found my young wife, who tried to comfort me, and then, for the first time in my life, the problem of living confronted me. There was I, a young man of twenty-four, the spoiled child of a rich father, thrown into the world to fight for existence with but a small sum between myself and starvation. Added to this was my complete ignorance of any way in which to make a living. Can you wonder that I was aghast at the prospect of the future?

“ We went to New Orleans where, after a while, I secured a position as a clerk. It was there that my little girl was born, and I called her Aline after her

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mother. We lived in the city for a time and my wife began to fade away day by day. The doctors could do nothing for her they said.

“ Finally one physician, the greatest in the city, told me that to save her life I must take her to the country, not for a visit, but to live there. A friend of mine in the city owned the place near Landry where I am living now, and he offered it to me on yearly payments. Having a little money put away, I bought it, paying for the first year. My wife was very sick at the time, too sick I thought to be moved, but she insisted upon going away, so the final arrangements were made, the furniture was packed, and we started for Mouton.

“ Half way there, she became so ill that we were obliged to stop at a little town on the road. I took her to a hotel and the doctors came, but they could do nothing. She died that night—died in the shabby hotel, amid the singing and laughing of a drunken crowd of vagabonds who were making merry in the bar beneath her room.

“ So she whom I met amid laughter and song, died amid laughter and song, and the last words that she spoke to me were the words of love that she greeted me with when first I met her.”

Here Lawrence bowed his head upon the table, and for a while all was silent in the little garden.

“ There is little more to tell,” said he finally, lifting his haggard face from his arm. “ I buried my Aline in the graveyard back of the town, and taking the child came on to Landry. I reached Mouton as one crazed, my chief desire being to reach my place, where, away

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from all men, I could mourn for my lost one. It was late in the afternoon when I arrived, and although a storm was brewing I set out at once for my place. Of my arrival here I will not speak, as I feel sure that our curious friend, Mr. Landry, has saved me the trouble.

“So I have lived here alone and friendless for three years, working day and night to pay for my place, and I have not prospered. My crops have been bad, and last year’s money was not paid. I have another year of grace, and if this crop is a failure I will lose everything.

“Therefore, you can understand that I have been worried about my child, especially at this time when there is fever in Mouton. She is all that I have, and she is very dear to me. Without me she would be left alone, the place would go, and I cannot bear to think of it.

“A week ago I swallowed my pride and wrote to my father for the first time, asking him to help the child in case of my death. The letter came back to me to-day unopened.

“I could write to my brother and he would help me, but I cannot bring myself to do it, for it would cause a breach between him and my father.

“So in my trouble I have come to you, Father Martain, and I ask you to take care of the child if it is necessary, to look after her, and to bring her up in her mother’s religion, which is your own. She is well-born, and should be raised a lady, not as the waif that she must be if she has no one to help her through her

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childhood. Will you take this child into your keeping?"

Father Martain rose, and held out his hand across the table.

"You can depend upon me to do it," answered he, and the two men clasped hands silently.

"And now you have my wretched story," said Lawrence. "It is a sad one, without a gleam of light in it, and I hope that it did not tire you."

"You are mistaken," said the good priest softly; "there was a gleam of light in it. The whole story shone with a good, pure love, which made it very beautiful to me. And Monsieur Varain? You did not tell me of him. Why do you not write, or go to him, for the little girl's sake? He is rich and can help you."

Lawrence's face grew dark.

"My wife wrote to him asking his forgiveness, soon after our marriage," answered he. "How any human being could have written the letter that he sent in reply, I cannot imagine. Had you seen the letter, you would not have asked that question."

"I am sorry; I did not know," said Father Martain. "And the girl that your father wished you to marry, what of her?"

"My brother married her the year after I left home," answered Lawrence. "They have one child, a girl, who is two years younger than my little one. And there is one thing more that I wish to tell you of. To-day I hung upon my little girl's neck, by a chain, a ring, which has my family crest upon it. My brother

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has one like it, so much like it that you can hardly tell the two apart. Should my father relent and wish to take the child, you could prove her identity by this ring, were I not alive to do so. Do you understand?"

"Yes," answered Father Martain, "I do understand."

Lawrence rose, and held out his hand.

"I must be going now," said he, "and I thank you more than I can tell you."

The good priest smiled, and shook his head.

"It is nothing," he replied. "I am glad to be of service to you. I trust that you may live a long life, and that the fever will not come to Landry, but should my services be necessary, you may rest assured that the child will want for nothing while I am alive."

He went down the narrow, brick walk with his visitor and watched him ride away.

"Poor man," said he to himself, "his life has been a hard one." And as he leaned upon his little gate watching the departing Lawrence, his mind went back to France—to the Paris that he loved.

He thought of a girl who had been there many years ago. A girl whom he had loved, a girl who, if she had lived, might have been——

Father Martain brushed his hand across his eyes, and raising his head, looked about him.

In the west the sun was setting in a mass of fire behind the Grand Woods. Dark and grim rose the trees, their tops radiant with the fast-fading light. The great stack of the sugar house at Belrive was gilded also by this light, as it rose tall and silent, like some

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huge sentinel, guarding the broad acres and many buildings of Colonel Gordon.

A little breeze had sprung up from the east, and the oaks in the grove before him rustled softly. Across from the blacksmith shop came the clang of iron, telling that the blacksmith had finished his nap.

But for this noise, the little town of Landry was silent. It seemed to sleep in the soft evening glow.

Monsieur Landry came out upon his porch and began to nail something to one of the posts that supported its roof.

Father Martain watched him idly, for he could not see what was being nailed up, the huge bulk of the storekeeper hiding it from sight. He wondered what it was.

"Perhaps it is a new postoffice sign," said he to himself.

Monsieur Landry finished his nailing and walked into the store. Father Martain leaned over the gate to get a better view.

On the post a little flag which the storekeeper had put there caught the breeze and stood out stiff and straight.

It was a brilliant orange.

Father Martain fell upon his knees on the narrow brick walk, his eyes uplifted in prayer.

"*Dieu vous sauve,*" said he.

CHAPTER IX

FATHER MARTAIN MAKES A JOURNEY

FOR four months the fever had raged in and about the little town of Landry; for four long, horrible months it had seared the minds of all with terror; and now it had passed on, leaving in its wake a long train of death and desolation and the many stricken ones, who were to live or die as best they might.

Never in the history of the place had there been such a time. People went mad with fear, laughing and cursing at the destroyer until, stricken like the rest, they died with a horrid smile upon their lips. Families left their homes, their belongings, and plunged madly into the cool sanctuary of the Grand Woods, the sick ones that they had deserted crying after them for help, for mercy.

Neighbors passed one another at a great distance, speaking no word of greeting, fearful of contagion. Fathers deserted their families, forgetting all in their mad rush for safety, leaving behind the mothers, who nursed and prayed, and fought the destroyer with a bravery to be marveled at by heroes—fought through the long, hot days; ever tender, ever fearless, faithful unto death. It was a time of fear, of madness, never to be forgotten, to be spoken of in days to come with lowered voice.

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And through these four months of frenzy, of destruction, the good Father Martain had gone about, nursing and praying, burying the dead, and comforting the living. Through these long days of darkness he had been the one gleam of light, the one ray of hope, striving amid the danger with a fearlessness born of virtue, leaving behind him words of hope, of comfort, of better days to come. Where the fever raged most fiercely, there would be the good priest, his soft voice calming the terrors of the living, praying for the souls of the dead.

And now the fever had passed, and the people were more hopeful. Father Martain's work was done, and in the little room, whose window looked out upon the church, he lay dying—dying of the fever that for the past four months he had fought with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his strength.

Early that morning Doctor Lemaire, worn to the white shadow of a man, had come out of the house; his face set, his voice trembling.

“There is no hope; he cannot live through the day,” he had said to the little group of watchers at the gate, and two large tears had fallen upon his coat sleeve as he shook the hand of Monsieur Landry.

Monsieur Landry had turned away his head, weeping softly. He, too, was white and thin, and so changed that one would have hardly known him for the jovial storekeeper of four months before. All through the long siege he had fought bravely, sending his wife away to safety, burying his boy Adrien, who had died, nursing his boy Octave, who had lived, tending the good

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priest when he had been stricken, with a devotion that was tireless.

Softly he turned away his head, and the boy Octave, who had served at the altar, tugged the doctor's coat.

"Shall I ring the bell, *M'sieu Le Doctaire*, and let the people know that *le Père Martain* will not live to-day?" he had asked.

Doctor Lemaire had nodded his head, and the boy had entered the church, sobbing as though his heart would break.

So all morning the bell had tolled its news of sorrow, the harsh sound of the broken metal going out over the fields, calling the people to Landry as it had called them from time immemorial; calling them to the little red church where they had been christened, where they had been married, from which they would be buried; calling them to the side of him who had been their friend, their helper, the one who had cheered them when they were sad, rejoiced with them when they were happy.

All morning long they came, riding their horses, driving their carts, some walking along the dusty road, all bent upon one errand, all filled with sorrow, calling upon God to spare their loved one. They thronged the little house, they trampled the little garden; and those unable to get inside of either waited patiently in the road, or prayed within the church. Men who had rushed madly from their homes a week before, terror-stricken at the fever, fought for admission to the little house with its yellow flag drooping idly in the heat. Women wept as sorrowfully for this old priest as they had for the loss of their sons and daughters.

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On the front porch Monsieur Landry argued with the throng as best he could.

“Do not come in!” cried he fiercely, the tears streaming down his cheeks. “Do you not know that there is fever inside? Do you wish to all catch it and have another epidemic?”

But the people did not heed him. One tall, gaunt man, on whose grizzled beard the tears glistened, answered him harshly:

“Do you suppose that God would send us fever through His priest? Do you think that our good *Père* Martain would harm us?” said he, and passed on into the house.

Within the little room that had been his home for so many years lay Father Martain, his soft voice, which had comforted so many, speaking to his children for the last time. On the hard, narrow bed he lay, his white hair falling about the thin yellow face, his blue eyes sparkling from the fever within him.

Monsieur Landry pushed his way through the throng of weeping men and women that crowded the little room, and approached the bedside. He reeled and swayed as he walked, like a drunken man, his eyes gleaming with a strange light.

Father Martain smiled as he saw him, and held out his hand weakly from the covering of the bed.

“It is almost time to say farewell,” said he.

Monsieur Landry fell upon his knees at the bedside; a woman, grown hysterical, shrieked, and was taken from the room.

“Nay, do not cry, my children,” said the good

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priest. "It is the will of the good God, and who shall judge His wishes? Do not weep for me—there is no need. I am going to make a journey, that is all. I go to my reward, to happiness. You should be glad, and yet—my children it is hard to leave you; I love you so. I have known you from childhood. Many of you I have baptized, I have married; and I have baptized many of your children.

"And you, my old friend, my old comrade," said the dying man, holding the storekeeper's hand more tightly, "it is very hard to leave you. You have nursed me so carefully, so faithfully, I thank you. But your hand is cold as death; are you, too, ill of the fever, my old friend? The good God forbid it."

"It is nothing, *mon Père*," said Monsieur Landry brokenly. "I am weak and nervous, that is all."

A little old man, his worn clothes caked with the dirt of the fields, pushed through the crowd, and knelt near the bed. He had left his plow in the furrow at the tolling of the bell, and had walked into Landry, counting as nothing his age, the dust and the sun. Kneeling alone, his weather-beaten cheeks wet with tears, his trembling hands outstretched toward the priest, he raised his voice in entreaty.

"Bless your children, *mon Père!*" he cried; "bless us for the last time. Call upon the good God to help us, to protect us, for when you are gone, who will help us?"

Father Martain made a movement to raise himself. In a moment the arm of Monsieur Landry was about him, supporting the helpless form.

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Down upon their knees fell the watchers, their heads bowed low.

Through the window a ray of sunshine, entering the room, shone about the head of the good priest like a halo. Outside a bird lifted its voice in song, the clear notes rising in the silence, thrilling with happiness, with the pure joy of living. The air was heavy with the scent of flowers, with the strong, rich odor of the autumn fields. From the room came a sound of stifled sobbing.

Father Martain raised his voice in benediction, placing his children in the care of God—the God to whom he was soon to go—the words falling to a whisper as he finished.

Slowly Monsieur Landry laid back the feeble frame upon the bed, and bent low to catch the words of the dying man. Leaving the bedside, he sought for something in a corner of the room.

The watchers whispered to one another.

“The good Father asks for something,” said they. “Perhaps it is a holy relic that will soothe his dying moments.”

Out from the corner came Monsieur Landry, and staggered toward the bed. Gently he placed upon it what he had brought with him and then, with one great gasp, he fell to the floor, his body shaking convulsively.

The watchers craned forward, curious to see what he had brought, curious to know why he had fallen.

The good priest lay back upon the pillows very still, the halo of sunlight shining brightly about him. His

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eyes were closed, and upon his lips there was a smile as of a great happiness. Clasped in his hands there was an old hat, a dark spot amid the white expanse of covering.

Once more the watchers fell upon their knees, their cries rising upon the still air as a dirge—an anthem for the dead.

Father Martain had made his journey.

CHAPTER X

OLD TELESSE MAKES A PROMISE

IN a room of an old white house near Landry, another man lay dying, fighting for his life with all his strength, crying out to God to spare him.

No throng of friends, of well-wishers, crowded the room in which he lay. One man alone tended him, nursing him with a faithfulness that was untiring.

No cries of grief sounded within the room. The one who nursed him sitting by the bed in solemn silence, his face expressionless. If there was sorrow within him, he made no sign.

Through the open window came the tolling of the bell at Landry, the harsh sound rudely breaking the stillness of the autumn afternoon. The sick man turned uneasily upon his bed.

“Telesse, are you there?” he asked.

The old man rose from his chair and bent over him.

“I am here, *M'sieu*,” answered he.

“That bell,” said Lawrence fretfully, “why has it rung all morning? Why is it ringing now? It annoys me.”

“They are ringing for the good Father Martain,” said the old man. “He is dying to-day of the fever.”

“And is there no chance for him?” asked Lawrence. “Might he not get well?”

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“There is no hope,” answered the old man. “As I told you, he is dying. *Le Doctaire* Lemaire has said that he cannot live through the day.”

The sick man sighed wearily.

“My one chance gone,” said he to himself. “The man upon whose help I counted dying—dying like myself of this fever. So this is the end of it all, and here I am to die like a rat in a hole, alone and friendless, my own child denied me. It is too much! I cannot die! I will not die! God will let me live for the child’s sake, for my little Aline’s sake.”

Slowly and painfully he raised himself from the bed, his eyes shining wildly, great beads of perspiration upon his brow—the dew of anguish.

“Telesse!” he called.

“*Oui, M’sieu?*” came the answer.

“Listen,” said the sick man, “the doctor has said that I will die, has he not?”

“So he has said, *M’sieu*,” replied the old man.

“The doctor is wrong!” cried Lawrence, “I am not going to die; I shall live. The cane must be cut, must be sold, and who shall do it but I? Who shall care for Aline, my Aline, but I? Who shall bring her up; who shall teach her to be a lady, the lady that she is? Who, I say, shall do all this but I? Bring me my clothes, Telesse, for I am going out to the field to my work. I will not lie here and die like a dog, helpless and alone.”

“*Mais, M’sieu!*” cried the old man, “*le Doctaire* Lemaire——”

“*Le Doctaire* Lemaire lies when he says that I am

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going to die!" cried the sick man, his voice rising to a shriek. "Bring me my clothes, do you hear? Bring them quickly. It is late, and I must be out before the sun sets."

Slowly the old man left the bedside, muttering to himself.

"He is crazy," said he. "It is the fever. I have seen it before, and I will please him."

The sick man fell back upon the pillows gasping. Telesse hurried to the bedside.

"*M'sieu, M'sieu*, what have you done?" cried he.

"It is no use," said Lawrence weakly. "The doctor is right, I am going to die. Thank you, Telesse; you have been a good and faithful servant."

"It is nothing, *M'sieu*," said the old man, and into his stolid face there came a look of sorrow. He brushed his hand across his eyes quickly, stealthily, as though ashamed of the deed.

"It is something," said the sick man, "and you know it. When the people on this place fled in terror of the fever, you alone stayed behind to care for me, to nurse me. You stayed and risked your life to save mine. Do you call that nothing? For three days you have not slept, you have scarcely tasted food. Do you call that nothing? Listen, for I am going to tell you something. Long years ago, before you knew me, I was a rich man. I had many servants, and I owned many *arpents* of land, more land even than the Colonel Gordon. Everything that I wanted I had, and now, Telesse, where are all the servants? Where is all the land? Gone, all gone, and as I lie here dying, there

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is only you. Of all the many, you alone are left. Now do you not see how much I think of what you have done for me?"

"It is nothing, *M'sieu*," repeated the old man. "If you are pleased with what I have done, I am glad, but I have done nothing."

"And Aline?" asked Lawrence, for the hundredth time that day, "she is safe?"

"She is in my cabin," answered the old man, "and the colored girl, Cecile, is with her. She has not been in the house, and there has been no danger."

"Telesse, give me your hand," said his master.

Fearfully the old man held it out, his face awestruck, as though some great honor was to be bestowed upon him.

"Listen, Telesse," said Lawrence. "I want you to promise me something. Remember that you are promising a dying man and that your promise is sacred. When I am dead there will be no one to care for the child but yourself, and I leave her in your charge. Promise me that you will care for her so long as you live, that you will look out for her as though she were your own child."

"I promise you, *M'sieu*," said the old man simply.

"The crop," continued his master, "I give to you. You must sell it and pay for the place. A man will come for the money. If there is anything left, you must save it for the child. Send the little one to school, to church, and there is one thing above all that you must remember. Aline is a pretty child, and she will be a handsome woman. Living with you, your friends, your

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people, must see her. The young men will wish to marry her. Promise me that you will never let one of your people marry her, that you will keep her from all save those of her own station, for I swear to you that she is a lady. Promise me upon your knees."

The old man knelt at the bed.

"I promise, *M'sieu*," said he.

For a long time there was silence in the room, the sick man tossing restlessly, Telesse sitting by the bed, staring out in front of him—waiting.

Through the open window there came finally the sound of a horse in the road outside. The old man crossed the room and looked out. The man upon the horse made a sign.

Slowly the old man left the window and seated himself again by the bedside.

"The good Father Martain is dead," said he. "Gabbie has told me so."

Lawrence clenched his hands despairingly.

"My hopes have died with him," answered he. "He was a good man. God rest his soul." And there was silence for a great while, as the short, autumn afternoon drew near its close. In the west the sun was setting, smothered in masses of flame-colored cloud. The air grew cooler, and from a near-by *coulée* came the hoarse croaking of a frog—the herald of the night.

The sick man gasped suddenly.

"It is coming, Telesse," he cried faintly. "I am going—going—to die. See, the sun has almost set. We are going out together. I am going to see my Aline, my wife. But the little one—ah! could I but

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see her before I go. I would give my hopes of salvation for the sight of her face, the sound of her voice." His voice rang with agony, and he buried his face in the covers sobbing.

The old man was thinking hard, his face wrinkled with perplexity.

"There is a way that you could see her, *M'sieu*," said he in a moment. "I could close the window and Cecile could bring her there. She would be outside and safe. If I held you up you could see her very well."

The face of the sick man glowed with joy, with expectation.

"Telesse," said he, "you have by those words given me the joy of a lifetime. May God bless you. But go quickly and call Cecile, there is no time to lose; I am nearly gone."

The old man went quickly to the door and called until, from the cabin in the back, came an answer. Briefly he gave his order and returned to the dying man.

He lay huddled among the covers, quivering with anguish, his eyes blazing with the fire of the fever. Toward the window he gazed with all his soul, his lips moving in prayer—prayer for but a few brief moments of life that he might see the child.

Slowly went the minutes, dragging like years to his agonized brain. Through the window there came a dull glow of red, the dying embers of the sunset. The corners of the room grew dark. Telesse beat the arms of his chair impatiently.

The shadows began to lengthen, the square of the

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window was now almost black and the old man rising, lit a candle.

Suddenly there was a noise outside, and at the window there appeared a black, grinning face. Very tenderly the old man raised his master, who lay back against him, panting from the exertion.

The black face grinned at the occupants of the room for an instant, and then in its place there came at the window the little girl. Very sweet and pretty she was with her face lit up by the dying sunset, and at the sight of her father she laughed happily, waving her little hand as though in greeting.

The sick man's face was lit with a smile.

"Good-by, my daughter," said he. "May God help and protect you, for I can no longer do so."

The little girl laughed merrily, and waved at him in great glee.

"Good-by, good-by, father," said she. "When are you coming back?"

For a moment more father and daughter gazed at one another, and then the darkness fell, the square of the window went black; Cecile set the child upon her feet.

The old man laid his master back upon the bed, and for a moment stood watching, his face set, his eyes filled with tears, for he thought him dead.

Lawrence stirred and held out his hand feebly.

"And now it is good-by to you, Telesse," he whispered. "I can only thank you. I would to God that I could repay you."

The old man held the hand as one holds a sacred

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thing, and then, falling upon his knees, buried his face in the covers.

“Listen, *M'sieu*,” said he, “for there is something that you can do for me if you will.”

There was no answer, but the hand in his tightened for an instant.

“It is said, *M'sieu*,” he continued, “that if one who has sinned will tell his sin to one about to die, and if that one, when he sees God, will plead for the sinner, the sin will be forgiven. Long years ago, a man who had killed another, fled to the Grand Woods, where he hid for safety. For many days we hunted him, and we were to know him, if we found him, by the red blouse that he wore. One day when I was out hunting with the boy Numa's father, we saw in the woods a man, and he wore a red blouse. I called to him to halt, but he ran and so I shot him. When we came up to him we found that it was not the man we sought, and I had killed one of my friends. We buried him where he lay, and no one knew what became of him. Le Blanc never told, but I have had to give him nearly all of my money to keep him silent. Before he died he told the boy Numa. To him, also, must I give money. For years I have prayed to the good God to forgive me, and now will you ask for my forgiveness also? I swear to you, *M'sieu*, I did not mean to kill my friend. Will you plead for me and save my soul, *M'sieu*?”

The old man raised his head, his eyes filled with entreaty.

His master smiled, and opened his lips as though to speak. The old man bent forward eagerly.

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The smile faded, the eyes opened wide with a great resolve. Swiftly the sick man raised himself, his clenched hands beating the air wildly, as though he fought some one.

"I will not—!" he cried, and stopped.

The old man's face went white, and he held out his hands imploringly.

"*M'sieu, M'sieu*, for God's sake, say yes!" he gasped hoarsely.

"I will not—die!" said his master, and fell back limply among the pillows.

The old man bent over him for an instant, his hand feeling for the heart that had ceased to beat. Slowly he took the candle from the shelf and set it at the head of the bed.

"Thank God! he did not refuse me," said he, the tears upon his cheeks glistening in the candle light.

Softly crossing the room he lit another candle and placed it at the foot of the bed.

"Thank God!" said he again, drawing his arm across his eyes.

From inside his blouse he now drew forth his most treasured possession, a small wooden rosary, worn black from age and much using. Softly he raised it to his lips and kissed it, as one kisses a loved one at parting.

"May the peace of God go with you," said he, as he placed it carefully between his master's fingers.

* * * * *

The new moon swam in a cloudless sky above the little town of Landry, sending forth rays of shimmer-

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ing light that glorified the landscape as with a flood of silver.

They fell upon the house of Father Martain, and stealing through the open window, rested softly, as though in reverence, upon the one who lay therein. They fell upon the church where, amid the soft glow of the candles, many people prayed for the soul of him who had so often prayed for theirs.

They fell upon a long, white house, that stood in the shadow of many trees, wherein an old man sat dry-eyed and staring, at the bedside of his master, waiting for the morning, and what it might bring. They fell upon a cabin where a little girl laughed and clapped her chubby hands at the antics of a negro girl, and knew not what had befallen her.

They fell upon the house of Monsieur Landry, wherein its owner writhed and shrieked in his delirium, the final victim of the departed scourge.

CHAPTER XI

OLD TELESSE GOES HOME

WITH the coming of the busy grinding season in November, came also a stranger to Landry. This stranger was none other than the Mr. Parker from whom Lawrence had purchased his place.

He was plump and contented-looking, was this stranger, with a very red face and a shiny bald head. That he was not a Louisianian by birth, could also be told at a glance, and indeed he made no pretense of being one.

"I come from good old New England, but I am a naturalized Louisianian now," he was wont to say when asked about his birthplace.

Mr. Parker had come to Louisiana when still in his twenties, and had worked as a clerk in New Orleans for many years. During those years he had been frugal, saving his small income with an object in view. In his work at the office he had heard much of sugar and of planters, for the business was a commission one, and gradually his thoughts began to center upon one thing—a sugar plantation.

It was the dream of his life, the goal which he strove to reach, and why not? Did not the people all about

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him speak of the planter, of his life, praising him as the backbone of the country? Mr. Parker had seen them also, fine bronzed men, who came to the office in their cool silk and linen clothes, talking carelessly about their crops, smoking many cigars, drinking many drinks, and through it all wearing an air of amused tolerance—an air that a prince might use among his subjects.

To be like one of these men who seemed to have no cares in life, joking through a morning at the office, going out (with a bill handed to the hall-boy) to spend an evening at wine or at cards at some club—that was what Mr. Parker longed for.

And so he saved his earnings and waited for an opportunity to buy a place.

One day a customer, whose cotton Mr. Parker's firm had sold for years, came to the city.

Mr. Parker saw him at the office and they talked of land. The customer's name was Landry, and when he had left, Mr. Parker had promised to buy a place that was for sale, near the town where this Mr. Landry lived.

So Mr. Parker had his plantation, but not for long, as he sold it to a friend whose wife must live in the country for her health. He sold the place on yearly payments, and the man had paid only for the first year. Two years had now gone by, no payments had been made, the man to whom he had sold the place was dead, and now Mr. Parker set out at last to become a planter.

So great was his impatience to see his place that the

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lateness of his arrival at Mouton alone deterred him from driving out to it at once, and the next morning found him at the Court House a full hour before it was opened.

Here, with the assistance of Paul Hebert, a deputy sheriff, his affairs were soon set in order, and when that gentleman offered to drive out to his place with him Mr. Parker's gratitude knew no bounds.

"I will have to act as interpreter, anyhow," said Hebert, "for the old man who is at your place won't understand a word of English when he finds that you have come to run him out."

So, therefore, when a little later he set out with Paul Hebert toward Landry, Mr. Parker felt that Heaven could not possibly compare with his present position. Under the influence of this mood he began to speak knowingly of his crop, his plantation, of the prospects for a good year, and all to such good purpose that before Mouton had been left a mile behind him his companion had come to the conclusion that not only was Mr. Parker no planter, but that he had never been on a plantation in his life. However, as Mr. Parker did not know of this opinion, he rattled away blithely, and so they drove on until the place was in sight.

Mr. Parker liked the long, white house set among the china trees. It looked very comfortable to him, and the more he looked, the more comfortable it became. To one who had been used to the restricted comforts of a boarding house, the size and amount of room in the house before him was bewildering.

Paul Hebert tied his horse near the gate, and Mr.

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Parker climbing out of the buggy, confronted him with a worried look.

"Do you know," said he, "that in my hurry I have forgotten all about bringing out my baggage."

"Oh, that will be all right," replied Paul Hebert. "You can come back with me, and there will be a lot of things that you will have to buy in town. You ought to give the old man until to-morrow morning, anyway, to get out."

Thus reassured, Mr. Parker went through the broken gate and up to the front steps, where Paul Hebert knocked loudly upon the door. There was no answer.

"Let's go around to the back of the house," said he, "and perhaps we will find the old man there."

In the doorway of the stable old Telesse was sharpening a cane knife. When he saw the two men approaching, he stuck the knife in one of the doors and came forward to meet them.

Paul Hebert called out to him from a distance.

"*Comment ça va?*" said he.

"*Te train,*" said the old man, as he joined the two men and shook hands with them awkwardly. He paid little attention to Mr. Parker, who stood eyeing him mistrustfully, as though he feared that the old man had another cane knife hidden about his person.

Paul Hebert now began to speak to him in French, and for a long time he and the old man talked earnestly, the former explaining his words with many gestures and much showing of papers, the latter replying seldom, listening sullenly, his face filled with a dogged sorrow that was pitiful to see.

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Finally Paul Hebert turned to Mr. Parker.

"It is all finished," said he, "but I had an awful time explaining it to him. He cannot read, and your papers were of no use. It seems that Mr. Lawrence left him the crop when he died, and he cannot understand why it does not belong to him. Finally I said something about the Judge, and that fixed him. All of the people around here are afraid of the Judge. The old man is going to move away to-day in the jumper, which he says is his. The horse is that small gray one in the pasture. It is his, also, as he brought it with him when he came to this place. He is going back to his house in the Grand Woods. You had better come with me now and get your baggage, so that you will have time to get back before dark."

Before he started for the gate, Mr. Parker turned, and going over to the old man, held out his hand.

"If you want to stay here and help me," said he, "there is no reason why you should leave at all. I am sorry enough to turn you out, but the place is mine, and you must know that I want to have it. Won't you stay awhile with me, until I can get things straight?"

The old man glared at him savagely for a moment, and then threw out his hand in a gesture of hate and disgust.

"*Voleur!*" said he. "*Je vais l'attraper!*"

Mr. Parker shrank from this fierce old man and joined Paul Hebert quickly.

"What did he say?" he gasped.

The deputy sheriff smiled in amusement.

"He called you a thief, and said that he would get

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even with you some day," answered he, as the two men started for the front of the house.

The old man watched his unwelcome visitors out of sight in a dazed sort of way, his head nodding at intervals, as though he were accepting the inevitable. When the sound of the departing buggy had died away, he went to the pasture gate and called the little girl.

Out from the hedges she came, her little apron full of white Cherokee roses, the dog Chicot plodding steadily behind her. When she reached the old man, he spoke to her in French.

"Come with me; I wish to speak to you," said he.

Obediently the little girl followed him, and when they had reached the stable, the old man seated himself upon a great log that lay there, drawing the child up beside him.

"Listen," said he. "*M'sieu* Paul Hebert came here to-day with a stranger, and he has told me that this place is not ours; that it belongs to this stranger, and that we must move. Do you understand?"

The little girl nodded, her face wrinkled with a perplexity that denied her statement.

"We must go away to my house in the Grand Woods," continued the old man. "We must leave the crop, the stock, everything. I will take the horse and the jumper, for they are mine. We will go now and pack up our clothes, so that we can leave this evening. The stranger is coming out to-night. I do not understand it all, but one thing I know. We must leave. Do you understand?"

Again the little girl nodded, and this time she seemed

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to be worried. Once or twice she began to speak and stopped, as though she was about to ask a favor that she feared would be denied her. Finally she spoke, her voice trembling with anxiety.

“Can—can—can I take Chicot with me?” she asked slowly.

The old man thought for a moment.

“Yes,” answered he. “He can run along beside the jumper.

The child’s pretty face broke into smiles of delight, her eyes beamed with happiness. What cared she for house or home or fields? She had her dog, her playmate, and she was satisfied.

But the old man was not, and as he gazed about him and saw the many familiar objects that for years had daily played their part in his life, his heart was very heavy. Down in the fields the cane stretched eastward, a mass of green and purple. There it lay, the work of his hands, each stalk owing its life, its strength, its sweetness, to his untiring labor. All through the year he had watched it, helping it from the first tender shoot to the strong-jointed stalk, and now when it stood ripe and ready, when his work was finished, he must lose it. He had made the crop, and another, a stranger, would reap the harvest—would receive the money, the little child’s money for which he had worked so untiringly. It was very hard, and the old man’s eyes were filled with tears, tears of anger, of bitter protest.

Suddenly his eye caught the mass of roses in the child’s lap, and his face softened.

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“Come, Aline,” said he. “We will say good-by to your father.”

Taking the child by the hand, he walked slowly to the little garden by the side of the house. There, among the ragged rose bushes (whose heavy flowers filled the air with perfume), covered with grass and creepers, was a mound, its top strewn with faded flowers. Above it the trees stretched their branches in a green canopy, and at the head there was a rough wooden cross, carved from solid oak—the work of many days.

By this cross, his own handiwork, the old man knelt in silent prayer, his head bowed, his arms folded. The little girl knelt also for a moment, her face sad, and then rising, she took her roses from her apron and placed them upon the grave until it gleamed a mass of white amid its emerald setting.

In the trees overhead a bird began to sing. The little girl, falling upon her knees, buried her face among the white blossoms, and kissed the hard black earth. The old man rose to his feet and stood watching her. In a moment the child came to him.

“I have told my father good-by,” said she, and smiled.

The old man coughed, and turned his head away.

“Come into the house,” said he brokenly, “for we must pack our clothes and leave.”

Into the house they went, the old man making their few clothes into a bundle. What belonged to him, he took, lingering lovingly over the many things which he must leave behind. Finally all was ready, and he stood

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at the door with his jumper. Lifting the child to the high seat, he stood for an instant looking about him.

"I am leaving many things of your father's that I must see the stranger about to-morrow," said he. "I will come in a wagon and, if he lets me have them, I will bring them back with me. And now that you are going to the Grand Woods to live with me, Aline, you must not call me Telesse any more. You must call me Uncle Telesse; do you understand?"

"Yes, Uncle Telesse," answered the child.

"Good," said the old man as he climbed into the jumper and sat beside her.

Once more he looked about him in silent parting, his eyes dim and misty, and then, whipping the horses, they started upon their journey, the dog trotting behind them. Down through the Cherokee hedges they drove, the old man silent, the child chatting merrily, now pointing out something by the roadside, now calling to the dog, alive with the pleasure of seeing something new.

Presently they came to Landry, and the old man, seeing Monsieur Landry on his porch, called to him as he passed:

"*Comment ça va?*" cried he.

Monsieur Landry did not reply. All memory of the past had been wiped from his brain by the fever as a schoolboy wipes a sum from his slate, and he knew not who the occupants of the jumper were.

Angrily the old man turned the corner past Monsieur Landry's house.

"It is always the way," said he to himself bitterly.

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“When one is in trouble the whole world is against him.”

The child turned and cast a backward glance at the little town.

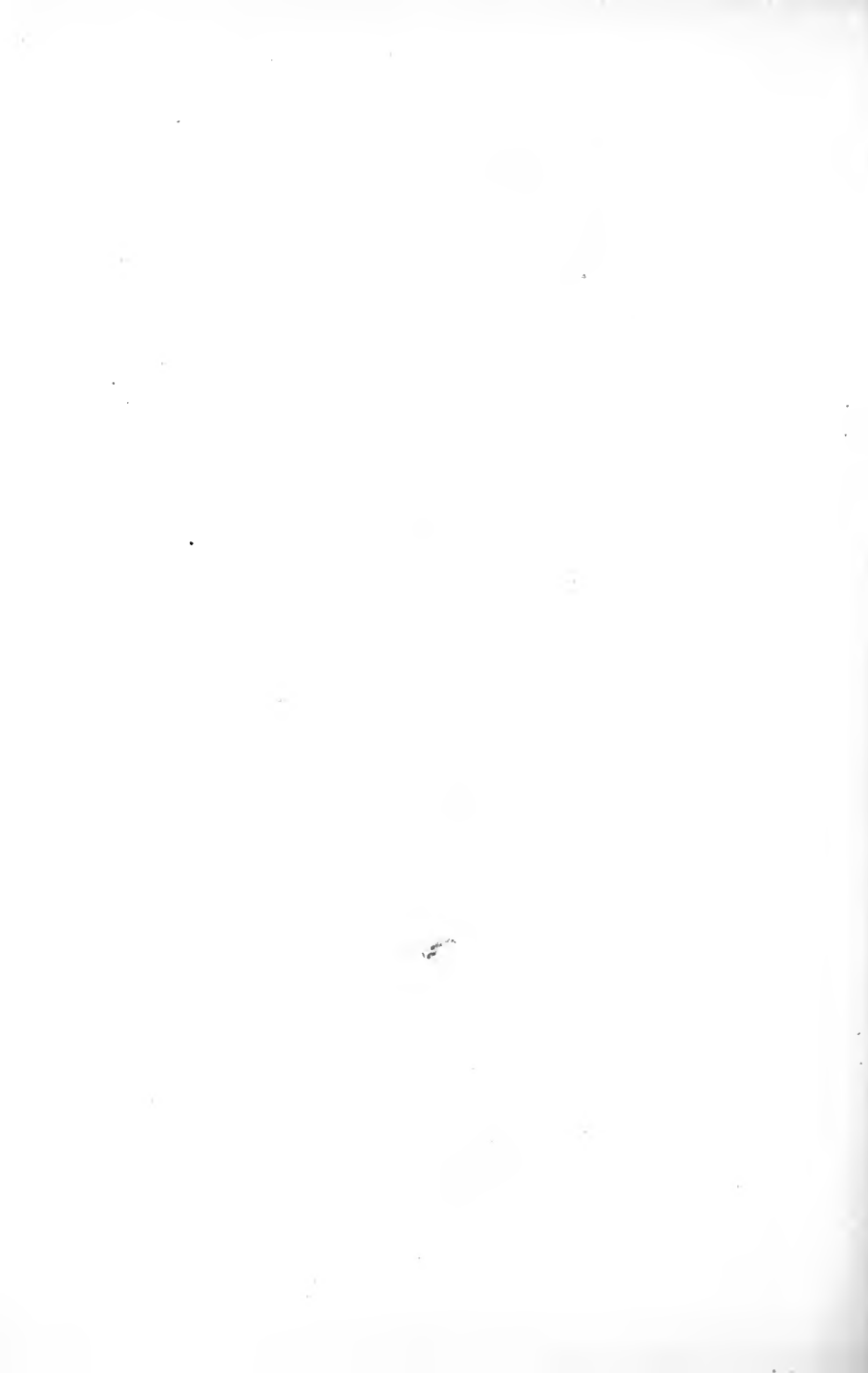
“Good-by,” said she laughingly. “I am going away, far away to the Grand Woods; ain’t I, Uncle Telesse?”

“Yes,” answered the old man as he whipped up the horse, “you are going to the Grand Woods, and you did right to call me uncle.”

The child nodded and turned again to look at the fast-receding Landry. With an impatient shrug she settled herself in her seat again, for the little town had sunk behind the distant horizon.

And so it was that Aline, daughter of Lawrence, left her home and her heritage behind her; and so it was that this old man and this little girl, so strangely thrown together by fate, by destiny, set out in the clear November evening toward the Grand Woods, which, lying cool and still in the western sunlight, stretched out its green arms to receive them.

BOOK TWO



CHAPTER I

BELRIVE

IT was twelve o'clock on a bright winter day and it was cold—very cold. Early that morning, before the first faint streaks of the approaching day had appeared in the east, coming softly, timidly, as though in awe of the stern dignity of the night, a visitor had come to Belrive. A rough, a noisy visitor, howling and shrieking in utter abandon, starting the sleeping ones into a shivering wakefulness—this unwelcome visitor was the North Wind.

All morning long he had sported about Belrive, whistling through the quarters in mockery at the shivering negroes within; swirling about the stables in mad outcry until the cowering animals huddled together for warmth and comfort; rattling through the avenue of live oaks that led to the big house until the moss and leaves strewed the ground far and near; roaring and shrieking about the big house itself, in the most impertinent manner possible, until the fires within blazed fiercely and the smoke from the tall chimneys poured in volumes, to be tortured and twisted by this same North Wind, until torn to pieces it vanished forever. Far up in the cloudless sky was the sun; shining calm and undisturbed, its stolid face and warming rays bid-

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ding defiance to this noisy invader, promising peace and deliverance from his blustering sway.

Down near the quarters a negro was ringing the plantation bell, his ragged clothes flapping about him, his body swaying with the rope, which threw the bell from side to side, sometimes completely overturning it in its violence. Loudly boomed the bell, and the wind in its wanton play catching the sound, hurried it along past the stables, over the high white fence of the stable lot, and on into the fields, rushing over the levees with their dead offerings of withered weeds; driving it through the tall Cherokee hedges within whose green hearts the birds cuddled low for shelter; whirling it around the great piles of straw until the field mice burrowed far into their musty interiors; urging it on over the rich black furrows where the plows had passed, until it brought it to the plows themselves, and the negroes hearing it, hurried their mules to the end of the rows, glancing eagerly toward the quarters where the twisting columns of smoke told of warmth, of rest, and of comfort.

No sooner did a team reach the end of its row than its driver, fixing his plow point into the catch upon his long wooden slide, stepped upon the slide himself and started for the plantation road, his body swaying with the motion of the mule in his effort to keep a balance upon his narrow foothold. The big gang plows, whose two shining blades had all morning torn and shattered the tender bosom of the earth, started toward the road also; the drivers cracking their whips and shouting at the teams in their eagerness to reach the road before

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the others; the two big blades raised high above the ground now as though in truce after the battle of the morning, the earth dropping from their polished sides in token of the long deep scars behind them. And last of all the water boy, his little barrel clasped under his arm, hurried to the road where his water cart stood, and seating himself upon the narrow board in front, picked up the rope reins, and beat the sleepy mule into a terrified energy in his effort to catch up with the plows.

Seated upon their horses, watching these preparations for departure, and falling in behind the long cavalcade as it moved briskly toward the stables, were two white men: Carey Gordon, the owner of the plantation, and Nicholas Wilson, his overseer.

Carey Gordon was a young man, nearing his thirtieth year, of medium height and slender, yet there was about his well-built and sinewy person an air of vigor and strength not to be despised. Any one of the negroes at Belrive would have told you that he was powerful, mighty powerful. He was tanned by the wind and sun to the deepest of brown, and the hand that he rested upon his saddle was almost the color of the weather-beaten leather. His face was clear cut and handsome, the jaw slightly squared, giving him an air of authority and firmness, while his mouth, well-shaped and masterful, showed when he smiled a row of white even teeth that were the crowning beauty of his very pleasing features. His eyes were gray, and in them also one saw the same firmness that his whole person suggested; the firmness of a man who, having bent his will to a pur-

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pose, follows that purpose untiringly until its accomplishment is gained.

His life had been a busy one, filled with much work and many worries. Called from college by the death of his father, he had taken charge of the plantation with its many acres and its throng of negroes, and for several years he had tried, with the help of an overseer, to make it pay, working hard in dogged silence through the short, busy grinding season, only to find that he had lost at the end of each year; hoping against hope through it all that he would succeed another time.

Finally it came to him that he would never succeed. His sugar house, though considered large at the time when it had been built, was now too small, and he knew that to cope with the many huge refineries would be impossible. So for many days he was in despair, his mind tortured by idleness, until he met the man who now rode at his side—Nicholas Wilson.

This Nicholas Wilson had been in many places and knew of many crops. He met Carey at the time of his misfortune, and his eye catching sight of the many level acres of Belrive, he spoke to him of rice, spoke long and eloquently; and Carey, seeing a gleam of hope, grew at first interested, then hopeful, and in the end agreed to plant a small crop as an experiment, with Wilson as overseer.

And so Carey Gordon turned his back upon the cane of his ancestors and planted rice, gaining what he had lost in the first two years, and continuing to gain as the years passed on, while the poor deserted sugar house gazed at him in reproachful silence from its broken

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windows, and Nicholas Wilson, rubbing his hands together in facetious glee, murmured, "What did I tell you?"

Nicholas Wilson was a Western man, and into his sharp, thrifty common-sense nature had injected a great amount of good humor and a keen appreciation of the ridiculous, which, combined with his knowledge of many persons and places, made him a most interesting person. Upon his countenance you would perpetually find a look of quizzical amusement, as though he were about to say, "I know that you are going to tell me something funny; well now what is it?" As he rode along with his companion he beguiled the time with many stories and anecdotes until they reached the stables, when suddenly his face became serious.

"Say, look here, Mr. Gordon," said he, "I was down in the back of the field to-day, and I was looking at that empty cabin again. Hain't there no one we can get to take it before plantin' time? There's a big patch around that cabin that hain't got a thing on it, and I hate to see the land lie idle."

"I can't find a soul," replied Carey helplessly. "I would rather get a white man to take the place on shares if it is possible. You see what you can do, and I will try again."

Wilson nodded. "All right," said he. "I'll get a man if I have to kidnap him."

During this conversation the negroes had been unharnessing their teams, each man hanging his harness on one of the multitude of pegs that lined the stable walls, and then pulling his plow from off its slide to place it

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in a half-circle with the rest. The mules, released from their gear, trotted quickly into their stalls, where a loud sound of crunching announced that they were hungry after their half-day's work, while the negroes, following their example, hurried off to the quarters, whence a loud yelling of children and a great barking of dogs heralded their arrival. Carey, leaving the overseer at his home, rode away by the footpath that led from the stables, and hurrying past the old sugar house as though ashamed of his desertion, arrived at the big house just as the bell was ringing for lunch.

The house at Belrive was a very old and a very large one, having in its time been a veritable palace, where the planters and their ladies in the golden, never-to-be-forgotten days, before the War, had come to enjoy a hospitality that was as boundless as the acres of its owner. It was a tall square house, set against a background of live oak and magnolia trees, its many out-buildings huddling about it in a motley throng as though afraid of leaving its protection.

On entering the dining room Carey found his mother, his Aunt Betty, and his sister Marjorie seated about the table, and awaiting his arrival. His mother, who sat at the foot of the table, was a small woman past the middle-age of life, yet still retaining a good part of the beauty for which in her younger days she had been famed. She had been born a Virginian, and was the descendant of a long line of Careys, whose name she wished to perpetuate through her only son.

Sitting next to her at the lunch table was her sister, Mrs. Peters, generally called Aunt Betty, if the

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speaker knew her well, or Miss Betty, if he did not. Like her sister she was small, but here her resemblance to that lady ceased entirely, for, being a much older woman, her face was crossed and seamed by a great many wrinkles, which would have made one think her very old and feeble, were it not for her great activity and her eyes. These eyes were very black and small, like those of a bird, and as they were continually hopping from one point of vision to another (with generally an amused tolerance in their placid depths) they told of an activity of mind and a keen sense of observation, really remarkable in such a very little old lady. Like her sister, she was a widow. Mrs. Gordon had mourned and still mourned the death of her husband with a grief that was as true as her love for him had been, but Aunt Betty had stood her affliction with very little mourning and very much stolid silence; so much stolid silence in fact, that a number of people had expressed their opinion that she looked upon the taking away of her husband as more of a Godsend than a calamity.

Those who had known the late Mr. Peters remembered him as a timid, shrinking man, who, never expressing any opinion of his own or saying anything not previously approved of by his wife, seemed to have been overcome by her powerful mind to the extent of being a nonentity. But what he had been during his life had no connection with his wife's memory of him, for like some great heroes he was immortalized by death, and his merest saying became to her an incontestible truth. Whenever Aunt Betty wished to impress

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a fact upon a listener, she recalled something said by her husband bearing upon the subject, and if the remarks used by the deceased Mr. Peters were introduced into an argument, it was a sign that the argument was ended and ended in her favor, as the sayings of her husband were manifestly incapable of contradiction.

Some people said that as the deceased Mr. Peters had never been known to make an original remark during the whole of his married life, his many brilliant sayings were the property of his wife, loaned to him during his lifetime to be made famous by his death; and some people went so far as to say that a great many of the remarks and expressions credited to him had never been uttered by that quiet, timid gentleman at all. But you may be sure that such gossip as this had never reached the ears of Aunt Betty, who, taking the greatest interest in all the affairs of her neighbors, never for a moment imagined that the neighbors took such a very great interest in hers.

Seated across the table from Aunt Betty was Marjorie Gordon. A large blue envelope lay upon the cloth in front of her, and there was a smile of great satisfaction on her pretty face. She was a young girl, not yet out of her teens, having just attained that age when, passing from the awkward schoolgirl period into young womanhood, the real feminine begins to show itself faint and delicate, and supremely divine.

The first to greet her brother as he entered the room, Marjorie half arose from her chair in her eagerness, waving the blue envelope at him. "It's come! It's come!" she cried, still waving the envelope furiously.

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"She is going to be here early this spring, and then won't I have some one to go with, and won't you have some one to flirt with?"

Carey, who had taken his seat and appeared bewildered at this outburst, now began to understand. "You mean that your Miss Lawrence is coming to Belrive?" he inquired.

Marjorie nodded. "Yes," said she, "Julia is coming. Aren't you glad?"

Carey smiled rather doubtfully. "Yes, yes," answered he, "but I don't see any great cause for excitement just now, when you consider that she will not be here until spring."

"From her letter she seems to be delighted at the prospect of staying in the country," said Mrs. Gordon. "As you have heard, her father died last summer, and since then she has been living with her aunt in New Orleans. She wrote that a cousin of hers has taken charge of Lawrence Hall, and that she misses the plantation dreadfully. So Marjorie, who was her room-mate at school, invited her to visit us. She will be such a companion for us all, and I am sure that from what is said of her beauty you had better look out for yourself, Carey."

Carey laughed. "If she were coming sooner," said he, "I might need your warning. As it is, she will get here when I am so busy thinking of planting that I will not have a thought for anything else. However, I will try to find the time to entertain her."

"And to fall in love with her," suggested Aunt Betty.

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Carey shook his head. "I won't have time enough for that," answered he.

"Your uncle was once traveling with a man," said Aunt Betty, "when the train happened to stop at a little station in which there was a sort of restaurant. When the man saw it from the car window he told your uncle that he would like to get out and buy a sandwich but he was afraid of getting left. 'You have plenty of time in which to do so,' said your uncle, so the man got out and bought his sandwich. He also caught his train." Aunt Betty ceased speaking and began to fold up her napkin.

Carey looked puzzled. "But I don't see what that has to do with my falling in love with Miss Lawrence," he ventured.

Aunt Betty smiled triumphantly. "The man fell in love with the girl who sold him the sandwich," said she. "It took just two minutes."

"Did he marry the girl at the restaurant?" asked Marjorie.

"He did," said Aunt Betty. "And she ran away with the very conductor who took up his and your uncle's tickets on the day he met her. I suppose that Fate worked the affair out that way to be consistent."

Carey nodded his head thoughtfully. "I guess you are right, Aunt Betty," said he; "it doesn't take very long, does it?"

"Of course it doesn't," said the little old lady decisively.

"Did it take Uncle very long?" asked Marjorie timidly.

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Aunt Betty smoothed the cloth in front of her and smiled grimly. "No," said she. "He didn't take long at all. I didn't let him. It is a very good thing to do, my dear, as you will find out soon enough."

"How you do talk, Betty," said Mrs. Gordon. "Marjorie is too young to even think of getting married."

"Perhaps she is," replied Aunt Betty. "A good many people get married without thinking, and if most of them thought about the matter at all there would be fewer marriages."

"Well," said Carey, "if that is the case, I am going to think of marrying for a long time to come, as I am by no means anxious to change my present condition."

At this moment the big clock in the hall struck one, and pushing back his chair from the table Carey arose. "I will just have time to catch the teams on their way to the field," said he, as he hurried from the room.

Going out to his horse he mounted and was about to ride away to the stables, when his eye was struck by the figure of a man who was riding slowly up the long avenue of live oaks that led to the house. Moving forward until he reached the avenue of trees, Carey waited for the stranger to come up to him, which he finally did, pulling in his horse (a poor mass of skin and bones) with a quick, cruel jerk of the bridle.

He was a tall, handsome man with wicked black eyes, a thin well-shaped nose, and a very red, full mouth. His face was an olive brown, and his clothes, which were torn to rags and tatters flapped and beat about him in the cold wind, showing the ragged holes

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with the brown skin beneath. Despite the coldness of the weather he was wet to the waist, and his water-soaked shoes showed the feet within blue with cold. Hanging from the pommel of his worn saddle, as though in explanation of his soaked condition, was a great bunch of ducks and snipe, and the man, who seemed to be in a very good humor despite his dilapidated wet appearance, swung his gun across the saddle in front of him, and pointing to the game asked pleasantly:

“Want to buy some birds?”

“I don’t know; you will have to ask at the kitchen,” answered Carey, and then mindful of poachers, “Where did you kill them?”

“In the Grand Woods,” said the stranger. “They are fine and fat. Feel one,” he urged, holding out a duck as he spoke.

“You live in the Grand Woods?” asked Carey, who having felt the duck was about to ride on.

“Yes,” said the stranger, “but I would like to live in Landry. And the old man will not move with the girl,” he added angrily, speaking more to himself than to his listener.

“I see,” said Carey; “so there is a girl in it, is there? And the old man, what does he do?”

“He raises a little cotton and a little corn, but his place is not large, and he can make but little money,” answered the stranger.

Carey’s eyes brightened. “Does he really know anything about a crop?” he asked eagerly.

“He was an overseer on a plantation near Landry

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before the yellow fever, and he always did well," replied the stranger. "But then, *M'sieu*, that was fifteen years ago."

"And what is this man's name?" asked Carey.

"Telesse," said the stranger, "Old Telesse."

"Well," answered Carey, "I have a good cabin without a tenant, and if the old man will take it in time for planting I will let him work the land about it on shares. Will you tell him that for me?"

The stranger's eyes shone with pleasure. "I am going there to-night, and I will surely tell him," he answered.

Carey smiled. "I see," said he. "So you are going there to-night, are you? Going to see the girl, I suppose?"

The stranger's face flushed slightly. "If you saw the girl you would know why I go to see her, *M'sieu* Gordon," he replied passionately. "She is not like the other girls about here. She is an angel, and she is beautiful. Ah! so beautiful! More beautiful than the statue of the Virgin in the big church at Mouton. And she is as good as the Saints that the *Père* Martain told me about when I was a boy. Why, do you think, *M'sieu!*" he cried, his voice rising higher, "do you suppose that I would go in the water on such a day as this for any but Aline, my Aline?"

Carey looked at the man and wondered at his passion. In some way it seemed to affect him so that when he spoke his voice was soft and low. "The girl must be very good and very pretty," said he, "and I am not surprised at your loving her. Go to the kitchen

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with your birds and if they do not buy them you can at least get warm."

The stranger thanked him and started his tired horse toward the kitchen. Carey stood watching him as he rode slowly away, when suddenly a thought striking him, he called to the retreating horseman. "I say," he cried, "what is your name?"

The stranger, turning in the saddle, answered him with a shout, the wind causing his voice to sound weak and far away. "Numa, Numa Le Blanc," said he.

Carey dug his spurs into his horse's side and went loping off toward the stables. "Numa," said he to himself thoughtfully, "Numa Le Blanc. Now where have I heard of that name before?"

CHAPTER II

SOME BIRDS

THE kitchen at Belrive (a long extension built out from one side of the big house) was always a place of great warmth and comfort; a place where one might while away many a working hour in front of the big stove and never know it; a place where much conversation and many arguments progressed, where the idle came to waste away the day, and the industrious stopping for a moment became idle also, in the power of its mighty comfort, its savory odors and its high-pitched conversations.

It was a small kingdom in itself, where many matters of importance and of moment were discussed and the ruler of it all, proud in her position and relentless to those who disobeyed her, was Aunt Felonise, the cook: big and black and bubbling over with good humor and contentment at one moment, only to be giving vent to her anger in deep-chested threats in the next. To enter her kitchen was an honor given only to the house servants, and were any one from the quarters to try to go beyond the big green door, with its myriad of sooty finger marks, Aunt Felonise would never recover from the insult.

It was toward this kitchen that the ragged Numa now made his way, and finding the green door tightly

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closed against the wind, he got down from his horse and knocked loudly upon it. On the other side of the door he heard at first a great deal of loud talking and laughing, but at the sound of his knock it ceased entirely, as though some one had snuffed it out like a candle, and a deep voice asked from inside:

“Who dar?”

“Want to buy some birds?” asked Numa doubtfully.

The door swung slowly inward, and he entered to find himself in a great square room, its whitewashed walls black with soot and grease and hung with a multitude of cooking utensils of various shapes and sizes. Near the wall was the big stove, crowded with pots and kettles, and surrounded by a shivering group of negroes of all ages, who, huddling as close to it as possible, derived from it the double enjoyment of its heat, and its appetizing odor.

Standing near the stove, her turbaned head bent over a pot in a most industrious manner, was Aunt Felonise, her broad figure presenting a view of greasy blue and white calico that was marvelous to see.

“Want to buy some birds?” repeated Numa, looking about him helplessly.

Aunt Felonise rose up and faced him, her whole person expressing the scorn that she felt for what she called “po’ white trash.” Gazing at him in surprise, as though she had not heard the knock or his coming in, she inquired:

“Whar you come from?”

“The Grand Woods,” answered Numa laconically.

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"Lemme see yo' birds," she commanded.

Going out to his horse Numa untied the birds, and brought them in to her. Aunt Felonise examined them carefully, turning them over, and prodding them with a fat black forefinger. Finally she announced her verdict. "Dese birds is mighty po'," said she. "Somehow de birds ain't like dey uster be. Dey get mo' poo'er every year. But I'll see if dey wants any at de house.

"Buddy!" she now called to a small boy, who sprawled lazily on his back amid the group about the stove, "get up from dar, yo' urthless good-fo'-nuthin' nigger, an' go in de house an' ask if dey wants any birds. Ask Miss Margey, if you kin," she continued as Buddy reached the door, "for God knows, I doan' want Miss Betty to come heah wif all dese triflin' niggers layin' round, an' it's so cold out doas I ain't got de heart to turn 'em out."

During this speech, delivered by Aunt Felonise in a high voice at first, and in almost a whisper at the end, Numa had been standing near the stove warming himself and drying his clothes, and the heat having begun to penetrate the damp coarse material, little puffs of white steam began to ascend from him, accompanied by a very strong odor of wet, scorched cloth. Aunt Felonise, whose heart was tender, noticed this and felt sorry for the soaked, bedraggled figure before her.

"Well, for' God, if de man ain' mos' on fire wid de hot an' de cold," said she vaguely. "Jes' stand by de stove till you's good an' warm."

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And so Numa stood by the fire while Aunt Felonise stirred about among the pots and pans, and the negroes about the stove were chatting merrily, when the sound of footsteps on the gallery outside warned them of the approach of the absent Buddy, whose loud talking told that there was somebody with him.

As he reached the door he shrieked, "Heah he is, Miss Betty!" whereupon that lady was heard informing him that she was not deaf, and that a continuation of such very loud talking would very probably get him into a great deal of trouble. But the warning of the loyal Buddy had been heard in time, for when Aunt Betty entered the big kitchen the group about the fire had melted away just as snow would have melted if placed in a similar position, and the room was now filled with a busy throng that chopped meat, picked chickens, scoured pans, helped about the big stove, and seemed to be trying to atone, in a single minute, for its idleness during the entire morning.

For a moment Aunt Betty surveyed this seeming industry in a quiet, dangerous silence, her eyes moving quickly about the room. "This is the first time in my life," said she drily, her eyes now fixed upon a certain corner, "that I have beheld the spectacle of two full-grown women picking one small chicken."

"Aunt Felonise was in a powerful hurry for it, Miss Betty," said one of the culprits, "an' we's both workin' on de chicken to get it ready sooner."

"The falsehood that you are telling, Millie," replied Aunt Betty, "is such a monstrous, and such a deliberate one, that I almost feel inclined to compli-

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ment you on your powers of mendacity—or of lying, I should say. However, you will come with me to the house when I go back, and I will try and find something for you to do.”

To this the woman to whom she had been speaking answered nothing, as the greater part of Aunt Betty's speeches were unintelligible to the negroes, but having understood that she was to go to the house and work under the supervision of that keen-sighted lady, she sat in silence, divided between sullenness and bewilderment.

Aunt Betty turned to Numa, who still stood by the stove, an amused smile upon his face, his clothes now scorched and almost burning. “I will take your birds,” said she, “if you are willing to sell them for the usual price.”

Numa nodded his head and held out his hand. Aunt Betty produced her pocketbook and carefully counted out the amount in small change. When she had counted it twice, to be sure that the amount was right, she poured the little heap of silver into Numa's outstretched hand. “Now,” said she, looking him squarely in the eyes, “there is your money. I suppose that you will spend it all upon whiskey instead of giving it to your wife.”

“I have no wife,” answered Numa, putting the money deep down in his pocket.

“But there is whiskey in Landry,” replied Aunt Betty suggestively.

Numa started to speak, but catching an expression on her face that said plainly, “I know what you are going to say,” he choked the lie that came to his lips,

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and answered her quickly, his eyes never wavering from hers.

“Yes, there is whiskey in Landry,” said he, “and I am going to spend all of this money on it but two-bits, which I will spend on a present for my girl.”

Aunt Betty gazed at him for a moment in astonishment, and then calling to the woman Millie to follow her, she started out with never a word. When she reached the door she stopped for a moment, and turning addressed the ragged Numa in a slow, even voice, to his utter bewilderment. “I have this morning seen in this kitchen,” said she, “the very acme of truth and mendacity. If this woman were white,” she continued, pointing to the sullen Millie, who stood beside her, “those people who believe that persons unlike each other should marry, would find in her an ideal wife for you. As it is, your girl, of whom you spoke just now, will get such a truthful husband that she will be miserable to the end of her days, and she will deserve her fate also for being fool enough to marry you.”

Aunt Betty went out, and the colored woman following her, slammed the door with a loud bang, expressive of her indignation at being forced to leave the merry company inside.

Numa stood by the fire for some time in silence, jingling the money in his pocket absently, and trying to make out what the lively old lady had said to him.

Aunt Felonise looked at him and grinned. “Ole Miss Betty a mighty fine talker,” said she, “but you can’t always tell what she’s talkin’ ’bout.”

“No,” answered Numa, with a little laugh, “you

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cannot. Thank you for the fire, and for selling the birds.”

Aunt Felonise nodded her head majestically in acknowledgment of his thanks, and Numa, going out to his tired horse, turned its head toward Landry. Down the long avenue of oaks he went, and out through the gate into the public road, his handsome face bright with the anticipation of the good time that he would have in the little town. There before him it lay, clearly seen over the flat, level acres of Belrive, its big church with its square wooden tower, its eight or ten stores set in a square with the dwelling houses huddling close about them, its grove of oaks swaying in the wind; all standing forth from the blue sky behind it like some vast picture set amid the brown and gray of the fields. Landry had grown since his boyhood; had grown slowly, adding a house or two every year, building a new church, and finding it too small, building a larger one, until it now stood a completed town; a village that would grow no more, but would stand for ages as it now was, the haunt of the idle on week days, the meeting place of hundreds of worshipers on Sundays. In the years to come time might add a little, a very little to its completed growth, but that would be all, and Landry lying sleepily among its fertile fields was finished, and would increase no more..

And so Numa rode along, now singing merrily, until near Landry he met the priest, who was taking his evening walk along the dusty road. To him the hunter bowed low as he passed, pulling off his hat, for in all the world there was but one man for whom he had the

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least respect or obedience, and that man was Father Bertrand of Landry. In his careless, shiftless way Numa, when sober, was a very easy person to get along with, provided you did not offend him; but once under the influence of the liquor he became a fiend incarnate, hating everything, venting his cruel anger upon any one who came his way, shrieking and cursing and fighting like some demon escaped from torment. It was when he was in this condition that the terrified people of Landry would send for Father Bertrand, and the priest coming upon the infuriated Numa, would never fail to calm him with a word or wave of his hand, and after speaking to him for a while would leave him docile and quiet, and crying in his shame like a little child.

Finally Numa entered Landry, and stopping outside of Monsieur Landry's store, he tied his horse to the rack in front, and went stamping inside as a man will do who has ridden a long way in the cold. Monsieur Landry was not in the store. Politics had interested him in his declining years; he was so completely wrapped up in the game that he never missed anything of a political flavor; and he carried with him a great many votes, for as in the days of old, he was the leader of Landry and of all the adjacent country.

His son Octave, who now looked after the store, came forward at Numa's entrance with a query.

"Something for my girl," answered Numa, "something worth two bits. Something fine and pretty."

Octave thought for a moment, and then thrusting his hand into a show case brought forth a long paste-

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board card upon which was pinned a great variety of cheap brass jewelry, set with pieces of red and blue glass, dull and lusterless—poor, cheap counterfeits.

“Here you are,” cried he, displaying the card with a flourish, “here is just what you want, fine and good and only two bits.”

Numa looked at the card carefully for a moment, examined a large brooch—a twisted mass of tarnished metal, set with a great red heart of glass, and throwing down his money said:

“I will take this one. Wrap it up good so that I will not break it.”

Octave wrapped up the brooch carefully, and handed him the package. “Who is the girl, Numa?” asked he, his voice full of awe and of flattery for the handsome man whose conquests were well known at Landry. “Is she like the little girl Madelaine that you——”

Straight across the counter went Numa’s hand for the speaker’s throat, his body quivering with anger, his eyes blazing with fury, with fierceness, like those of a madman. Octave, springing away from him, cowered, trembling against the shelves. “What is it, Numa?” he whimpered. “I meant no harm. I did not mean to make you angry.”

Slowly Numa withdrew his arm from across the counter, his breath coming short and sharp in his anger, and for a while he stood silent, fighting down the rage that was within him. Octave, still crouching against the shelves, watched him with a terrified fascination.

Finally Numa drew a deep breath, and picking up the package, which he had dropped in his anger, spoke

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to the trembling clerk, his voice weak and low with suppressed rage. "You are a fool, Octave," said he. "This girl is not like Madelaine. I am going to marry her because she is as good as the holiest saint above. Is she like Madelaine do you ask," he cried, his anger rising again; "if ever you speak to me of my girl or of Madelaine again I will kill you. Why I did not kill you a moment ago I do not know. You are lucky, Octave, very lucky, but people are not always lucky, especially fools. Remember that."

Octave made no reply, but watched the angry man depart in awed silence, and when the door had closed behind him, he heaved a great sigh of relief, and came out from behind the counter quietly and stealthily, as though afraid of the furious Numa's return.

CHAPTER III

AND A BOTTLE

MEANWHILE Numa had again mounted his horse, and was riding slowly to the one bar-room of the little town. It was a low, white-washed building of two stories; in front was a tall fence which served to hide its wicked interior from the feminine eyes of Landry.

As Numa rode the short distance which separated this barroom, or coffee house, as it was called, from the store of Monsieur Landry, his brain was in a tumult, whirling dizzily from the many emotions which were within him. He was angry, he was afraid, he was penitent, and all because Octave had spoken a name to him. A name that he had tried so hard to forget, and had forgotten, burying it deep in the shadowy past; too deep, he had thought, ever to rise again. And now in an instant it had all come back again at the word of a mere boy, a fool, a silly fool who should be punished. Numa's hand fell upon the whip at his pommel, and he half-turned his horse, but the sight of the low white building changed his determination, and, striking the animal cruelly, he went on.

At the bar he paused for a moment to buy a bottle of whiskey, which he took with him into the poker

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room upon the right. It was a small room, low-ceiled, with dirty whitewashed walls upon which some one had tacked a great many old French newspapers, and in the center of it there was a round table covered with faded green baize at which a group of men were seated playing cards.

At Numa's entrance several of the players spoke to him, asking him to join the game, but paying no heed to them he dragged a chair into a corner of the room, and tilting it back against the wall sat down, with the bottle of whiskey in his lap, to think.

He thought of the little Madelaine, whom he had been so unwillingly forced to remember, and as he thought his mind went back to the days when he had loved her, and the bottle in his lap went many times to his lips, to drown the memories that came to him.

He thought of the house far out in the prairie, with its trees and flowers that grew so lovingly about it, making it an oasis in the great desert of green that closed it in on every side. He thought of the garden, with its odor of roses, of honeysuckle, where he had met her in the softness of the summer evening, leaning from his saddle to speak to her as she stood, shading her eyes with her hand, to look up at him. He thought of how he had spoken to her, asking for food, for a place to rest his tired body, and of her answer—of her voice—sweet and clear, and happy as the birds about her.

He could see her plainly, standing slim and straight under the great bushy china trees, her soft brown eyes gazing questioningly into his, her cheeks rosy with

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blushes, her lips smiling at him as if in welcome. He could see the big wooden rice mortar, and the heavy wooden pestle with which she had been working, lying idle in the shade at his interruption.

And now he could see the house with its cool rooms and spotless floors and its tiny kitchen, where the girl went to bring him meat and drink. He could see her as she returned, bringing with her the old couple with whom she lived, who had taken her to their hearts when a child, and had raised her as tenderly as though she had been their own flesh and blood, when in truth, she had no kin.

And now he thought of the hot fierce love for this girl that had filled his heart—of the longing for her by day and by night—of the long rides into the prairie to see her, when the sun would scorch and burn him, and the little house with its clustering trees, would seem but a dot in the shimmering waves of heat.

Now he was in the garden with his love, mid the faint scent of the sleeping flowers, talking to her softly, while the moonbeams made lights and shadows among the roses until their leaves seemed a marvelous piece of filmy lace, and the prairie lay about them a shining sea of silver. He thought of how she had loved him, of how she had trusted him, telling him of her simple life and planning for the happy future that was never to come.

And now he thought of the time when the days were shorter and cooler, and the ride to the little house would be quicker and more pleasant. He thought of the time when the nights were cold in the little garden;

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as cold as his own heart had become, and the roses were dead and withered upon the bushes, as his love for the pretty Madelaine was dead and withered—the hot, fierce love that had burned itself away like the summer.

He remembered the last night when he had seen her, the night when he had decided never to return to the little house so far in the prairie. He could see her as she bade him farewell, waving her little hand long after he had gone, with the lie that he had told her burning upon his lip like a coal of fire. He seemed to feel again the cold wind of the prairie blowing hard against him on his long ride from the little Madelaine, he seemed to hear again the soft mystic sounds of the woods as he rode into them at dawn, and plunged into their cold gray depths, seeking sanctuary and peace of mind from his guilty conscience.

And now he heard again the stories that came to him at Landry, the stories that told of the long waiting of the little Madelaine, of her despair and sorrow. The story of how she had left the little house and its garden one night and had gone far out upon the great prairie, God knows where, leaving behind her the old couple to break their hearts in the loneliness of her going. He remembered how he had bragged one day in his drunkenness of his conquest, and the silent scorn with which his story had been received. He thought now of what a fool he had been to speak of it, and wondered vaguely whether it would harm him in his quest for the girl he loved, the girl that he wished to marry.

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He found it hard to have to remember the little Madelaine after he had tried so desperately to forget her and had succeeded so well. It had all happened so long ago, years ago, and now to have it brought back to him by this fool Octave. He cursed him madly under his breath, and turned up the bottle to drink to his endless perdition. It was empty, and flinging it savagely to the floor he lurched unsteadily to his feet, his brain reeling. One of the cardplayers called to him asking him to join the game, as he staggered drunkenly across the floor in quest of another bottle.

Numa cursed him savagely and staggered on toward the door, when a figure suddenly appeared upon its threshold that caused him to stop and cry out with satisfaction, though in an angry tone.

“So it is you at last, is it?” he shouted fiercely. “So it is you, is it, Jean Le Bossu? And where did you come from?”

The one in the doorway eyed him quietly for a moment. He was a strange-looking man was this Jean LeBossu, with his humped back, his long, strong arms, and his short, crooked legs which seem to have been bent and twisted in the effort of carrying his heavy, round body. As he stood in the doorway with the shadows of the evening falling dark about him, he was like a great spider about to emerge from its web, upon some errand of destruction. But had one come closer to him, and looking above his deformed body beheld his white, peaceful face, he would have been reassured, for the face of Jean LeBossu was pale and saint-like and beautifully molded, like that of an angel.

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It was said by some that God had given him this beautiful face in compensation for his twisted, crooked form and the priest had even preached a sermon about it, but LeBossu had answered when they told him about it, that his beautiful face could do him little good, and that he would rather have a straighter body. He was a silent man, living deep in the Grand Woods with his friend and partner, Numa, whom he followed about most of the time, and though this strange partnership had puzzled many at Landry, its explanation was unknown. All that was known of him was that he was often at his partner's side and that the latter in his wildest, most drunken moments would never lay the weight of his finger upon him, although he would curse and rage at him furiously.

The little man, at Numa's angry greeting, stood in the doorway and smiled placidly until his partner staggered up to him, when reaching out one of his long arms he dragged the drunken man into the bar without a word. Once inside he released his hold, and after looking at the tall, ragged figure before him for a moment, said in a low, soft voice: "So you are drunk again, Numa? You told me that you would not drink to-day for the girl's sake."

At the mention of the girl Numa ceased his cursing, and thrust a piece of money into the hunchback's hand. "Buy some whiskey, Jean," said he, "and we will go upstairs where it is quiet and drink it. I have something to tell you."

Obediently Jean writhed upon his crooked legs to the bar, while Numa, with many a lurch and stagger,

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led the way up the steep, narrow stairs. The room that they entered was like the one below, save for the fact that being beneath the eaves, it was much lower. It was black and dark also, and Jean, after groping about for a moment, found a piece of candle in a broken tin candlestick, which he lit and put upon the table. Numa, who leaned heavily against the wall, dragged a chair to the table, and sat down with the bottle in front of him. The hunchback stared at him from the other side, his pale face upon a level with the soiled green baize, looking for all the world as though it had no body supporting it, and had been placed there as a ghastly relic of some execution. "What is it that you have to tell me, Numa?" asked he.

Numa smiled and pushed the bottle across the table. "Drink," said he, "it is good news."

Jean placed his lips to the bottle and shoved it back again. He seldom drank. "What is the news?" he asked again anxiously.

Numa drank deeply and drew his hand across his lips. "I sold my birds at Belrive," said he.

"Well?" urged Jean.

Numa drank again, and laughed stupidly, passing his hand across his brow.

"There is an empty house at Belrive," said he. "A place without a tenant, and I am going to make the old man take it. Then we will live in Landry, Jean, we will live there, eh? The woods are too far."

Jean seemed perplexed. "But why do you wish to leave the woods?" he asked. "Why do you wish Aline to be near Landry?"

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The question seemed to arouse the stupid Numa, and when he spoke his voice was low and earnest. "You know that I love Aline, Jean, love her until I am sick with it, and you know that I am going to marry her," said he. The hunchback nodded. "But that is not all, Jean. I want her to love me as I love her, to tell me so and mean it. Why do you think I left the old man's house and lived with you? Was it because I wished to leave her? Would she love me if she saw me come to the woods as I shall come there to-night, drunk and crazy? No, Jean, no, she would hate me. I know that she does not love me now as I wish her to, but she shall some day, and on that day I will marry her if I have to kill Telesse to do it. You know me, Jean; you know that I mean what I say."

Numa's voice had risen in his excitement and Jean, with a wave of his hand, motioned him to be quiet. "Yes, I know all this, Numa," said he wearily. "You have told it to me a thousand times before. But why do you wish Aline near Landry? How will it help you? She will hear of your drinking, I am sure."

Numa's eyes grew crafty, and he leaned far across the table wagging his finger before the hunchback's face. "I am no fool, Jean," chuckled he, "I know women. How many girls are there in the woods, eh? None. How many are there at Landry? A great many. When Aline comes to Belrive I shall go about with all the girls at Landry. I shall go in fine clothes and they will follow me. One of them I shall make love me, and of her I shall make a fool, for there is

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a debt between us. And will Aline hear of this? Will she be jealous, eh? Am I a fool, Jean, when I want Aline near Landry?"

The scorn upon the hunchback's face was lost upon his drunken partner. "And what will you do about the whiskey?" he asked.

Numa patted the bottle in front of him lovingly, and took a deep draught of its contents. "I will see about the whiskey, Jean," said he thickly. "I will see about it. I am no fool, am I, Jean? Why don't you speak? Are you dumb?"

"No, Numa," said the little man slowly, "I am not dumb, but I wish just now that I were blind."

"Do not talk like a fool," said Numa angrily, "I heard one fool talk to-day and that is enough." Then, the events of the afternoon coming back to him, he became furious. Cursing the luckless Octave at the top of his voice, he knocked the bottle to the floor, where it broke, and lay a mass of shattered glass and reeking spirits.

Numa gazed at this catastrophe in silence, his rage increasing every moment. "I am going downstairs to get another bottle," said he finally with an oath. "Wait here until I come back."

The hunchback watched him stagger out of the room, with a sinister smile upon his pale face, and in a moment he heard the drunken man lurching heavily down the narrow stairway.

"I wish to God you would fall and break your wicked neck," said he in a whisper, his brown eyes blazing. From the bar below there came a heavy

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tramping of many feet, mingled with loud shouts and drunken laughter.

The hunchback leaned his twisted body across the table, stretching out one of his long arms before him. "If one of you drunken men would only kill Numa," he wailed, "how I would bless you. How I wish that I could do so myself, but I cannot send my soul to hell. No, no, I cannot do it! I am not brave enough. I am living my life in hell now, I cannot die to find more suffering. It would be too much, too much," he sobbed, burying his face in his hands, his poor, misshapen body quivering with grief and passion.

For a long time he sat thus in the flickering light of the candle, and then a great tramping and shouting upon the stairway outside caused him to spring to his feet with a start.

"So Numa brings friends with him," said he to himself. "His anger must have left him."

From the stairway came the voice of Numa calling hoarsely. "Open the door, Jean," he was crying. "It is dark and I cannot see. I have some friends who wish to see you. Open the door, Jean, open the door."

The hunchback threw open the door and stood upon its threshold bowing grandly in mock ceremony.

"Come in, come in, my friends," said he. "Le Bossu is glad to see you."

Into the room there came the drunken Numa, followed by four great hairy men, whose dark, sunburned faces told of a free life in the open air.

"These are my friends, Jean," said Numa. "They are from the swamp, and we will drink with them."

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The four big men looked at the little hunchback, who stood before them in silence, the pity that they felt for him softening their frank, honest features.

"We are glad to meet Le Bossu," said one of them gently. "We have come from the swamp to enjoy ourselves. You will drink with us, I hope, and will sing and amuse yourself."

Le Bossu nodded. "Let us sit at the table," said he, "and be merry."

The four big men seated themselves clumsily, placing their bottles before them, while the hunchback, with a spring, seated himself upon the table where he might see and be seen by all.

In a corner of the room Numa lay helpless, his head upon his breast, his arms hanging loosely, in the last stages of drunkenness.

"Come, Numa," called the swamper who had spoken before, "give us a toast. It is growing late and we must be riding soon." He filled a glass and held it out toward the drunken man as he spoke.

The sight of the liquor seemed to revive the helpless Numa, and, seizing the glass, he held it aloft, his eyes rolling wildly. "I will give you a toast," he cried with a shriek of laughter—a loud, fiendish shriek of laughter, so wild and so devilish that the big men shuddered at the sound of it. "I will give you a toast, but first let me tell you a story."

The swampers turned in their chairs and gazed at him expectantly. The hunchback leaned forward, his face twitching with emotion. Numa steadied himself against a chair and set his glass upon the table.

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"Listen now," said he slowly, "to my story." And there in the white, low-ceilinged room, with its dim, smoky candle, he told the story of the little Madelaine. Told it with the oaths and words that only his black soul could know of, while the big men sat with the red flush of shame flooding their swarthy features, and the little hunchback gazed before him with a face that was set and white, and still as death.

Never a sound disturbed the story of the drunken man, and when he had finished all was silent save for the quick breathing of the swampers.

Numa seized his glass, and again raised it high. "Drink," he cried wildly. "Drink to the little Madelaine. Where she is, God knows, but drink to her once, and then forget her as I shall do."

The big swamper knocked the glass from his hand with an oath, and sprang to his feet. "Drink, do you say," he cried, "drink with a dog like you? I could not call myself a man if I were to do so."

For a moment Numa gazed at his glass, which had rolled into a corner, in a dazed, stupid way, and then the significance of it all coming to him, he drew a long knife from inside his blouse, and sprang at the swamper.

"I will kill you for that," he cried fiercely, as he lunged forward.

The big man seized a chair and swung it about his head. Straight and true he brought it down in the face of the furious Numa, who, crashing to the floor, overturned the table and left the room in total darkness.

The hunchback, who had retreated to a corner of the

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room, heard the crash, the scrambling of many feet toward the door, the sound of hurrying footsteps upon the stairway, the banging of a door downstairs, the sound of galloping horses, and a shout borne back upon the wind. The swampers had ridden on.

Le Bossu passed his hand across his face and tried to think in the blackness of the room. It had all been so sudden that he was dazed and breathless. He wondered if they had killed Numa. He hoped, he prayed that they had, and yet he feared to look.

Drawing a match from his pocket he scratched it fearfully. As the little flame sprang into life, he saw the candle which had rolled near him, and straightening its flattened wick he lit it, glancing cautiously toward the center of the room.

Sprawling amid the wreckage of broken glass, the table pinning him down, lay Numa, his eyes closed, his face covered with blood, which shone black in the candle light. Under his head was a little black pool that wound its way in a ghastly stream across the dirty floor.

The hunchback drew a deep breath. "Thank God," said he. "Numa is dead."

Creeping softly to the silent figure he bent over it and sank his head upon its breast, listening eagerly amid the silence of the room.

Slowly he raised himself, his face white and drawn with despair and disappointment, and crept painfully to his place in the corner. Long he gazed at the prostrate figure before him, the tears of sorrow on his cheeks, until his glance rested upon something that lay

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quite near him, gleaming softly in the shadow of the table. It was the knife of the desperate Numa, lying where he had dropped it in his downfall, its polished blade dimly reflecting the soft light of the candle.

The hunchback gazed at it as though fascinated, his long arm reaching out toward it as though drawn there by some irresistible force; drawn toward it as surely as the magnet draws the steel. Picking it up with trembling fingers, he crept over to the still figure again, and for a moment stood over it.

“Why should I not,” he gasped, his throat parched and dry. “He is nearly dead now. It would hardly be killing him.”

Slowly he fell upon his knees, and raised the knife above the prostrate figure, his face black with hatred, his breath coming in short, hard gasps. “For the little Madelaine,” he panted hoarsely.

Suddenly there came through the window a great stream of moonlight, filling the room with a flood of shimmering silver, that fell across the silent figure, and made it less horrible with its softness. The knife fell from the hunchback’s uplifted hand, making a great clatter in the silent room. He clutched the crucifix inside his blouse with the strength of despair, his eyes wide with fear and wonder.

“It is a warning—a sign from Heaven—may God forgive,” he murmured brokenly.

Outside, the wind, which had gone away at sunset, came back again with renewed violence. On it went past the little town of Landry, roaring and moaning about the low, white house like some savage beast,

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causing Old Pierre, the proprietor, to tremble at its fierceness, and the drinkers at his bar to pause in their revelry and heed it for a moment; but in the little room under the eaves, the hunchback, kneeling in his corner, mumbled his prayer and heard it no more than the figure that lay so stark and still in the cold, white moonlight.

CHAPTER IV

THE GRAND WOODS

FAR down in the Grand Woods, set deep amid its leafy solitude, was the home of old Telesse, a tiny bit of civilization, of the work of man in the wilderness of the forest. For years it had stood there, the tall, live oaks that formed the outer edge of the forest clustering about it thickly, as though they would close in together and crush this feeble intruder, this shaky, rotten thing of wood and clay that marred their beauty, and stole from them the rich, sweet earth that was their birthright.

But as the years went on the little clearing about the cabin grew larger and larger, and the trees were forced back farther and farther, until they stood now and gazed at the little house from a distance, shaking their tall tops angrily when the cold winter winds blew in from the prairie, towering grim and silent in the still summer days as though pondering upon some vengeance that would be theirs in the years to come.

It was a very small house, set high upon four great cypress logs, lest the rising waters of the swamp behind should sweep it away from its clearing and hurl it battered and broken at the feet of the live oaks that

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longed for its destruction. It had also never been painted save by the weather, which, taking compassion on it in its first state of yellow barrenness, had colored it with the softest shade of silvery gray, and had trimmed and bordered it with the greenest and brightest of lichens, leaving it as perfect in tone and color as any tree in the forest.

In front of the house there was a little garden, where a few vegetables and a great many wild flowers grew, fighting hard for their lives amid the rank weeds and grass that choked and oppressed them. Reaching out from this garden was the clearing that the old man had made, the outcome of many years of hard, endless work in the open, stretching away to the border of the woods, a long, flat sweep of plowed and furrowed land, dotted about with the blackened stumps of the live oaks that had grown there.

Here it was that the old Telesse planted his corn and his cotton, which, rooting deep in the virgin soil, grew strong and tall and straight, yielding richly to the one that had planted them in this wilderness. Here in the spring one found the dark expanse of forest broken by a waving mass of tender green, while in the summer the ground would be white with the cotton bolls that grew as cool, as pure, and as fleecy as the clouds above them.

A high rail fence enclosed the house and the clearing, separating them from the road that ran alongside, and across this road, stretching dark and silent as far as the eye could see was the cypress swamp, a monstrous forest of thickly growing trees, vast, impenetrable and

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trackless; the home of the snake, the alligator and the innumerable writhing, crawling things that hid in its black sluggish waters from the light of Heaven.

Here one found the shiny cypress knees pushing their way from the oily water, in emulation of their parent tree, the green slime clinging closely about them, as though to drag them back into the gloomy depths from which they had arisen. Here one was aware of the weird dead silence of the swamp, the silence which leaves one lonely and afraid, unbroken save by the fall of a branch in the murky water, or the dreary moaning of the wind; the silence which makes one long to shout and scream aloud for the joy of hearing something living, something human, in the deathly stillness.

Running along the edge of the swamp, separating it from the higher land ran the road, an indistinct track amid the green carpet of the forest, and on this road in the hazy light of the early morning was old Telesse himself, his white head bent low as he studied the ground before him.

All along the road the soft sod was trampled and torn, showing great brown scars in the bosom of the earth, scars that had been made by the heavy hoofs of swiftly running horses.

"There were four of them, and they were going very fast," said the old man aloud, as he straightened up. "One was Numa, and one was Jean, but who were the other two?"

He stood silent for a moment as though expecting some one to answer his question, but the only response

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to his query being the song of the birds he turned toward the little house, his heavy shoes wet and glistening with the dew of the early morning.

On he went through the sodden grass, until he came to the stile that crossed the high rail fence, and mounting it he stood gazing far down the leafy road that led to the open country.

Far away in the distance he could see the figure of a girl moving slowly away from him, a tiny spot of blue and white amid the green aisles of the forest. The old man stood looking down the road long after the girl had vanished from his sight, his wrinkled face troubled, his hard, calloused hands plucking at the coarse cloth of his blouse in his perplexity. Slowly he seated himself upon the topmost step of the stile, and sat staring before him in an attitude of utter dejection.

"Aline," said he to himself. "Aline Telesse, Aline nothing, Aline nobody." He laughed harshly. "What am I to do with her? Numa says that he will marry her, he swears it, and if I prevent him he will tell. And me, what becomes of me? But that will be no affair of his. And what if I let him marry her? I shall break my promise and my soul shall be damned. Again that will be no affair of his."

He sat for a long time, his head bowed deep in thought. A venturesome rabbit crept out of the grass on the roadside, and hopping up to the stile, stood fearfully gazing at the silent figure upon its top. From the woods came the call of the birds, the sweet, clear notes of the cardinal, the shrill scream of the jay, the long, glorious trill of the mocking bird, rising

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upon the air like some glorious hymn of thanksgiving for the gift of the beautiful day.

The old man rose to his feet wearily, scaring the rabbit into the crisp, dead weeds at the edge of the field.

"Aline," said he bitterly. "Aline of the Grand Woods! What is she? A Cajun. What does she know? Nothing. Ah, *M'sieu*," he cried, raising his eyes to the blue sky above him, "I promised you so much, and I have done so little, but I could do no more. I had no money, no place to live. I could do nothing. Forgive me, *M'sieu*, forgive me, for there is one promise left and I shall keep it. Numa shall never have Aline, I promise you. Yes, I promise you that, even though I die for it."

Once more he looked down the road, and then shaking his head he slowly descended the stile into his small front yard, where he was soon busy among the few withered plants that grew there. As he worked, his active movements telling of a great amount of health and strength despite his age, he seemed a very cheerful old man, and not in the least like the disconsolate figure that had so lately sat upon the top of the stile.

The old man's mind was at peace, for he had succeeded in quieting his conscience for the time being, had succeeded in putting his trouble away from him for a little while, as he had done for years. Ever since his master's death he had been troubled, thinking of the promise that he had made, swearing that he would keep it, and in his heart he would mean to do what he had sworn.

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For years he had seen the cunning Numa spreading his nets to catch the pretty Aline, sly and cunning, giving the girl no cause for finding harm in him, hiding his wickedness as carefully as a miser hides his gold. For years he had seen the cruel imposter come day by day to the little house in the clearing, his handsome face flushed with passion, smiling and talking to the girl with many bits of idle flattery and words of praise that fell upon her simple heart unheeded, leaving no harmful touch of vanity behind them. For years he had sworn that Numa should come no more, that he would tell the girl of his wickedness, of his hypocrisy, only to break his oath, to cast his solutions from him in quaking terror at one word, one threat, from the tyrant.

And so the years had gone by, and the girl had grown as fair and as beautiful as any of the flowers that grew in the forest, and Numa was half crazy with his love for her, bullying and threatening the old man into angry silence whenever he opposed him; while the old man, swearing to keep his oath, from day to day calmed and soothed his troubled conscience into an angry silence not unlike his own.

The sun was high in the heavens, and the old man's work was nearly done when the figure of a horseman coming down the road arrested his attention. Leaning upon his hoe he watched this horseman approach, an amused smile upon his wrinkled face. Perched upon the back of a shaggy pony was a little dwarfed man, whose short legs clutching desperately at the pony's sides were unable to keep his heavy body in the saddle, as his jolting from side to side and into the air

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seemed to certify. Arriving at the garden he pulled in his horse with a quick jerk that nearly unseated him, and waving his hand cheerily to the old man, "*Comment ça va!*" cried he.

The old man leaned over the fence and shook hands with him, speaking to him in French. "How are you, Jean?" said he. "Where is Numa?"

"Numa is up the road waiting," said the little man. "He was drunk last night and was hurt. He does not wish Aline to see him, so he sent me ahead to draw her away when he passes by."

"Aline is not here," answered the old man slowly. "She went early this morning to Madame Joe, who is teaching her to spin. She will not be back until near sunset."

Le Bossu smiled. "Then I will ride back with her," said he. "Now I must call Numa."

Placing his fingers to his lips he whistled thrice, and Numa came out from his hiding place among the trees, his brown face swathed in bandages, between the white edges of which his black eyes shone angrily. Pulling up his horse next to Jean's, he addressed him shortly, nodding carelessly to the old man, who stood eyeing the white bandages in wonder. "Is Aline here?" he asked.

"No," answered the old man, "she has gone to Madame Joe's."

"I did not ask you," said Numa ungraciously, "let Jean speak when he is spoken to. How long will Aline be at Madame Joe's?"

"All day," answered the old man quietly. "You

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are in a bad humor to-day, Numa. What is the matter?"

Numa put his hand to his bandaged head, and then pointed toward Landry. "Over there," said he, "I was hurt, I was struck with a chair and beaten. Beaten by four men, four big men, any one of whom would have been enough for me. And all because I asked a toast. Think of it. Four great men, four swampers, the cowards. But I have sworn an oath to make them pay for it, and pay for it they will. They passed here, of course, their tracks are all around. But come, Jean, we must be going. Aline is away and the road is clear."

Gathering up his reins, he turned his horse preparatory to going, when the hunchback called to him. "*Mais Numa*," cried he, "I thought that you wished to speak to Telesse."

Numa swung his horse about quickly. "I am a fool," said he. "I had forgotten. Since last night I can think of nothing but my hurt. You know, Telesse, that I have spoken to you about going to Landry to live."

The old man nodded and his face grew grave.

"You told me that you had no house to live in there," continued Numa.

Again the old man nodded his head, and his face grew graver still.

"Well," cried Numa triumphantly, "I have found you a place at Belrive, *M'sieu* Gordon's plantation. There is a big house there that is vacant with plenty of land about it, and he will let you take the place on

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shares. What do you say to that? You will move, eh?"

The old man was silent for a long time, trying in vain to call up his courage, to speak harshly and refuse this question that was a command, and when he finally spoke his voice was beseeching.

"I do not know, Numa," said he timidly, "I must think about it. I must see *M'sieu* Gordon. I must have time, I must have time. Aline would be pleased, for then she could go to school, but she would miss the woods sadly. And me—Ah! Numa, all that I have in the world is here. Give me time. Give me time."

Numa shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "Very well," said he, "take your time. You will have until the planting season to think the matter over. Take your time, Telesse, and then decide whichever way you think is best. I guess you know which way is best, eh?"

To this the old man answered nothing and for a while the three men were silent; Numa thinking of the life that would be his in Landry; Telesse praying for some deliverance from this evil that was to befall him; the little hunchback wondering what power it was that made this strong old man obey his wicked partner as though he were a little child.

Finally Numa picked up his reins. "I am going," he announced with a yawn. "Tell Aline that I have been thrown by my horse and hurt. Tell her that he dragged me and cut my face against the ground. Do you understand?"

"Yes," answered the old man dully, "I will tell her."

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Numa suddenly thrust his hand into his pocket and brought forth a package which he tossed to the ground. "Give that to Aline also," said he. "I had almost forgotten it. Tell her that I bought it for her and that it cost a great deal of money. Do you understand?"

The old man nodded and thrust the package into his pocket, his hands shaking nervously. "Why is it that you wish me to go to Belrive? Why do you want Aline to be there?" he asked timidly.

Numa laughed. "That is my business," answered he. "Jean knows, perhaps he will tell you some day. But I will tell you one thing," he cried passionately, "Aline is going to love me as I love her, I swear it. Why should she not? Am I not tall and well-formed and handsome? She shall love me, and on the day that she tells me so I shall marry her. This I swear also and this I will bring about even though it costs your life to do it," and calling to Jean he rode away, leaving the old man to stare wonderingly after him.

CHAPTER V

ANGELE OF ANSE LE VERT

THE sun was low in the western sky and the forest aisles were gray when Le Bossu set out from his cabin to meet Aline. Living as he did, deep in the heart of the woods and far from the old man's clearing, he yet found time to see the girl often, for he loved her very dearly.

Silent and morose with others, he would follow her about all day, telling her stories, making her many things from bits of wood and of string, amusing her in a thousand different ways. In all the world there seemed to be no one for whom he cared as he did for this girl.

The earliest flowers of the spring, the first snipe in the marsh, the soonest ripened fruit of the muscadine, were always hers, for Jean, little Jean Le Bossu, knew the woods and all that was within them as did no one in all that country.

No one knew where the best cherries grew as did Jean; no one knew where the big French ducks and the little teals dived and swam in the early morning as did Jean, and who but Jean could tell where the biggest fish in the bayou lay, safe and snug in the cool black

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water beneath the live oaks? Who knew what the great trees said when the strong wind moved them into voice; who knew of what the tall grasses of the marsh whispered when the salt winds murmured through their greenness; who knew the stories that the smoothly flowing waters of the bayou told as they made their way noiselessly toward the sea; who knew all these things but Jean, little Jean Le Bossu?

And all these things he told the girl, showing her many secrets of the woods, and she in her turn loved him dearly and thought that in all the world there was no one like Jean, her Jean, with his face of an angel and his body of a demon.

And so Jean rode on through the shadows of the forest until he saw a spot of white coming down the road toward him. Stopping his pony he climbed down to the ground and waited for the girl to come up to him, his face glowing with that greatest of all pleasures, the pleasure of anticipation.

Near him, at one side of the road, lying like a great jewel in the heart of the forest, was a little pond, its blue bosom covered with dead and withered water lilies that rustled softly when the wind passed among them. Standing high amid the withered lilies, their round, heavy seed pods upturned to the sun, their brown, wrinkled stems cracked and peeling, were the *graine-à-volée*, a bare, tattered memory of their former life and sweetness.

The little hunchback, leaving his pony to browse along the roadside, went over to the pond and plucked a handful of them.

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“They may amuse Aline,” said he to himself, rattling them loudly, “and I can make her a necklace of the seeds.”

Looking down the road he saw the girl, who was now quite near, running toward him, and he waved his withered *graine-à-volée* high above his head in greeting. On she came, her head thrown back, her hands clenched at her sides, as fresh and as sweet as the salt wind that blew in from the marshes, as strong and as slim as the young oaks of the forest, as fair and as beautiful as the glorious day that was dying about her.

She was a small girl, straight and slender, with tiny well-shaped hands and feet that were the marvel of those who knew her. Her hair was brown, the dark, glossy brown of the dead oak leaves beneath her feet, gleaming with threads of gold where the sunlight fell upon it, and her eyes were the deep blue of the wild iris. Large and clear they were, and filled with a simple faith and gentle trustfulness in all things, yet having about them a look of shyness, the shyness of the woods which is born of life among the wild things that hide there. She was tanned and brown from her life in the open, and as she stood bareheaded and panting before the little hunchback, her hair blown in feathery wisps across her face, her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkling, she seemed some fairy creature of the woods, some sylvan nymph, who would vanish in a moment among the great trees and be gone forever.

“Jean, Jean,” she cried in French, “how glad I am to see you. I was afraid that you would not meet me, as you always do, and the walk is so long when I am

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alone. But I have been alone almost the whole way, as it is. Why were you so late, Jean?"

The little man caught his pony and lifted her into the saddle before he answered. "I went to Landry last night," said he, as he walked beside the slowly moving animal. "I was there until morning, and I could not sleep, for I missed the woods, and so when I closed my eyes in the cabin to-day my sleep was like that of the great black bear, who hides himself away in the winter."

The girl smiled. "I see," said she. "My poor Jean, no wonder you missed the woods, when you love them so. But what is that you have in your hand? It is the *graine-à-volée*, is it not?"

"Yes," replied Jean, "it is the *graine-à-volée*, the flower of Angele of Anse Le Vert."

The girl clapped her hands and dropped the bridle, which in no ways disconcerted the stolid pony. "Oh, Jean," cried she, "it is a story, is it not? Do tell it to me, I want so much to hear it."

"I had not meant to tell you a story," replied the little man. "I took the *graine-à-volée* so that I could make you a necklace from its seeds, but if you wish me to tell you the story, I will do so. I will tell you before I begin, though, that it is a very sad one."

"I am sorry that it is sad," replied the girl, whose heart was very tender, "but tell me, Jean, tell me the story."

The little man turned the seed pods over in his hands, caressing them with his long fingers. "Poor Angele," said he. "You must know, Aline, that all of what I

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am going to tell you happened many years ago at Anse Le Vert, and that in those days there were no *graine-à-volée*."

"No *graine-à-volée!*" exclaimed the girl in great surprise.

"No," said Jean, "there were none in those days. The story was told me by a very old man, and he said that at that time he had never seen one.

"You must know that this Angele was a very beautiful girl about your own age, and that she lived with her father and mother in a little house at Anse Le Vert. You must also know that she was French—Cajun—like ourselves.

"Now this pretty Angele had many sweethearts, and there was not a man in all that country who would not have given his life to marry her, but she would have none of them. She knew of the kind of man that she wished to marry, but she could not find him at Anse Le Vert, so she dreamed of him for a long while and prayed that some day he might come to her."

"And did he come, Jean, did he come?" asked the girl breathlessly.

"Yes," answered the little man, "he came as you shall see. You must know that near the place where this Angele lived there was a great house with many *arpents* of land about it, and that for many years this house had been closed and empty.

"Now, one day it was opened, and it was told at Anse Le Vert that a rich man had bought it, and would live there with his son and with a girl who was his cousin. In one corner of the land that lay about this

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big house there was a great *coulée*, and in this *coulée* there were many fish, so many that Angele would often go there to catch them, for she was very poor and sometimes there would be nothing to eat in the little home where she lived.

“Now one day when she was fishing in the *coulée* she heard some one behind her, and turning round she saw a young man. As soon as she saw him, she knew that he was the one that she had dreamed of, and this young man thought that he had never seen so beautiful a girl as Angele.”

“And did the young man love this Angele?” asked the girl eagerly.

“Yes,” replied Le Bossu, “that is just what he did. And now you must know that this young man was the son of the rich one, who owned the big house, and that he came from a great city far away. All through the summer and all through the autumn did this young man meet Angele at the *coulée*, and the fish swam about in peace and were happy, for she caught them no more.

“The people at Anse Le Vert now told it about that the young man would marry the girl at the great house that winter, but to this Angele paid no heed, for she had found the lover of her dreams, and she was very happy. And did not this young man tell her each day that he loved her? What more could she wish?”

“And now the days grew colder, and these two would often find the big wild ducks diving in the *coulée*, which you know is a sign that the winter has come. And now there came a day on which it was said at

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Anse Le Vert that this young man would marry the girl at the great house, but the pretty Angele shook her head and smiled, for did she not know?

“All through the morning she went about her little home singing, and when the evening came she took her line and went out to the *coulée*, hurrying along that she might see her lover the sooner and laugh with him at what was said at Anse Le Vert.

“For a long time she waited, plucking the grass at the water’s edge and singing, wondering why her lover did not come, fearful lest some harm had befallen him. And now the sun went down, the water of the *coulée* grew black and the pretty Angele ceased her singing, while her heart grew cold with fear, as cold as the wind that blew against her from the north.

“Across the fields she could see the great house, blazing with lights from every window, and as she looked her heart grew colder still, for any one could have seen that there was a celebration going on at the big place before her.

“And so this Angele started across the fields toward the great house, to see if what was said at Anse Le Vert was so, and as she went she prayed to God to give her back her lover, and the pain in her heart grew greater and greater at every step.

“Now, when she came to her lover’s house she found a great crowd of people about it, and to one of them she spoke, asking why there was a celebration.

“‘The young master marries his cousin to-night,’ answered the man to whom she spoke.

“So the poor Angele went away across the fields

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toward her home, and many times did she fall to the ground as she stumbled across the furrows, but never a sound did she make, never a tear did she shed, for her heart was broken.

“When she came to the *coulée* she did not pass around it as she had done on her way to the great house, but she stepped down into the cold black water and went out toward the middle. And so she went on until she came to that part of the *coulée* where the water was very deep, and there she sank down and down to the bottom, and nobody saw her go but the little stars way up in the heavens above her.

“So that is the way that Angele of Anse Le Vert died, and may the good God have mercy on her soul.”

The little man walked on in silence for a moment, his hand upon the pony's mane.

“And the *graine-à-volée*, Jean,” said the girl softly, “what of them?”

“Ah,” replied Le Bossu, “that is the strange part of the story. The days went on, the cold winter passed away, the beautiful spring came again, and in that *coulée* at Anse Le Vert, where there had never before been a flower, a great green stem thrust itself out into the sunlight. Now the people wondered much at this, and while they wondered this green stem brought forth a bud that grew and grew, and then unfurled itself into a great golden blossom that was the marvel of all that country.

“And now you must know that when the young man saw the flower his eyes were filled with tears and he

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cried, 'That is the flower of Angele, the one I loved. It springs from her as a memory of our happy days and haunts me with my cruelty to her,' and before the winter came again he was dead also, and the *coulée* was covered with *graine-à-volée*, as it is covered with them to-day."

The little man ceased speaking, and he and the girl went on in silence until they came in sight of the clearing.

"Thank you for telling me the story, Jean," said Aline, whose eyes were wet with tears, "it is a pretty one, but it is very sad."

"Yes," answered Jean as he stopped before the little house, "it is very sad, but that is the story of Angele of Anse Le Vert. Now I must be going home, for it is late."

The old man came out of the house as the hunchback was scrambling onto his pony.

"So you are here at last, Aline," said he. "I have something for you that Numa left behind him."

The girl took the package that he gave her and tore off its wrappings. Jean leaned forward in his saddle and looked eagerly. Aline drew out the tarnished brooch and held it in the dying sunlight.

"It is pretty, but I would not care to wear it," said she simply. "I do not know why, but I would not care to wear it."

The little man laughed and turned his horse.

"But my *graine-à-volée*," cried Aline. "You are not going without giving them to me?"

"I thought that you had forgotten about them after

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seeing your pretty present," said Le Bossu as he handed them to her.

* * * * *

The sun set, the stars came out, the birds of the forest were still, for the beautiful day was gone. In the little cabin the old man sat nodding drowsily before the fire, where the girl bent softly over him and kissed him before she went to her tiny room to sleep.

The old man awakened, bent down to stir the dying embers, when his eye was caught by something which shone dully among the ashes of the hearth. Picking it up he wiped it upon his coat and gazed at it thoughtfully. It was the gaudy brooch of Numa's choosing, lying where it had fallen from the shelf above the open fire.

The old man smiled triumphantly as he put it back again. "So much for you, Numa," he muttered.

Going over to the little room he peeped through the half-open door, his wrinkled face calm and peaceful. Inside the girl was placing something upon the shelf above her bed, the little shelf which held her crucifix. Suddenly she stood back, and the watcher saw what she had placed there. It was the *graine-à-volée*.

The old man smiled at the girl as he drew back from the little room, for he, too, knew the legend. "Poor Angele of Anse Le Vert," he heard her whisper as he softly closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER VI

TOM BAYNE OF SUNNYSIDE

DOWN in the fields at Belrive rode Carey Gordon, a look of great pleasure on his face as he gazed about him. Before him the land stretched away, a great brown sea of fertile, fragrant earth, a troubled sea of long, even furrows that seemed to roll and break in the misty haze that hung above them as do the waves of the ocean.

Far away on the smoky horizon lay the prairies, enclosing the fields in their setting of green, dotted with little ponds that shone and sparkled in the waning sunlight and mirrored the blue sky above them amid their tiny waves, as though they would bring the glories of the heavens to earth that man thus seeing them so near might rejoice in their beauty the more.

Across the brown furrows of the field ran the levees, crossing and cutting and dividing the land into squares, until it looked like a huge checkerboard, a great earthen board fruitful and productive, upon which in the months to come the game of life, of existence, would be played; played by living, breathing men, to whom the outcome of the game would be all or nothing.

Carey sat upon his horse and looked about him with

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a satisfied smile, and well might he do so, for his fall plowing, that was to make the land more rich, more yielding and more ready to receive its offering of golden yellow seed, was done, and the torn, broken earth would now be left to rest and heal its many wounds.

“ Well, Nick,” said he exultingly to his overseer who rode behind him, “ we are all finished for the present, aren’t we? ”

Nicholas Wilson nodded his head. “ It sure looks like it,” he replied, but in his answer there was none of the satisfaction that had sounded so clearly in the question of his companion.

Carey turned upon him and gazed at him curiously, an amused look upon his face.

“ Do you know, Nick,” said he, “ I believe that you are sorry we have finished plowing? ”

Wilson looked at him quizzically for a moment. “ I’ll tell you, Mr. Gordon,” he answered, “ I feel about this plowin’ as Bug Smith did when he licked Bill Thompson.”

“ And how was that? ” asked Carey, who knew that a story was forthcoming and was anxious to hear it, as Wilson’s stories were generally good ones.

“ Well,” said Wilson, “ I’ll tell you as we go back to the stables. You see, this here Bug Smith lived up in Butler County, Nebrasky, and if he ever done anything but live, nobody ever caught him at it, for he didn’t have no very great reputation for bein’ industrious. How he come to be called Bug I don’t know. Some people said that they called him that ’cause about

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the only thing bugs was good for was for killin' purposes, and some people said that he was born durin' harvest and his paw didn't have time to call him nawthing else, but then Bug never would admit that what they said was so, and even if he had no one would 'a' believed him, 'cause he was the biggest liar in the State of Nebrasky.

"About all that this here Bug Smith did was to worry about Bill Thompson, and if you can call worryin' workin', why, Bug used to make watches at night. Bill Thompson was a scrapper, and he was the bully of Butler County, and Bill said that if there was anybody that thought he could lick him he would sure be glad to show him that he was wrong.

"So this is what was botherin' Bug Smith, 'cause Bug was a pretty good man himself and he could lick pretty near anybody he wanted to in Butler County, but he didn't feel so sure about lickin' Bill, and he couldn't get up nerve enough to fight him.

"Well, one day he says somethin' about Bill, and Bill comes round to his shack to see him about it. Bill talks and cusses round for a while till Bug sees that he's got to fight, so he gets up his nerve and swarms into him, and for a while there hain't nawthing much around the shack but dust and profanity.

"After a little while things gets quieter and Bug's surprised to see he's got Bill licked. Both of 'em's beat up pretty bad and they hain't got enough clothes between 'em to make a necktie out of, but Bill's licked, and he knows it.

"'Well,' says he, speakin' kind of funny, 'cause he's

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lost considerable teeth. 'Well,' says he, 'I guess you're pretty proud now, hain't you?'

"Bug don't say nawthing, but he just stands there lookin' kind of sad and sour, and he looks so mighty disappointed that he makes Bill mad again.

"'Good God!' says Bill, 'hain't you satisfied? You don't want to kill me, do you?'

"'No,' says Bug mighty sorrowful, 'it hain't that, but I'm damned sorry I licked you.'

"'What,' says Bill, 'you're sorry you licked *me*?'

"'Yes,' says Bug, 'I hain't got nawthing to worry about now,' and that's the way I feel about that plowin', Mr. Gordon."

"Well," said Carey, after he had laughed heartily at the overseer's story, "I'm afraid that I'm not like you. I'm glad to have a rest. If you want something to worry about, Nick, you can start worrying about planting any time that you get ready."

"No," replied Wilson, as he leaned from his saddle to unlatch the gate of the stable lot, "I hain't investin' none of my time lookin' for trouble. People who does that generally draw about two hundred per cent. on their investment."

"Right," answered Carey, "I mean to make the time from now to planting one long holiday, and I'm going to start in before sunrise to-morrow morning with a snipe hunt on the marsh. Tom Bayne is going with me, so I guess if I hurry home I will about catch him as he comes in"; and putting spurs to his horse he loped away to the big house, where he found Bayne just dismounting at the front porch.

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Tom Bayne was a young man, tall and nice looking, with the most sunny disposition imaginable.

It made no difference what ill-luck or trouble befell him, he was always cheerful, and his power of imparting this cheerfulness to others made him beloved and admired by all who knew him. He had lived all his life at Sunnyside, his father's plantation, and this plantation being not very far from Belrive, he had known the Gordons from childhood.

His first recollections went back to the days when he had played with Carey Gordon, and he still felt a touch of the reverence and awe that he had felt in those days for the older boy. And then there was Marjorie also. With her he had been more at his ease, being the elder, and the days that they had spent together, playing from dawn to dark with the tireless energy of childhood, were the happiest memories of his life.

In those times he had called her his sweetheart and had boasted that he would marry her when he grew to be a man, and would live with her forever on an enchanted isle, where the only food would be cakes and candy.

Now that he was a man, Tom Bayne thought of those days, and he envied the boy that he had been, for he still wished to marry Marjorie Gordon, and he could not boast of it to her, nor could he even call her sweetheart, for he was shy and very bashful in the time of his maturity. For months he had sworn that he would speak to her, and for months had his courage forsaken him. He could talk to her for hours, for long, happy hours, of the old days, but once let him try to

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tell what was in his heart, and he was dumb and silent and hated himself for the rest of the day.

Swinging down from his horse upon the broad, front steps, he swore that he would go to her at once and tell her everything. But Carey, suddenly riding up, rudely interrupted his reverie by greeting him boisterously and hurrying him off to his room, where he declared they must instantly go and dress, if they would be in time for dinner.

Tom went upstairs with him reluctantly, hoping to catch a glimpse of Marjorie, hating to waste what he considered precious time in talking to Carey, with whom he would be all of the next day. When he finally entered the dining room his greeting to those within it was somewhat incoherent, for Marjorie, a vision of beauty in a dress of darkest crimson, had smiled at him so sweetly when he had shaken hands with her that she had left him all but speechless.

Once seated at the table, however, he regained his composure, and was soon answering the many questions that were asked him about himself and the family at Sunnyside. He had been placed next to Marjorie, and he felt that could he but go on forever sitting next to the glorious creature beside him he would ask for nothing more and would die content.

The talk at the table now turned to the hunt on the morrow, and Tom was busy telling of dogs and guns and where to shoot, when suddenly it drifted into a discussion of Miss Lawrence's many charms, upon which subject he became strangely silent. And it was evident that Marjorie, noticing his reticence, approved

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of it heartily, but she could not resist the temptation of teasing him a little, which was her way of showing her appreciation.

“Julia will be lucky in having two such nice beaux as Carey and yourself,” said she demurely, “and I am especially obliged to you, Tom, for paying so much interest to her arrival.”

“Which interest,” observed Aunt Betty drily, “will cause no withdrawal of the principal should you suddenly cease paying it.”

To this Marjorie answered nothing, but blushed so furiously and looked so confused and pretty that Tom could do nothing but gaze at her in wide-eyed admiration, utterly regardless of the food before him.

“I am afraid,” continued Aunt Betty, who had been watching him closely, “that Tom is in love, as he has hardly eaten anything. I know that it is not the fault of the dinner, Tom, for I ordered it myself.”

To this Tom made a stammering reply about a late lunch, and became so exceedingly confused and nervous that Aunt Betty took compassion on him and told him that it was eminently proper that he should be in love, and a great many other things which she thought would put him at his ease, with the result that in a few moments he was in a state closely bordering upon insanity.

It was a relief to him when, the dinner over, he and Carey sat at the table smoking their cigarettes; yet, when a little later Carey arose, Tom followed him with alacrity, for in the parlor was his divinity, and he

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already felt that he had been away from her for a very long time.

The parlor at Belrive, a great high-ceiled room, lighted by huge French windows, had been changed but little since its palmy days before the war. Hanging upon its walls were the same family portraits that had been the admiration of those who had filled the great house in the years gone by. The same chairs stood upon its floors that had held the fairy form of many a belle of bygone days, and the old sofa that hid so snugly in the corner by the open fire could have told many a tale of ancient love and passion. It was a room of faded memories and pleasant thoughts, a room where love and romance filled one's brain and made one dream of olden days, of beaux and belles and of wooing.

No sooner did Carey enter the door than he was captured at once by Aunt Betty, who led him away to a table where a pack of cards and a cribbage board were set forth.

"I am afraid that I am very rude," said the little old lady as she began shuffling the cards, "but I really do not think that I could sleep at night if I missed my game of cribbage." And from that time on she was silent, save for occasional remarks which she made about the game. At times these remarks were unduly violent.

Near the open fire sat Mrs. Gordon, a bit of fancy work in her lap, and seated upon a little stool at her feet was Marjorie, the firelight playing about the ruddy glory of her hair, until it shone like molten gold.

Tom Bayne drew up a chair to the fireside and seated

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himself. "I am going to ask you to let me stay here," said he, "for Carey has driven me away, and if you turn me out I am friendless."

Mrs. Gordon smiled and looked at him affectionately. She was very fond of him, and she thought that in all the world there was no nicer fellow than Tom Bayne.

"You are very welcome, Tom," said she, "but I am afraid that Marjorie will have to entertain you, for I am going to my room to write some letters. I am sure that you will excuse me."

Would he excuse her? Would he be sorry at being left alone with Marjorie? Tom Bayne arose instantly, and stood making the most desperate efforts to appear disappointed, as Mrs. Gordon gathered up her sewing, and with a good-night kiss from her daughter departed.

How Tom envied her that kiss. What would he not have given for it, and yet Mrs. Gordon received it with the utmost composure imaginable. He decided that she lacked appreciation as he resumed his seat again.

Meanwhile Marjorie had taken possession of her mother's armchair and was resting her feet upon the little stool from which she had just arisen.

"Do you know, Tom," said she, "it's awful to be so small. Why, if a chair is the least bit high my feet won't touch the floor."

Tom objected to what she said. He did not think that it was awful to be so small. He liked small people. He wished that he was small himself.

Marjorie laughed at him. "I do believe, Tom," said she, "that you are trying to pay me a compliment

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—why, you are getting to be quite a beau. Who is the lucky girl? Won't you tell me?"

Tom instantly became very savage. He declared that there wasn't any lucky girl, that he was not paying any compliments, but was simply telling her the truth.

Marjorie laughed at him the more and teased him unmercifully. She asked him if it were not Kate, or Jane, or Ethel, or one of a dozen other girls that they knew, while Tom denounced each one fiercely, declaring that he would not marry her if she were the only woman on earth.

"And just think, Tom," she continued, "Julia Lawrence will be here soon, and you can fall in love with her. You don't know what a beauty she is, and you ought to hear her play and sing. I am sure that you will lose your heart the first day that you meet her."

Tom swore that he would under no consideration fall in love with Miss Lawrence. He felt sure that he could never love her.

"Then, Tom," said Marjorie, "I give you up. I can't seem to find a girl that suits your lordship. What sort of a girl do you want anyway?"

Tom looked at her as she lay back in the big chair, with the shadows of the firelight dancing across her pretty face, and his heart gave a great throb. Summoning all his courage he leaned over her and spoke, his voice low and earnest.

"The sort of a girl that I want," said he, "is an angel, and her name is——"

"Tom," called Carey from the card table, "the

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game is over, and let's go to bed. We are going to get up very early in the morning, you know."

Tom arose without a word, and as a vent for his ill-humor fiercely kicked one of the logs in the fire.

"Good night, Margey," said he sullenly as he turned to go.

"But you haven't told me the girl's name," whispered Marjorie, an amused smile upon her face.

Tom turned to her again, but the eyes of Aunt Betty and of Carey were upon him, and his courage of a moment before had vanished.

"You had better ask Carey what her name is," said he angrily. "It was his fault that I didn't tell you."

For a long time after he had gone Marjorie sat before the fire, thinking of what he had said. "Poor Tom," said she to herself, as she finally rose from the big chair. "How stupid he is. Why, I knew who the girl was before he did, and he can't even see that she cares for him."

CHAPTER VII

A FAIRY AND A GOBLIN

THE first faint streaks of dawn were beginning to tinge the eastern sky when Carey and his companion drove up to the spot which they had chosen for their hunting. Through the heavy fog of the morning they could see the marsh, a great muddy flat, covered with grass and water, its long even stretch unbroken, save by a dark mass of trees that pushed their way into its level bareness.

On one side the Grand Woods closed it in, rising against the horizon like some great wall. On the other as far as the eye could see was the brown marsh grass, stiff and straight and silent, stretching, it seemed, to the end of the world.

“Now, Tom,” said Carey, “you take the dogs and hunt on this side of that point of trees. I know that you will find snipe there. I’m going to cut straight across the point and shoot, for I’ve never been there and I want to see how it is. We’ll meet here at three o’clock”; and with a little shiver at the coldness of the morning he started off to the point of woods.

It was very hard walking, for the marsh was full of water, and as he went along he frequently sank above his knees. Finally he reached the point of woods and

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the higher land, and after stopping for a while to rest himself, he crossed the narrow strip before him and came out upon the open marsh again. It was very like the one he had just left, save that between it and the point of trees there ran a stream, a small brown stream flowing between low banks of soft black mud.

Carey stood upon the bank of this stream and frowned in a very angry way. On the other side of it lay the marsh with its many hidden snipe, distant from him but a few yards, yet impossible for him to reach, for the stream was too wide for him to be able to jump across it, and the cold wind that blew in from the sea marsh changed his determination to wade to the other side.

After vainly trying to think of some way in which to overcome this obstacle, he went back to the strip of trees and started in toward the Grand Woods in a very bad humor. "I will see if this stream doesn't grow smaller in the woods, or if I can't find a fallen tree to cross by," he muttered angrily as he went along.

And so he went into the silent depths of the Grand Woods, and the farther he went the wider grew the stream, until he finally stood upon the banks of a little river, fringed with the long green leaves of the wild iris and almost hidden from sight by the thickly growing trees that clustered about it. Its water now was blue and clear, and in its placid depths Carey could see pictured the vast panorama of the forest, with its swaying limbs and softly rustling leaves.

Along the sides of the little river grew the blackberry bushes, with their thorny mass of branches, now dry

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and brown, waiting for the gentle touch of spring to clothe them with their white and green. Along the little river hung the great muscadine vines, strong and brown and twining like great serpents, swaying softly in the wind, waiting like all else in the woods for the spring, the generous spring, that would give them their harvest of dark, glossy fruit.

Carey gazed about him in admiration, the quiet beauty of this tiny river driving away his bad humor. "This is like the places that I used to read about in the fairy tales," said he as he flung himself upon the ground. "All that is needed to make it complete is a fairy or a goblin." And as he spoke there came to him the sound of a woman singing, the clear notes rising sweet and true amid the silence of the forest.

Carey sprang to his feet and gazed curiously down the little river, but just below him it made a sudden bend, and he could see nothing. "Now I wonder who that is?" he asked himself. "Perhaps it is my fairy," and as he stood there looking about him a pirogue shot suddenly around the bend and came swiftly toward him.

It was an old pirogue, battered and worn, hewn from a single log, and in its stern, paddling with long, even strokes was a girl, her head thrown back as she sang her simple song that fell so sweetly on the woodland air.

On she came, her slender body swaying with the motion of the paddle, her brown hair blowing about her face in a cloud, her blue eyes gleaming with the joy of the forest, the sharp prow of her pirogue throwing back the water on either side in little waves that danced and sparkled in the sunlight. The blue sky above her,

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the warm sunlight that caressed her rosy cheek, the fresh salt wind that tossed her silken hair, the little waves of the river that lapped softly against the sides of the pirogue, even the great trees themselves seemed brighter and stronger and more beautiful as she passed along.

Carey gazed at her in astonishment, until the girl, catching sight of him, stopped her pirogue and sat for a moment with her paddle poised above the water, as though undecided whether to wait for him to speak or to keep upon her way. For a moment the two were motionless, gazing at each other in silence, and then the girl thrust her paddle into the water again.

“Wait, wait,” called Carey in French as the pirogue glided away. “I wish to cross.”

The girl turned her frail craft and came paddling back to him again.

“Did you not say that you wished to cross, *M’sieu?*” she asked in English as she grounded her pirogue gently at his feet.

Her eyes met his squarely, trustingly, but in them he saw a touch of shyness that made them the more perfect. Carey still gazed at her in speechless amazement, and found her, now that he saw her closely, more beautiful than she had appeared when upon the water.

“Did you not say that you wished to cross, *M’sieu?*” asked the girl again.

“Yes, yes,” said Carey, coming back to himself. “I do want to cross. Excuse my staring at you. I thought at first that you were a fairy.”

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The girl shook her pretty head. "No, no," said she, "I am no fairy. I am only Aline, *M'sieu*."

"Aline," smiled Carey, "Aline? That is a very pretty name for a very pretty girl."

The girl laughed at this, her face lighting up with pleasure. "So you think that I am pretty, *M'sieu*?" she cried. "You really think so? Then I am glad. Jean tells me that I am pretty, but my poor Jean would say so if I were very ugly, for he loves me very much, *M'sieu*."

Carey looked at her quickly. "What vanity," he thought, but the girl faced him squarely with naught but a childish joy in her blue eyes, and he smiled at her innocence. "And so you like people to think that you are pretty?" he asked.

The girl nodded and stretched her arm before her. "Oh, yes, *M'sieu*," said she, "I do care for people to think that I am pretty. See the bayou there before you in the woods, is it not pretty? Do you not love to see it? You are happy when you look at it, but if it were ugly, *M'sieu*? Then you would turn away and hate it. And if I were ugly, *M'sieu*, you would turn away and hate me, and I do not wish to be hated. God has made us love that which is pretty, and if you find me so, I am happy."

And now that the girl had finished speaking, she blushed and hung her pretty head at having said so much, and Carey as he looked at her thought her more beautiful than ever. "Was there ever any one so naïve?" said he to himself.

The girl now raised her head and pointed to the

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pirogue. "I will take you across if you wish, *M'sieu*," she said shyly.

"I will go in a moment," answered Carey, "but first, if you do not mind, I would like to ask you a few questions."

"*M'sieu* has but to ask," said the girl.

"Well, then, what is the name of this bayou?" asked Carey, glad of an excuse for conversation. "And can you tell me where it goes to?"

"This is Bayou des Arbres," answered the girl, "and it runs into the big lake in the Grand Woods. You will find that it is very narrow in the marsh."

"So I have found it, and yet it is a little too wide to cross," said Carey laughing. "And now will you tell me where you learned to speak such pretty English?"

The girl's face clouded for a moment. "My father taught me, *M'sieu*," she answered slowly, and I have never forgotten."

"And your father's name is—" began Carey.

"Do not ask me, *M'sieu*," cried the girl quickly, her blue eyes full of sorrow. "My father died a long time ago, and I do not know. It is tangled and twisted, like the love vines are in the summer, and it makes me sad when I think of it. Some day it will all come straight, my uncle says so, but now I do not know. My name is Aline, *M'sieu*, that is all. Some call me Aline of the Grand Woods, but again that is all."

The girl ceased speaking and drew her little hand across her face, for there were tears in her eyes.

Carey turned to her and spoke softly. "I am sorry,

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Aline," said he. "I did not mean to make you sad. Will you forgive me?"

The girl drew her hand away and showed him a smiling, tear-stained face. "It is all over now, *M'sieu*," she answered brightly. "I have nothing to forgive. It is I who should ask you to forgive me. We who live in the woods are not like other people. We are strange creatures, *M'sieu*, and therefore you must not mind our ways."

"And do you live in these great woods?" asked Carey.

"Yes, *M'sieu*," replied the girl, "I live here with my Uncle Telesse."

"Telesse," cried Carey. "Ah, I see it now. He is the old man whom I have sent word to come to my plantation to live and you are the girl, the beautiful girl, that the hunter told me about."

"And," said the girl, "you are *M'sieu* Gordon, *M'sieu* Carey Gordon, who used to ride a pony many years ago when you were a little boy."

For a moment the two were silent, thinking of their strange meeting, and then Carey spoke to the girl again.

"And is your uncle coming to Belrive?" he asked.

"Yes, *M'sieu*," replied the girl. "He will ride to see you to-morrow and will ask you to send a cart so that we may move in time for the planting. He does not wish to leave the woods, but he will go that I may be near the school at Landry. And I will try so hard to learn, *M'sieu*, I wish so much to learn. It will make me so happy."

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The girl ceased speaking, her pretty face bright with joy.

“And have you ever been taught at school?” asked Carey.

The girl shook her head. “No, *M’sieu*,” answered she, “but long ago my father used to teach me, and I have tried to teach myself. Wait a moment and I will show you.”

Going to her pirogue she brought forth a battered book from beneath the seat and handed it to him. It was an old primer, its cover worn almost away, its pages dog-eared and torn and black from much turning.

Carey laid back the worn covers as tenderly as though it were a living thing. “And you have kept this little book all these years, and have tried to teach yourself from it?” he asked softly.

“Yes, *M’sieu*,” replied the girl, “and I have had so much pleasure in trying to learn. I take my book everywhere, for I love it very dearly.”

Carey looked out upon the forest before him and frowned as he thought of the life of this girl. “Tell your uncle,” said he, “that I will move him to Belrive whenever he wishes to go. Tell him to come to me to-morrow, and when you come to Belrive, if you cannot buy the books for the school let me know, and I will get them for you.”

“Thank you, *M’sieu*,” cried the girl, “you are very kind, but I fear that the books will cost a great deal of money.”

Carey laughed. “Oh, that’s all right,” said he. “I will get them for you anyhow, and in payment for them

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I am going to ask you to cross me over, and to tell me if, when I am on the other side, I can get back again."

"Yes," answered the girl as she seated herself in the pirogue, and took up the paddle. "You will find that the bayou is very narrow deep in the marsh, so narrow that you will be able to jump across it."

The journey across the little bayou was accomplished in a moment, and when the girl had grounded her pirogue in the soft mud on the other side Carey thanked her and jumped out among the iris plants, crushing their tall, straight leaves into the muddy water. The girl sat in the pirogue and watched him closely as he swung his gun upon his shoulder and started away.

Suddenly he stopped and came back to the bayou's edge.

"Do you know," said he, "I have been wondering how you knew that I used to ride a pony. He has been dead for years, poor fellow. I had forgotten him myself."

"I have met you once before, *M'sieu*," answered the girl, "and you were on the pony. I have not forgotten it."

"Where did you meet me? When was it?" asked Carey.

The girl shook her head and smiled. "It was a long time ago, *M'sieu*," said she, "and you will not remember. You have forgotten it as you did the pony. Besides, I see Jean coming for me and I must go to him. He has been fishing and has waited a long time for me to take him to the lake. *Adieu, M'sieu*, and thank

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you for the promise of the books. I know that I shall be happy at Belrive with such a kind master."

Carey watched her as the pirogue glided away, and as he gazed after it the freshness and the beauty of the forest seemed to go with her. Suddenly he caught sight of Le Bossu at the bend of the bayou, and an amused smile overspread his features.

"The goblin," said he as he walked away. "I had better hurry and leave this enchanted forest before I am called upon to fight a dragon."

CHAPTER VIII

AUNT BETTY DRIVES OUT

THE sun shone warm and bright about Belrive, and the air was touched with the first faint traces of the approaching spring. In the garden the flowers and plants put forth their tender shoots of green, which, bursting from the confines of dead and withered wood, raised their tiny heads thankfully to the blue sky above, that seemed to glow with warmer, softer hues in welcome of them.

Down in the quarters the doors were thrown wide, and the children rolling about in the dusty road raised their voices in glad outcry at the promise of warmth and comfort, joining their shrill chatter to the swelling chorus of the birds, who heralded the fast-approaching spring and sang in the same sweet tones the requiem of the dead and departed winter.

All along the bayou there was a burst of misty green, and the very water itself seemed to splash and sparkle in pure gladness at the caress of the strong, warm sunlight, and to invite one to leave the hot, dusty earth to find rest and comfort in the coolness of its rippling depths.

At the big house the soft breezes blew joyously through the open windows and filled the great rooms

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with the strong, sweet odors of the budding fields and forests.

In the dining room Aunt Betty, having finished her breakfast, carefully folded her napkin, and sat for a moment gazing out of the window before her.

"I think," said she, "that the winter is over, and I also think that I shall go driving this morning."

Carey pushed back his chair from the table and arose. "All right, Aunt Betty," said he, "I will order your phaeton, and I will also order Nick to begin preparations for planting immediately. I have only needed this to convince me that the cold weather is over."

Aunt Betty smiled and nodded her head approvingly. "You can begin safely whenever you wish," said she.

It had long been her custom to go out in her phaeton on what she considered the first spring day of the year, and so successful had she been in choosing that day that she was now considered infallible. In all the country about Belrive the appearance of Aunt Betty and her phaeton was the signal that the winter was over and the comforting assurance that the planter could plant his crop, be it what it might, without fear of cold or frost.

She never drove in the winter, as she hated the cold, and her annual spring excursion was always a thing of great joy and pride to her, although she always spent a week or two in terror afterwards, fearing that a norther, appearing unexpectedly, would spoil the crops of those who had trusted in her, and ruin forever her reputation as a weather prophet.

Therefore it was that a half-hour later she descended

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the stairs, with the stern dignity of a judge, gazing knowingly through a pair of heavy black eyeglasses, which she put on only for this occasion. She would liked to have smiled, as she was in a very good humor, but the importance of her mission forbade it, and the consequences of a norther coming suddenly to her, she walked out upon the gallery in the most majestic manner imaginable.

Mrs. Gordon and Marjorie, who were waiting there for her, received her in silence, as they always did upon this occasion, and Aunt Betty, after having kissed them gravely, after the manner of a person who is going upon a long, dangerous journey, descended the steps and was assisted into the phaeton by Carey.

Having arranged herself comfortably, she slapped the reins upon the brown pony's back. "I shall be back for lunch," she announced as the phaeton moved off, and the true herald of the spring went upon her way amid a cheerful chorus of good-bys from the gallery.

And so Aunt Betty drove away and went out on the brown, dusty road toward Landry, bringing with her the promise of the spring to all those who saw her, and many were the tenants who went to examine carefully their store of seed when she had passed. On she went, sitting very straight in her phaeton, slapping the lazy pony vigorously with the reins, until she came to the store of Monsieur Landry, and there she stopped and called for some one to come out to her.

Monsieur Landry came out himself, his face wreathed in smiles. "Well, well, Miss Betty, we have looked for you for some time," he cried as he came

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hurrying down the steps of his porch. "And the winter, it is over now, is it not? We will all commence to plant, I am sure."

Aunt Betty permitted herself a smile, just the faintest trace of a smile, and surveyed the storekeeper through the black eyeglasses in a very knowing way. "It is my opinion that the winter is over, Monsieur Landry," said she, "but then you know nothing is certain."

"Except yourself, Miss Betty," interrupted Monsieur Landry gallantly.

Again Aunt Betty smiled, this time a good, honest smile that could not be repressed. "Thank you," said she. "I hope that you are right. And how are politics, Monsieur Landry?"

Monsieur Landry looked very wise and shook his head in a most judicial manner before replying. "Politics are all mixed up," he slowly answered. "It is hard to find out much about them, but of one thing I am certain, and that is that I shall support Paul Hebert for sheriff."

As Monsieur Landry finished speaking he looked at Aunt Betty in a way that plainly said, "You know as well as I do that if I support Paul Hebert he will be elected."

"I wish you and Paul Hebert all the luck in the world," said Aunt Betty, "and I will speak to Carey and ask him to help you. And now will you give me the mail, if it has come in?"

Monsieur Landry retreated into his store and returned in a moment with a bundle of letters and papers. On top of the bundle was a square, thick let-

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ter, and for a moment Aunt Betty gazed at it, an amused smile upon her face.

"I'll declare," said she, "if she is not getting letters before she gets here. She will keep you busy, Monsieur Landry, with her mail."

"And who is that?" asked the storekeeper.

"Why, Miss Lawrence, of course," answered Aunt Betty, "a young lady who is coming to visit at Belrive. She will arrive to-day, and Marjorie has gone over to Mouton to meet her."

"To be sure," said Monsieur Landry, "I had heard that she was coming, and I noticed the letter. I have heard of the name of Lawrence before, but I cannot remember when or where I heard it. We old people are always forgetful, you know."

"Nonsense," replied Aunt Betty. "You should be thankful that you are alive. I think that every year that we live over sixty is *lagniappe*. You would not care for people to find fault with the *lagniappe* that you give them at your store, would you?"

"You are right, Miss Betty," answered the storekeeper, "and I should not complain, but it is the habit of old age to do so."

"It is the habit of all ages to complain," said Aunt Betty. "My husband was the only man that I have ever known who did not do so."

Monsieur Landry was silent for a moment, perhaps in respect of the late Mr. Peters, perhaps because he thought that the reason of his not complaining was that he was not allowed to do so. Perhaps because of some other reason, but nevertheless he was silent.

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“Who is that man on the porch?” suddenly asked Aunt Betty, whose keen black eyes had been roaming among the motley throng of loungers that clustered about the front of Monsieur Landry’s store.

“Which of the men do you mean, Miss Betty?” inquired the storekeeper.

“The handsome man with the torn coat,” said Aunt Betty. “What is his name?”

Monsieur Landry snorted in disdain. “Oh!” replied he, “that is Numa Le Blanc. He is worthless, Miss Betty, absolutely worthless. A regular vagabond.”

“And yet,” said Aunt Betty smiling, “he is something of a curiosity. He tells the truth sometimes, when a lie would do him very good service. Do you know of any other vagabond who does that, Monsieur Landry?”

The storekeeper shook his head. “He is a strange creature,” answered he. “He is a wild, bad creature, never doing good, always doing harm. He drinks also, Miss Betty.”

“I know that he does,” said Aunt Betty, “for he told me himself that he did,” and while she spoke Numa came suddenly down from the store and into the road, his steps pointing toward the coffee house of old Pierre. As he passed the phaeton Aunt Betty leaned a little forward and called to him in French.

“Well, Mr. Hunter, when are you going to bring me some more birds?” she asked.

Numa stepped up to the phaeton and took off his

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hat. "I will bring you birds to-morrow, if you will buy them," said he. "I need money badly."

"To buy a present for your girl with, I suppose?" inquired Aunt Betty.

Numa shook his head. "She shall care for me without any presents," said he. "She shall care for me without anything. She shall care for me because of myself."

"That is right," said Aunt Betty approvingly. "But like all men, you have a very high opinion of yourself, Mr. Hunter."

Numa shrugged his shoulders. "Some one must think well of me," said he. "Who could be better for such a thing than myself?"

"Nobody, I am sure," replied Aunt Betty drily. "Any one else would lack the imagination necessary for such a purpose. And how is your girl?"

"She is well," answered Numa. "To-day she goes to Belrive to live."

Aunt Betty gave a little gasp and turned appealingly to Monsieur Landry, who had listened to everything that had been said with the greatest attention. "Another girl coming to Belrive!" cried she. "What do you think of that? If this keeps on, we shall have a veritable lovers' paradise. I must be going before I hear that there is still another one coming. Good-by, Mr. Hunter. Your conversation has been both startling and instructing. May you never think less of yourself. I am sure that you cannot think more. And good-by to you also, Monsieur Landry, and good luck to Paul Hebert. Sometime you must tell me all about

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him, for I am interested in your candidate. If you will just turn my horse a little I shall be obliged to you. I am going to drive toward Mouton."

Monsieur Landry took the brown pony by the bit and turned him in the direction required.

"Good-by, Miss Betty," cried he, as she drove away. "I hope that we shall see you soon again."

And so Aunt Betty went on through Landry, with its scattered stores and dwellings, and presently she came to the long line of Cherokee hedges that shut in the road to Mouton on either side. Here she laid the reins in her lap and began a careful inspection of the mail, her eyeglasses upon the seat beside her that she might see the better. Finally she came to the end of the hedges and before her lay the open country, with a long, white house standing out from the green fields about it. This house was set deep in its yard, and from its front to the gate that opened upon the road there was a broad path closed in on either side by closely growing rows of China trees.

Across the front of this house there ran a long porch, and upon this porch, his chair tilted back, his feet resting on the railing, sat a man deeply absorbed in a thick, white pamphlet. He was a short, stout man with a very red face, and as he read the pamphlet he glared at it in a most ferocious manner, as though the words that he was reading were being spoken to him.

"Light, sandy soil," he read aloud angrily. "Who ever heard of such a thing?"

At this moment happening to glance over the top of the pamphlet, he caught sight of the phaeton in which

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Aunt Betty was slowly approaching his place. Instantly his expression changed and he smiled as though very much pleased. "Well, if it isn't Miss Betty herself," he cried as he shoved back his chair from the railing and sprang to his feet. Hastily snatching up his coat, he ran down the path toward the front gate, putting it on as he went. He reached the gate just as the phaeton was passing, and rushing excitedly into the road, wildly waved the pamphlet about his head.

"Wait a moment, Miss Betty, please," he cried.

Aunt Betty pulled in the brown pony and smiled graciously. She had been fully prepared to stop at the house, and would have been very much disappointed if she had not been called upon to do so.

"And how are you, Mr. Parker?" she asked as the red-faced man came up to her, his face redder than usual from his recent exertions.

Mr. Parker leaned an arm upon the side of the phaeton, and panted a moment before replying. "I'm fine," said he, "but I'm not much on running. I'm afraid I'm getting old."

"Nonsense," exclaimed Aunt Betty. "Every one that I have met to-day is getting old. It won't be long before I shall think that I am getting old myself."

Mr. Parker shook his head. "You will never grow old, Miss Betty," said he. "God forbid that you should. And now I suppose that I can plant safely?"

"As far as I know you can," replied Aunt Betty, "but as you know we may have a norther."

"No norther would be rude enough to make its

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appearance after you had driven out, Miss Betty, I am sure," said Mr. Parker gallantly.

"Thank you, you are very complimentary," smiled Aunt Betty. "You really ought to be complimented upon your ability to make compliments and also upon the particularly fine cane crop that I am told you made last fall."

"Well," replied Mr. Parker, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, "I did make a fine crop, and again I didn't. You see, I stuck on here for years and couldn't make a thing; in fact, I lost money, so last year I hired a good overseer, and he made a fine crop. To be candid with you, he was the one that made it, and do you know there is a funny thing about it all. During the years when I tried unsuccessfully to make a crop I thought that if I could only succeed I would be the happiest man alive. Last fall, when I did make a good one, I was not half as much pleased as I thought I would be. Why, when I went out in the field and saw all that cane I hardly knew what to do with it. I suppose that I am very peculiar, but that was just the way I felt about it."

Aunt Betty eyed him thoughtfully for a moment. "My husband once knew an old darky," she said, "named Uncle Roy. He was a very poor old darky and he lived on a little patch of ground near Mouton. Now, all Uncle Roy thought about was money, and it was said that he used to pray to the Lord every night to make him rich. He also used to tell the most remarkable stories about what he would do if he had a hundred dollars.

"All of this happened when they were putting the

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railroad from New Orleans through Mouton, and one day a railroad official went to see Uncle Roy and told him that the road would have to go through his place, and that he wanted to buy it.

“So Uncle Roy saddled his pony and went over to Mouton to see a lawyer, and in the end the lawyer sold the place for two thousand dollars.

“‘Now, Uncle Roy,’ said the lawyer to him, when he had received the check, ‘just take this piece of paper over to the bank and the gentleman there will give you your money.’

“So Uncle Roy went over to the bank and handed in his check. ‘I’d like to have my money in silver, if you please, Boss,’ he said to the man at the bank.

“The man told him that he would give him as much silver money as he could, and then he started counting it out through the little gate before him. Uncle Roy watched him with his eyes almost popping out of his head, until finally he could stand it no longer, and then he called to the man to stop.

“‘Well, what’s the matter?’ he asked Uncle Roy. ‘Didn’t you say that you wanted your money in silver?’”

“‘Yassir,’ said Uncle Roy, ‘but don’t tell me, Boss, that all that money’s for me.’

“‘Why, of course it is,’ said the man, ‘and you’ve got a whole lot more coming to you. So far I’ve only counted out two hundred dollars.’

“Uncle Roy looked at him for a long time, to make sure that he was not joking, and then he shoved the money back through the little gate.

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“ ‘Here, Boss,’ said he, ‘you take all this money. I ain’t got no use for it and I might lose it. Just give me six bits, and I’m gone.’ And now,” concluded Aunt Betty, “how do you feel about your cane?”

“Just as Uncle Roy felt about his money,” said Mr. Parker laughing. “You always hit the nail on the head, Miss Betty.”

“And what about this year’s crop, Mr. Parker?” inquired Aunt Betty.

“Oh, my overseer’s attending to all that,” replied Mr. Parker. “I am busy with something else. I’m planting cantaloupes.”

“Cantaloupes!” gasped Aunt Betty.

“Why, yes,” replied Mr. Parker placidly. “I think there’s money in them. Ship them to the city in carload lots, you know, and all that sort of thing.”

“Cantaloupes!” gasped Aunt Betty again, her voice rising.

“Yes,” said Mr. Parker. “It’s all my own idea. I’ve only had one piece of bad luck, and that is after planting all my seed in fine, rich ground, so as to get a good yield, this book says that the seed should have been planted in a light, sandy soil. Light, sandy soil,” he repeated, slapping the book disgustedly. “But there is a chance of the book being wrong, and I am going to leave the seed where it is.”

Aunt Betty looked at Mr. Parker for a long time in pitying silence. “You ought to get married, Mr. Parker,” said she finally. “You need some one to look after you. You ought to get married and plant rice.”

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Aunt Betty delivered this piece of advice as her ultimatum.

"Rice is a good thing to plant, isn't it?" inquired Mr. Parker innocently.

"It is better than cantaloupes," replied Aunt Betty.

"I am going to think of what you have said," announced Mr. Parker after he had thought for a few minutes. "Your advice is always good, Miss Betty. But what am I going to do about the getting married part of it? Is getting married in any way connected with the planting of rice?"

"In your case it most assuredly is," replied Aunt Betty. "Just keep your eyes open until you see a girl that you like, and then come to me. If I don't arrange matters for you I shall be very much surprised."

"By Jove! I'll do it," cried Mr. Parker enthusiastically, "and when I find her I'm coming to you right away."

"Of course you are," said Aunt Betty, "and now I must drive home, if I wish to get there in time for lunch."

Mr. Parker bade her farewell, and the phaeton moved away.

"Cantaloupes!" gasped Aunt Betty, slapping the brown pony as though in punctuation, "who ever heard of such a thing?"

"Get married and plant rice," said Mr. Parker thoughtfully, as he walked slowly toward his house. "I'll do it. Miss Betty is a remarkably intelligent woman."

* * * * *

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A few hours later, far down on the road from Mouton, Marjorie was driving home with her visitor, Julia Lawrence, and many and interesting were the subjects upon which they talked on their long journey.

Miss Lawrence was a very pretty girl with a great quantity of golden hair and a trick of smiling that was charming in the extreme, for when she smiled her face seemed to break into a myriad of dimples that would have made an impression upon the most stony-hearted of men.

And so these two young girls went on their way to Belrive, and when they arrived at Landry the sun had sunk behind the dark line of the Grand Woods and the twilight was deepening fast.

"We must hurry if we wish to reach home before dark," said Marjorie as the carriage turned the corner past Monsieur Landry's store. Old Bill, who was driving, whipped up the horses, and away they went until they came to the road that led from the highway to Belrive, and there they stopped, for the way was obstructed.

Just ahead of them a huge cane cart, driven by an old man, had turned into the road, blocking the way with its great breadth. The cart was piled high with furniture and bedding, and on the very top of the pile there was a young girl holding fast to the mattress upon which she was seated, her body swaying gracefully with the jolting of the cart.

Miss Lawrence, looking out at her, declared that she was quite pretty and that she had a very bright, intelligent face.

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"Yes," said Marjorie, who had looked out also. "She is pretty. She is the niece of the old man who is driving the cart, and she is coming to Belrive to be one of our tenants. Carey had told me that girl was pretty, but she is prettier than I expected her to be. Just think, she can neither read nor write."

"Poor thing, and she is so pretty," said Miss Lawrence softly, as the carriage, having come to a wider part of the road, shot past the cart, and went upon its way toward the twinkling lights of the big house.

The girl upon the mattress gazed after the carriage until it was blotted out in the darkness of the live oaks.

"What a beautiful lady that was," said she to the old man.

The old man turned and looked up at the girl, whose figure was sharply silhouetted against the grayness of the sky. "Yes, she was beautiful, but not so beautiful as you, Aline," answered he jealously.

"Oh, Uncle Telesse," laughed the girl, "you are joking. She is a fine lady and I—I am a Cajun."

For a while she was silent, looking out toward the west, where the Grand Woods lay a thin, hazy line in the approaching darkness. Suddenly she gave a little sob, and leaning down put her hand upon the old man's shoulder.

"We shall miss the old cabin very much to-night, Uncle Telesse," said she. "It is very lonesome here without the woods, with all these great, bare fields about us."

The old man's eyes filled and he nodded his head, for he could not speak.

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The girl slipped from the mattress, and coming down beside him put her arms about him and laid her cheek against his hard, wrinkled face.

"Ah, Uncle Telesse," she cried, "you have been so good to me. How can I ever thank you. To think that it was for me that you came to this great, lonesome place. I will work so hard to learn, I will try so hard to make you happy here."

The old man patted her softly with his great, rough hand, and two big tears rolled down his weatherbeaten cheeks. "It is nothing, it is nothing, Aline," he muttered brokenly as they jolted along through the dreary stretch of fields.

Meanwhile at the big house all was hurry and bustle, and the lights gleamed from every window, for Miss Lawrence had come to Belrive, and there were many who wished to give her welcome. In the great dining room amid the soft light of the candles she sat in state, and upon her the eyes of Carey Gordon were turned in silent worship, for she had smiled upon him.

And thus it was that two young girls so close in blood, so distant in station, came to Belrive in the dusk of the spring twilight; and thus it was that Aline set out upon another journey with the old man, her protector, while far down in the Grand Woods the little cabin stood dark and silent, as dreary and as lonesome as the cry of the night birds that whirled their way in ceaseless flight through the deserted forest.

CHAPTER IX

OLD TELESSE MAKES A WISH

FAR down on the plantation road at Belrive, set close upon the edge of outreaching rice fields, was a low, white cabin, the very last of the long line of quarters; standing distinct and separate and a very long distance from the rest. There it stood in the gray silence of the early morning, showing faint and ghostly through the low trees that grew about it, the tiny porch in front a mere blot upon its hazy whiteness, the girl who stood upon it a mere shadow in the darkness of the little roof above her.

For a long time she had stood there, gazing out upon the dim outline of the road, her head bent forward listening. Listening for some sound that would break the deathly stillness about her, for some welcome noise that would fall upon the ghostly quiet of the mist-covered fields, where the very insects, harsh disturbers of the night, were hushed and silent and made no cry.

Suddenly far up the road there came a sound, faint and indistinct, but yet a sound, and the girl lifted her head thankfully. "They are coming, Uncle Telesse," she cried. "They are coming."

The old man stepped out upon the porch and looked up the road. Out of the darkness there came a sound

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of men's voices singing, the long, wailing notes made soft and mellow by the distance.

"Yes, they are coming," said he. "They go early to work at Belrive."

And now out of the darkness came a long, black line of men and mules, and the sound of many hoofs beating upon the hard road, while the voices of the men grew stronger and louder as they sang, finishing one verse only to sing another and yet another, as though the song had no end.

"En er hongry man looked sad,
En er hongry man looked sad,
En er hongry man said, Lord! Lord! Lord!
En er hongry man looked sad.

"En er hongry man was fed,
En er hongry man was fed,
En er hongry man said, Lord! Lord! Lord!
En er hongry man was fed."

The old man went down to the little gate, the girl following him, and together they leaned upon it to watch the long line as it wound its way toward the field, the mules plodding along in sleepy indifference, the negroes nodding their heads in time with the song, their black faces showing dim and unnatural in the half-light.

At the rear of the teams rode Carey Gordon, who, giving a few brief words of direction to his overseer, stopped at the gate.

"*Comment ça va?*" said he to Telesse. "And how do you like Belrive?"

"I like it very much, and the cabin is very large,

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M'sieu," answered the old man, "but I miss the woods sadly. That will pass away, though. And my team and plow, *M'sieu*, what of them? There is much grass, and I would like to begin my work to-day."

"Your team is at the stables," said Carey, "and you can get it now if you wish."

"*Bien merci*," replied the old man. "I will go and get it now, and perhaps I can start my work before the sun is very high. Bring me my coat and hat, Aline."

The girl went into the house and brought them to him, helping him on with them with as much tender care as though he had been a little child.

"And how do you like Belrive, Aline?" asked Carey when she had finished.

The old man shook his head and went out upon the road. The girl looked after him, and her eyes were filled with tears, for she felt very strange and lonesome in her new surroundings.

"And how do you like Belrive, Aline?" asked Carey again.

The girl gave a little sob and laid her head upon her arm.

"Why, what is the matter?" asked Carey. "Don't you like the place and this house? I thought that you wanted to come to Belrive?"

The girl raised her head and tried bravely to smile. "Oh, yes, *M'sieu*, I like Belrive," said she, "and the house is fine, there is so much room. But I am lonesome, and I miss the woods. Ah! *M'sieu*, I never thought that I could miss them as I did but a moment ago. It is all so dead and quiet here in the early morn-

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ing, and I wish so for the trees. When the wind from the sea marsh blows them, before the day had broken, they make the sweetest music in the world. It is then that they seem to talk to me, when all else is quiet and asleep, and there is nothing to frighten them. The trees are very large, *M'sieu*, but like all things in the woods, they are much afraid, and they will not tell their secrets when the sun is shining bright and all about may hear them. Jean has told me so.

“I did not miss them until this morning, for yesterday I was very busy putting the house in order, and I did not have time to think of them, but now! Ah, *M'sieu*, forgive me, for I am very lonely.”

Carey looked at the mournful little figure before him in silence, and for a moment the gray dreariness of the morning seized him also, causing a great flood of pity for this lonely girl to rise up within him. From the fields came the faint sound of the negroes' voices:

“En er hongry man was fed.”

In some distant pasture a field lark sang joyously, as though in welcome of the coming day. In the east the sky was rosy, streaked with little points of fire.

“And the school, Aline?” said Carey softly. “What of the school? It is gray and cold and lonely now, and you miss the woods and are sad, but look at the sun rising. In a little while it will be bright and warm, and the birds will sing and you will go to school, and what then?”

The girl bowed her head. “*M'sieu*, I have been

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ungrateful," said she. "It was very sad and lonely, and I forgot the school. Forgive me."

Carey laughed. "Nonsense," cried he, "there is nothing to forgive. I shall ask my sister to get the books for you when she goes to Landry to-day, and you can get them to-night if you will go to the big house."

"Thank you, *M'sieu*," said the girl, her face bright with smiles. You are very kind to me, and there is something that I would like to ask of you, it is about—about—" she paused timidly, blushing with confusion.

"About what?" asked Carey gently.

"About the books, *M'sieu*," replied she. "I would like to pay you for them. Not now, for I have no money, but some day. I can work, *M'sieu*, and can make money, and I wish so to pay you for the books. I would be very happy if I could do so."

"If you really wish to pay me for the books, Aline," said Carey after a moment, "you can do so by making coffee for me every morning, when I go to the field. I should like that much better than your paying me in money."

The girl smiled at him happily. "Thank you very much, *M'sieu*," said she softly. "You have been kinder to me than I have deserved, and I will try to make my coffee the best in the world, to pay you for your kindness."

For a long time after he had left her she stood upon the little porch and gazed about her as though to make herself familiar with the place that was now to be her home. The sun rose amid a mass of red and gold and shone upon the dreary fields, transforming them into a

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fairyland of sparkling dew and filmy cobwebs, touched and sprinkled with tiny drops that gleamed and shone like jewels. The heavy mist raised itself from the damp black earth and hung in smoky clouds about it, for all the world like the aftermath of some great battle with nature.

From all sides came the call of birds, blending down from the soft, pleading notes of the great brown thrush that had made its home amid the pale greenness of a willow to the shrill chatter of the tiny wren, who had built her nest under the low, hanging roof of the cabin.

Aline stepped down from the porch into the long, dew-soaked grass of the little garden and sought for a flower. The few rose bushes, rank and ragged as the weeds about them, were bare of even a bud. With a sigh she turned and picked her way carefully through the wet grass toward the cabin.

Suddenly she gave a little cry of joy, and stooping, picked from its hiding place amid the thick growth of the garden, a pale, white flower, pure and sweet and very delicate.

“Ah, my little friend, you have not left me, have you? How is it that you are here alone, so far from your friends, like myself?” said the girl as she pressed the Cherokee rose to her lips.

Going through the cabin she came out into the little orchard behind, where the rows of pear trees stretched away in tall, straight columns of green, and the fig trees twined their white and twisted branches in riotous confusion. Here in the cool greenness some one had placed

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a great oaken bench, and Aline, seating herself upon it, looked down the fragrant aisles of the orchard, her heart filled with a quiet contentment.

And as she sat thus her thoughts went back to the little cabin in the woods, and farther back to the days when she had first come there to live amid the vast, mysterious silence, amid the peace and quiet and the soft whisperings of the great oaks, her friends. And then her gaze, resting for a moment upon the flower that lay still and white against the dark blue of her cottonade skirt, her thoughts went back further still, and she saw a scene that she seemed to have gazed upon long years ago. A scene in which she had played a part, when but a little child, in which she had strewn a whole apronful of the fragrant white blossoms upon a low green mound, while an old man had looked on tearfully, and the birds had sung as joyously as though there had been no sorrow in the world. Again she raised the flower to her lips and her eyes were filled with a quiet sorrow. Thrusting her hand into the bosom of her dress she drew forth a ring that hung from her neck by a slender golden chain, and gazed at it long and thoughtfully.

“My poor father,” said she softly. “This is all that I have to remind me of your love.”

And then there came into her thoughts something which she seemed to have heard many years ago. “You must wear this ring with the chain always, and you must never show it to any one, unless you are in a great deal of trouble,” said she slowly, as though repeating a well-learned lesson.

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"Ah, what does it all mean? What does it all mean?" she asked herself again and again.

A long shadow fell upon the grass before her, and she thrust the ring hurriedly inside her dress, turning to look behind her as she did so.

"Oh! It is you, Numa, is it?" she cried. "How you scared me."

Numa nodded. "Where did you get that ring, Aline?" he asked slowly.

"I cannot tell you where it came from, Numa, so do not ask me," replied the girl quietly, her cheeks flushed from the sudden interruption of her thoughts.

Numa's face grew dark. "I should think that you could not tell me," said he with a sneer. "I suppose he gave it to you."

"He! Why, who do you mean?" asked the girl bewildered.

"You know who I mean," said Numa, his voice low and trembling. "You know well who I mean. Who else but *M'sieu* Gordon gave it to you?"

Aline broke into a loud peal of girlish laughter. "Oh, Numa, you are so silly," she cried. "Why should *M'sieu* Gordon give me a ring? Me, a poor Cajun girl? Whatever made you think of such a thing as that? Is it a joke, Numa?"

Numa glared at her, his eyes blazing. "A joke?" shouted he, his anger overcoming him. "Yes, it is a joke, and a grim one, too. Why, indeed, should he give you a ring. But I will make him sorry for this. He will wish that he is dead before I am through with him. I will——"

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“Stop!” cried the girl, her laughter gone in a moment, her face white, her little hands clenched. “What is the matter with you, Numa? I have never seen you act in this way before. I do not know what you mean, but if you seek to hurt *M’sieu* Gordon I shall hate you. He has been very kind to me, and you should like him for it. You are bad and wicked and I will not talk to you to-day. Go away and do not come again until you can speak more kindly.”

The girl turned away from him and walked slowly toward the cabin, tears of surprise and anger in her eyes.

Numa ran after her. “Forgive me, Aline,” he cried. “I was only joking and am sorry that you took me in earnest.”

Aline shook her head. “No, no, Numa,” said she, “you were not joking. It is wicked to lie. Go away now, or I shall hate you.”

“But the ring?” pleaded Numa. “He did not give it to you, did he?”

“No,” answered the girl. “He did not. You are very foolish to ask me such a question.”

“Perhaps I am not as foolish as you think,” said Numa as he strode sullenly away.

When the old man returned with his team he found Aline working silently in the kitchen, and there were tears in her eyes.

“Why, what is the matter?” he asked. “Are you still so lonesome for the woods?”

Briefly the girl told him of Numa’s visit, of what he had said and of how strangely he had acted, and

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while she spoke the old man's face grew exceedingly grave.

"Why did he talk and act so queerly, Uncle Telesse?" she asked when she had finished.

The old man said never a word, but gazed for a long time through the open door before him, thinking. Far away in the fields he could see the men at work and a figure upon a horse which he knew was Carey Gordon. Back of the horseman and far away in the distance were the Grand Woods, a long, dark streak along the horizon, half-hidden by the hazy mist that hung above the field.

Aline came over to the old man and put her arms about him.

"You have forgotten what I asked you, Uncle Telesse," said she.

The old man shook his head. "No, no," he answered. "I heard what you said. I was wishing."

"Wishing?" said the girl with a little smile. "Wishing for what, Uncle Telesse?"

The old man looked at her and found her very beautiful. "I was wishing that we had never left the Grand Woods, Aline," said he sadly.

CHAPTER X

A RAIN

OF course," said Aunt Betty from her post at the parlor window, "if you wish to get wringing wet, you had better go. But if you will take my advice you will stay where you are and not run the danger of catching your death of cold by riding about in such weather."

Turning she faced the disconsolate group before her, as though inviting some one to contradict the truth of her statement.

"But, Aunt Betty," ventured Carey, "it isn't raining yet, and it may hold off until night. Besides, the horses have been saddled and we are all ready to go."

"And Julia wants to go so much," interposed Marjorie pathetically. "She has been here a whole week, and she hasn't even been in the field once. She has never seen rice planted, either. Tom says it isn't going to rain, anyhow."

"No, I didn't," cried Tom Bayne hastily. "I said that I didn't think it would rain. Didn't I, Miss Julia?"

"Yes," said Miss Lawrence uncertainly, "I believe you did say so."

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During this burst of explanations Aunt Betty had preserved a stony calmness, waiting quietly until every one had spoken, when she left the window and made her way toward the door. Having reached it she paused for a moment and delivered her parting shot. "After you have all died of pneumonia you will wish that you had taken my advice," said she prophetically.

The little group in the parlor listened to her in guilty silence as she climbed the stairway, a smile of satisfaction broadening upon every face as they heard the door of her room slam heavily above them.

Tom Bayne scratched his head reflectively. "I don't just see how we can wish anything when we are dead," said he.

"Perhaps she meant in some future existence," suggested Carey.

"I hardly think so," said Miss Lawrence, "when you consider that in our future existence a rainstorm would very probably be rather an inducement for going out than otherwise."

"And she didn't say a word about uncle's going out in the rain," added Marjorie, looking very much surprised.

"Perhaps she didn't let him," replied Tom Bayne in the tone of one stating a fact.

"Well," said Carey, moving toward the door, "it is long past my time for going to the field, and I must be off. If you are coming with me, come now or be forever left behind."

And so it was that in a few moments the four were loping swiftly down the plantation road, bound for the

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field and the planting, while the dark clouds spread themselves swiftly overhead as though to punish them for their rashness. Far away in the north, lying close to the earth, was a great black cloud, its threatening gloom broken by tiny flashes of lightning, while all about it the sky was gray and dark and tinged with inky blackness.

Way off in the distance there was the dull rumble of the approaching thunder, and the wind blew cool and strong, touched with the freshness of the coming rain.

"It is worse outside than I thought," said Carey to Miss Lawrence, who rode beside him. "Do you want to turn back?"

Miss Lawrence laughed. "Of course not," answered she. "It will not hurt me if it does rain. I don't seem able to make you understand that I was raised on a plantation myself, and am just as used to such things as you are."

"And the pneumonia?" said Carey jokingly. "Have you thought of that?"

"No," laughed Miss Lawrence, giving her pony a touch with the whip. "I shall have ample time to think of that in my future existence."

"Good Lord!" said Tom, to whom this last remark had been borne on the wind. "Those people are still talking about their future existence. I don't like it. It gives me the creeps. I suppose that Aunt Betty will be disappointed if we don't all catch pneumonia and die."

"Well, I think that she will have the satisfaction of

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seeing us wet through," said Marjorie, "but I won't mind it a bit. It will be such fun. Just like old times, Tom."

"Ah! the old times," began Tom. "How I wish——"

Marjorie, leaning from her saddle, touched his arm. "That is where Aline, Carey's pretty coffee girl, lives," said she as they flashed past a low, white cabin by the roadside.

"Oh, does she?" replied Tom, grown sulky at this interruption. "I suppose that she is as ugly and as uninteresting as Carey thinks her beautiful and clever."

"You should see her first, and then judge her," said Marjorie rebukingly as they scrambled up the shallow ditch that separated the road from the field.

And now, under the guidance of Carey, they made their way over the puzzling maze of levees, and presently they came to the series of cuts where the planting was in progress. All about them, as they had ridden down the plantation road, the fields had lain brown and flat and silent, with never a sound, with never a movement to mar the quiet of their level barrenness; seeming to sleep in peaceful expectation until the tiny seeds, so closely sheltered in their earthy bosoms, would glorify them with life and color.

But here before them all was different, all was life and sound and ceaseless movement, ending only when the kindly night would softly draw her veil of darkness above the torn, trampled earth and gently soothe it with the warm, caressing breezes of the twilight.

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Here the teams went round and round inside the walls of the levees that closed them in, ever moving in an endless circle, from cut to cut, from acre to acre. On and on they went, the great disk harrows in the lead, their round, shining blades cutting and chopping the earth into small fragments, slicing and tearing the great grass-covered clods, until the dust from them rose into the air like smoke, to be whipped away by the wind.

And behind them were the drag harrows, great, heavy frames of iron and steel, armed with a multitude of long, sharpened spikes which, seizing upon the smaller clods of earth that had escaped destruction by the disks, dragged them torn and broken into the soft, powdery seed bed. Last of all came the huge drill with its many tiny wheels and disks and spouts pressing its gift of golden grain into the warm, grateful bosom of the earth, drawing over it a strong, rich cover, through which in time the tiny shoots would force their way to the welcome sunlight.

And so these great machines of steel and wood and iron, these inanimate helpers of nature, made their way in ever-decreasing circles around the cuts, each pulled by its four mules, each driven by its dusky driver, each taking its part in the work that was presently to clothe the barren fields with the greenness and freshness of the newborn crop.

All about the teams, hovering in the air above them, pecking in the ground below them, hopping upon the levees around them, were the birds; the tiny sparrows, the large black birds, the great chawks, ragged and

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rusty as though worn by wind and weather, all fighting and chattering and digging for the tiny grains of rice, forgetting in their excitement to shrink from their common enemy, Man. And all about upon the ground, running swiftly from one clod to another, dashing terror-stricken between the hoofs of the mules, burrowing deep within the levees, were the tiny field mice, fleeing panic-stricken from the huge iron monsters which, having destroyed their homes, now sought with an unquenchable ferocity to take their very lives.

For a while the little group looked at the busy scene before them, while Carey explained to Miss Lawrence the many details of the planting.

"And now," said he, "if you will come over this way, I will show you how the rice is sown broadcast."

So the four, turning their horses, came presently to a cut, where, as in the one that they had just left, the teams made their way in circles, but here the great drill was missing, and in its place was a little two-wheeled cart drawn by a small and very ragged mule. Seated in the back of this cart, a large tin bucket of seed held tightly between his knees, was Nicholas Wilson, and ever and anon, as the cart rolled slowly behind the harrows, he dug his hands into the bucket and scattered the seed in a glistening shower far and wide.

As the little party headed by Carey made their way into the cut where he was planting, Nicholas Wilson stopped the cart and pulled off his hat.

"Howdy?" said he. "I jest guess you all hain't much skeered of rain, are you?"

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"Oh! Mr. Wilson, is it going to rain?" asked Marjorie.

"It sure is," replied Wilson. "Jest look at the sky if you don't think so. Besides, the ground hain't been full of cobwebs for the last two days for nawthing."

"This is Miss Lawrence, from New Orleans," explained Carey.

"Glad to meet you," said Wilson. "I used to know a man named Lawrence in Colorado. Buck Lawrence they used to call him. He got all shot up rustlin' cattle."

"I don't think that I have any relatives in Colorado," said Miss Lawrence smiling.

"Sure you hain't," replied Wilson hastily. "And even if you did I don't guess they'd have to rustle cattle for a livin'. I jest happened to think of Buck, that was all. He was a regular—well, he was a pretty tough proposition."

"We have been showing Miss Lawrence how to plant rice," said Marjorie, laughing at the overseer's apology, to his utter confusion.

"Well," answered Wilson, "I guess you've seen it all, except some rice that I'm having soaked to plant in the *coulée*. I'll have to drag it into the mud with a harrow, you know," he added in explanation to Miss Lawrence.

"And here's your rain, Margey," said Tom Bayne as he slid from his horse and began to tug at the raw-hide things which fastened his slicker to the back of his saddle.

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While the four young people had been talking to Wilson the sky had grown darker and darker, and when at Tom Bayne's exclamation they now looked about them they saw the storm approaching in all its fury.

In the north the sky was inky black, and in that direction, coming swiftly toward them, tossing the branches of the distant live oaks wildly, heralded by an icy blast of wind, they could see the rain.

On it came, stretching across the field before them in a thick white wall, beating down the weeds and grass on the roadside, boring great holes in the soft earth of the seed beds, running in broken, swiftly flowing streams from the tops of the levees, leaving the cobwebs, which had told of its coming, a mass of broken, twisted, spray-lashed threads behind it.

On it came with a dull, even, roaring sound, driving the negroes from the field, to ride swiftly in little shelter-seeking groups far up the road; scaring the birds from their feast of pilfered seed, to whirl away in startled terror toward the wind-beaten woods; hurrying the tiny field mice into the twisting tunnels of the levees, filling the air with the mist of the shattered, broken raindrops.

Hastily wrapping the two girls in their saddle-slickers, Carey and Tom Bayne hurried them across the field toward the road, while Nicholas Wilson, following close behind them, raised his voice above the wind, crying: "Line out for the old man's cabin, and I'll keep on to the stables and see that the teams get in all right."

And so they rode helter-skelter up the road toward

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the low, white cabin, with a great pounding of hoofs and fluttering of garments, while the rain following close behind them roared with a dull, sullen fury as though angry at not being able to give them the drenching they so richly deserved.

CHAPTER XI

AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

MEANWHILE, in the little cabin toward which the horses were making their way, Aline had sat all afternoon spinning, her wheel placed near the open window, through which she looked, whenever her work permitted her, at the gathering darkness outside. Sprawling at her feet lay Jean Le Bossu, his white face ever uplifted toward her as he watched her at her task.

Swiftly went the rough, oaken wheel, urged by her tiny foot, and swiftly grew the long, yellow thread which she spun from the fluffy mass of nankeen cotton held loosely in her hand. Nimbly her fingers guided the saffron rolls into the swiftly turning thread that spun and jumped and twisted in its short journey to the reel. Lying by the side of Jean were the little spike-covered paddles with which she had carded the cotton, while a great corncob reel of heavy yellow thread showed that her work that day had not gone for nothing.

And so she sat in the dull, yellow light of the clouded day, the low, mellow hum of her wheel sounding as a soft accompaniment to the rumbling of the distant thunder.

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"Ah, Jean," said she, "you do not know how nice it is to be able to spin. I shall thank Madame Joe all my life for having taught me to do so."

Le Bossu gazed at her for a moment in silent admiration. "It is fine," he answered. "And one of these days, when you have nothing to do, will you make a little piece of cloth for me?"

Aline pointed to the huge homemade loom that filled a corner of the room. "The first cloth that I weave will be for my Jean," said she.

Le Bossu pressed the hand that she held out to him. "And I shall wear the cloth until it is worn to rags," he whispered softly.

"Tell me of the woods, Jean," said the girl. "I miss them so, and none but you can tell me of them."

Le Bossu drew his knees up under his chin and clasped his long arms about them. "The trees are all covered with little green buds," said he. "The violets bloom in the dead heart of the great oak by the *coulée*, and the wood ducks dive there alone in the early morning. The snipe fly slow in the sea marsh and the waters of the bayou are blue with the flowers of the wild iris. The fish lie deep in the lake and the prairies are white with the *pistaches sauvages*.

"The leaves are sweet and fresh on the gum trees, and the vines of the dewberry bloom in the new grass of the forest. The spring has come, Aline. All of the leaves are out, save those on the pecan trees, and even they will come ere many days, for I have seen the buds far up in their tops, where they hide from those who wish to see them."

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“How I wish that I could be in the woods to see the spring, Jean,” said the girl wistfully, pausing in her work to look fondly at the little man beside her.

Le Bossu stroked his knee softly. “And how much do I wish that you were there?” asked he. “The sun is not as bright, the air is not as sweet, the sky is not as blue, since you are gone. The birds sing sadly in the sunshine; the trees cry and moan through the long nights, and when the great winds blow in from the sea marsh the whole forest seems to cry Aline, Aline.”

The little man sank his head upon his folded arms that she might not see his look of utter desolation.

“And do you go often to the woods from Landry?” asked Aline softly.

Le Bossu nodded. “I cannot stay away from them,” said he. “It is lonely there since you are gone, but it is better than Landry. For two nights I lay in the town, listening for the whispering of the trees, and sleep would not come to me. On the third night I went to the woods, and there I slept for many hours. I have slept there ever since. Numa says that I am a fool, but I cannot live in Landry.”

“And Numa?” asked Aline. “Does he go often to the woods?”

Le Bossu shook his head. “He has not been there since we left,” said he. And then he added sulkily, as though saying something that he did not wish to say, “Numa goes about Landry in fine, new clothes, and all the girls are mad about him.”

To this Aline answered never a word, but went on with her spinning.

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Le Bossu stared at her amazed, his heart cold with fear. He saw again the look upon the crafty Numa's face, the look that had been there when he had told him what to say. He heard again the low, cunning laugh, the short, triumphant question, "Will she be jealous, Jean? Will she be jealous, eh?"

"Numa goes much with the daughter of Old Victor. She is a pretty girl," ventured Le Bossu, eyeing the girl furtively.

Aline stopped her spinning and leaned forward. "There is one who wishes that he would marry her," said she.

"And that one is?" asked Jean breathlessly.

"Aline of the Grand Woods," replied the girl, looking at the little man steadily.

Le Bossu sighed happily. "God is very good," said he.

For a while the two were silent, the girl spinning out the long cotton thread before her, Le Bossu rocking to and fro at her feet, while the thunder grew louder and nearer, and the cool, fresh wind blew in from the open window.

"And now tell me of yourself, Aline," said the little man. "Tell me of the school and of what you have learned there."

"I am learning much," replied the girl brightly. "It is all so new, and I love it so. When my spinning is done I take my books that *M'sieu* Gordon has given me, and I work until it is late in the night. I call it work, but it is not work, Jean. To me it is the greatest of all pleasures."

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"And the school?" asked Le Bossu.

"It is very nice there," answered the girl, "and the teacher is very good and kind to me. She says that I learn quickly, that in a few weeks I could go to the convent at Mouton, where they would teach me many things that she cannot teach me here. Ah, to go to the convent, Jean, to the convent at Mouton!" She paused, her eyes sparkling at the mere thought of such good fortune.

"At the foot of the great oak on Bayou des Arbres I have cured some skins," began Le Bossu.

The girl shook her head sadly, and leaning forward patted the little man's shoulder. "It would not be enough, dear Jean," said she. "Such a thing is something to dream of. That is all."

"If I caught many fish, if I killed many deer?" asked Le Bossu eagerly.

Again the girl shook her head. "No, no, Jean," said she. "It would take a great deal of money. More than we will ever have."

Rising, she went to the window and looked out, wiping away the tears of gratitude as she did so, that the little man might not see them.

"The rain is almost here," said she.

"The swallows flew low this morning," replied Le Bossu from his place on the floor. "They are like all the other wild things of the forest. They never lie."

Going across the room the girl took down a book from the shelf above the open fire, and went back to her seat by the window. "If you would like me to, Jean, I will read to you," she said timidly.

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The hunchback moved his twisted body close beside the chair, and looked up into her face. "I would rather hear you read than listen to the sweetest music ever played," said he.

Aline laughed. "Would you have me become vain, Jean?" she asked.

Le Bossu shook his head. "Is the flower vain when it lifts its head to the sunlight? Is the bird vain when it sings its song in the forest?" he asked.

"You are a queer fellow, Jean," replied the girl as she opened the book, "but I love you all the more because of it."

Bending her pretty head she slowly read out the words of the simple lesson, while the little man looked up at her in rapt silence, his heart filled with pride, with admiration and devotion. And as they sat thus, the first heavy drops of rain began to fall, pounding loudly upon the shingle roof overhead.

Suddenly they were startled by the sound of voices calling loudly from the road, and the girl, putting down her book, hurried to the door.

"It is *M'sieu* Gordon!" she cried to Le Bossu as she threw it open.

And now there burst into the room, with much laughter and with many little screams of excitement, Marjorie and Miss Lawrence, both of them being so completely enveloped in the folds of the great slickers which were wrapped about them that it would have been very difficult to tell them apart. Quickly throwing off the huge waterproof coat with which she was encumbered, Marjorie ran to the back door of the

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cabin, and there she watched with much amusement the frantic efforts of Carey and Tom Bayne who, with the assistance of Le Bossu, were trying to tie the four struggling ponies beneath the tiny shed in the orchard. Miss Lawrence hurried to the door also, and Aline following timidly behind her, they stood there watching until the last horse had been tied, and the three men came running toward them through the rain, which was now falling in a steady white sheet.

"My, but I'm wet," gasped Carey as he stood panting within the shelter of the cabin.

Tom Bayne, who had been ruefully patting his dripping garments, turned to Miss Lawrence. "What wouldn't Aunt Betty give to see me now?" he inquired whimsically.

"I think," replied she with a smile, "that Aunt Betty would be so satisfied with your appearance that she would forgive us all for having gone out."

This remark was greeted with a burst of laughter, and Carey, suddenly catching sight of Aline, who had withdrawn shyly into a corner of the room, went over to her.

"I hope that you will excuse this invasion of your home," said he. "I have been out in the field with some friends, the rain caught us, and *c'est tout*," he finished, waving his hand about him.

"You and your friends are very welcome, *M'sieu*," answered the girl blushing.

"Oh, Aline!" cried Marjorie, who had caught sight of the spinning wheel. "Is that yours? Can you spin?"

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"Yes, Miss Marjorie," replied the girl. "Would you care to see me do it?"

"Yes, yes," answered Marjorie. "It would be such fun to watch you."

Obediently Aline took her place at the wheel and spun out the long, yellow thread, while the others, crowded about her, watched her with breathless interest.

"Isn't it wonderful!" said Marjorie.

"I don't see how she keeps from breaking it," exclaimed Tom Bayne.

"It is a perfect picture," cried Miss Lawrence.

Carey said never a word. His eyes were upon Miss Lawrence, and he thought her the most beautiful creature in the world. He felt that could he but call this lovely girl his own his happiness would be complete.

Again and again he asked himself could he aspire to such joy as this. Again and again he told himself that such happiness could never be his.

And so he gazed at Miss Lawrence in silent admiration, and his heart was filled now with happiness, now with pain; now with hope, now with despair; now with joy, now with sadness; and all because, for the first time in his life, Carey Gordon was in love.

"Carey tells me that you make the very best coffee in the world," said Marjorie.

"*M'sieu* is very kind to say so," replied the girl.

At the mention of his name Carey came suddenly back from the paradise of his dreams, and the eyes of the party being now turned upon him, he addressed Aline in the greatest confusion, his face a fiery red.

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"It is not kind of me at all to say so," he exclaimed. "The coffee is the best in the world, and if I had some here I could show you."

"If you would care for it, *M'sieu*, I could make you some now, while you are waiting for the rain to cease," said the girl, stopping her spinning. "It will take but a few moments, and Jean can help me."

Rising, she went out to the little kitchen at the back of the cabin, while Le Bossu left his place in the corner from which he had silently watched the visitors, and followed closely after her.

"She is indeed a very pretty and a very nice girl," said Miss Lawrence as the door closed behind Le Bossu. "And isn't that a funny little man who follows her about so quietly?"

"That," replied Carey, "is Jean Le Bossu. This girl Aline is the one thing in the world he cares for. He is a curious little man, simple as a child, and yet he knows and can tell you more about the woods and what is in them than any one in all this country."

"And I suppose that this pretty girl has a great many beaux who come to see her here and crowd this little cabin," said Miss Lawrence, looking about the neatly kept room with a smile.

"No," answered Carey. "Strange as it may seem, she has not. She leaves this cabin very seldom, and there are few that know her. In the woods she saw nobody but Le Bossu and a hunter who they say is to marry her. All this was told me by her uncle, for she has been here only a week, you know."

"I'll declare," said Tom, pressing his face against

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the glass of the window. "Here's some one coming up the road in all this rain."

"And I'll declare," said Carey, "if here isn't Aline already with the coffee."

As he spoke the girl came into the room carrying a small tin waiter in her hand. On the waiter stood four little white cups in a circle, and in the center of the circle the coffeepot, hot and steaming, filled the room with its sharp, aromatic odor. Behind Aline came Le Bossu, carefully carrying the white china sugar bowl, into which he had stuck the four tin spoons in a glittering ring.

The girl came to Carey, but he smiled and shook his head. "Miss Lawrence first," said he. "She is my guest."

And so Aline went on to Miss Lawrence, and taking one of the little cups from off the waiter she held it out to her.

Miss Lawrence reached forth her hand to take it.

Suddenly the girl gave a cry, and dropped the cup, which broke into pieces, splashing the floor with its little pool of coffee.

Carey sprang to his feet. "Why, Aline, what is it?" he cried.

The girl stood with her hand pressed tightly to her side, her face flushed, her breath coming quick and short. "It is nothing, *M'sieu*," she gasped. "It is nothing. It is—it is—Numa coming up the road," cried she, looking suddenly out of the window.

Carey took his seat again. "And does it always affect you that way when Numa comes?" he asked.

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The girl, who was upon her knees picking up the broken china, shook her head. "No, no, *M'sieu*," said she. "It must be that I am not well to-day. If Jean will but bring me another cup I will pass the coffee before it grows too cold."

Le Bossu set down his sugar bowl and crept out to the kitchen, his white face wrinkled with bewilderment. "She said it was Numa, but it was not," mumbled the little man shaking his head. "She fooled them all, but she cannot fool Jean."

And so the four visitors sat in the cabin and drank their coffee, declaring that never in their lives had they tasted better. And so Aline stood and watched them, her eyes ever upon Miss Lawrence, while Le Bossu sat silent in his corner, his gaze never wavering from the girl before him.

Suddenly there was a noise outside, the door was flung hastily open, and those in the room, turning quickly to see the intruder, beheld a man standing in the rain.

He was a tall man, clad from head to foot in worn, yellow oilskins, and he stood for a moment at the doorway gazing into the room as though to make sure of those who were within before entering. Apparently satisfied with his inspection he stepped over the threshold where, quickly removing his oilskins, he presently emerged in all the poor vulgarity of cheap and flashy clothing.

While he had stood in the rain outside, his brown, handsome face enclosed in the cap of oilskin, his tall, graceful figure outlined against the wet, gleaming coat

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about him, he had presented a picture of wild and reckless manhood very good to look upon. But as he stood now within the room, clad in all the squalid ugliness of his shoddy garments, a horrid look upon his simpering face, half-smile, half-sneer; from the top of his greased and oily head to the tip of his pointed yellow shoes, from the dull stone in his gaudy necktie to the tarnished ring upon his finger, he presented a picture of mean, cheap vulgarity never to be forgotten.

Carey was the first to break the silence which followed his entrance. "Why, if it isn't the hunter," he cried, laughing at the ludicrous appearance of the man before him. "Isn't he fine, though. What have you killed lately, Mr. Hunter, to have given you such beautiful garments?"

Numa glared at the speaker angrily. "I have not killed anything yet," said he in a menacing tone.

The girl came hastily forward. "My uncle is not here, Numa. He is in Landry," said she.

Numa laughed contemptuously. "Do you suppose that I have put on these clothes to see your uncle, Aline?" he asked. "Do you suppose that I rode in all that rain from Landry just to see him?"

To this the girl made no direct reply, but looked about her uneasily.

"It is strange that you have not seen him to-day," she ventured.

Numa laughed. "I have been all day at Old Victor's," said he meaningly. "Jeanne is a fine girl."

"I say he does, Tom, he looks just like a gypsy," came audibly from the window in the voice of Marjorie.

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Numa turned about quickly. "I am no gypsy. I am Spanish," said he.

Miss Lawrence was immediately interested. "But you can tell fortunes, can't you?" she asked.

Numa shook his head. Miss Lawrence held out her hand. "Please," said she. "It's such fun."

Numa looked at the outstretched hand scornfully. "I do not—" he began and stopped suddenly, with a little gasp of astonishment.

Miss Lawrence withdrew her hand instantly.

"I do not mind telling fortunes sometimes," continued Numa smoothly, "but when I have told one, I can tell no more that day. I will tell your fortune, Mademoiselle, if you wish me to, but I will have to tell it in French."

Miss Lawrence held out her hand again. "That is right," said she. "I knew all the time that you could do it. I also understand French perfectly, which makes everything exactly right."

Numa took the extended hand, and turning it palm downwards, gazed at it for a moment.

"Why, that isn't the way to tell fortunes," cried Miss Lawrence. "Are you trying to read the back of my hand?"

Numa turned the hand palm upward, and examined it closely, tracing the lines with his long, brown forefinger.

"There are different ways of telling a fortune," said he. "Yours is a good one." And then in a singsong voice he began to tell the fortune, speaking the words mechanically, with many pauses, as though reciting

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some lesson which he had learned long ago and had almost forgotten.

"You will marry young and die old. You will travel much and see more. Your riches will only be exceeded by your happiness. Your desires will be gratified only when they will be of benefit to you. Your beauty will fade only with your life and—" He paused for a moment and looked at Miss Lawrence significantly. "Should you live for a thousand years you will never puzzle man as you have puzzled him to-day."

He finished, released the hand and smiled.

"But the last thing that you said, all that about 'puzzling man.' What do you mean by it?" questioned Miss Lawrence.

Numa shrugged his shoulders. "It is the fortune, Mademoiselle," said he. "I cannot explain it."

"And I owe you—" began Miss Lawrence.

"Nothing," replied Numa. "I have been well paid for telling your fortune."

"You are a strange man," said Miss Lawrence, "and a stranger fortune teller. You are the first one that I have ever heard of that didn't ask for money."

Numa bowed low. "Yours is the first fortune that I have ever told, Mademoiselle," said he. "The next time I shall ask enough for both fortunes."

"Hello," cried Tom Bayne from the door. "It has stopped raining."

"Then we must go," said Marjorie rising. "We have barely time to dress for dinner. I am very much obliged to you, Aline, for the coffee and the shelter."

"And I am also," said Miss Lawrence, pausing in

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the doorway. "Some day, if you will let me, I am coming back to see you, and perhaps I may learn what your fortune teller means by his talk of my puzzling hand."

The little party went up the muddy road very slowly, splashing their way through the many puddles that had formed in the low places.

For a while Miss Lawrence rode along in silence, and then suddenly stopping her horse she held out her hand to Carey, who rode beside her.

"Do you see anything curious about my hand?" she asked.

Carey took it, his heart beating high. He felt that he would be contented to hold this hand forever. He thought that he had never seen so beautiful a hand before.

"I can see nothing peculiar," said he, "except that it is the most——"

Miss Lawrence shook her head. "No, no," she cried. "I do not mean that. Do you remember how the girl cried out, and dropped the cup when I reached for it? Do you remember how the hunter refused to tell my fortune? How he consented when he had seen my hand? What he said about my puzzling man? He was the man that I puzzled, and my hand was what puzzled him. What made the girl cry out, and why?"

Carey looked perplexed. "What you say is right," answered he. "It was your hand. And the ring that you wear. Perhaps——"

Miss Lawrence took it off and handed it to him.

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“It is a family ring,” said she. “I cannot see how it could possibly interest them.”

Carey examined the ring closely. It was a chased band of gold, set with a reddish-brown stone. The stone was mottled with white, and upon it was cut a crest.

He handed the ring to Miss Lawrence. “It cannot be this,” said he. “It is very strange.”

“There is another ring, the exact counterpart of this one,” said Miss Lawrence, “and it belonged to my uncle who is dead. He married beneath him and my grandfather disowned him. I have often heard my father speak of it. When my uncle died he left a child, a girl, and in his will my father has left this girl the property that should have been her father’s. The girl has never been heard of. We have tried in every way to find her, but with no success, and I am afraid that she too is dead. It could not be that this girl Aline?” She paused excitedly.

Carey shook his head. “It could not be,” answered he. “She has lived all her life with the old man in the Grand Woods.”

Again they moved on in silence, while far up the road went Marjorie and Tom Bayne unconscious of their absence.

Suddenly they came to a little rise in the land, and Carey stopping his horse pointed before him. “Isn’t it beautiful?” he asked.

In the west the dark clouds had broken and the sun was setting in a flood of fire that tinged the darkened heavens with a golden shadow. Before them lay the

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rain-soaked fields, their tiny pools glowing in the fire of the sunset. The air was fresh and sweet, redolent with the odor of the rich, wet earth.

On every plant and tiny blade of grass the raindrops shone and sparkled. The land from its recent bath lay fresh and sweet and clean in the quiet of the evening.

Miss Lawrence turned to Carey and pointed at the scene before her. "Aren't you proud?" she asked. "You are monarch of all you survey."

For a moment he looked at her and in his eyes there was a great longing.

"I only wish that I were," said he.

CHAPTER XII

NUMA MAKING ONE CONQUEST FAILS TO MAKE ANOTHER

IT was Sunday at Landry, and on the broad, dusty street the stores stood closed and silent. The houses were deserted also, for the last bell had rung from the square, wooden tower of the church, and the people of the town, with those of the surrounding country, now knelt within the sacred building at mass.

From one end of the little town to the other the buildings were deserted save one—the drug store of Doctor Lemaire. It was a long, barn-like structure with a deep porch in front, and on this porch there now sat, comfortably established in the very chair of the old doctor himself, the one inharmonious figure in the quiet of the Sabbath morning—Jean Marie Lacour, the clerk of the drug store.

He was a young man, short of stature and ungraceful of figure, with a brown, freckled face, saved only from being commonplace by its great weakness. He was dressed in the newest and flashiest of suits and the brightest of patent-leather shoes, while upon his short and closely curling hair he wore a small gray hat, ornamented with a very blue ribbon.

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Lying back in the skin-covered chair, his feet elevated to the narrow railing of the porch, the clerk contemplated his brightly shining shoes with a smile of gratified vanity, and then looking beyond them to the great yellow church at the end of the street he shook his head with an expression of violent indignation. Jean Marie Lacour was angry.

For many months he had saved his paltry wages that he might emerge upon some happy Sunday in the gorgeous raiment which now clothed him. For many months he had dreamed of entering the church in the dazzling splendor of his new garments, of the looks of admiration from the women, of the looks of envy from the men.

Above all he had dreamed of the admiring glances of one in all that great congregation, of one who to him meant everything, of one whose dark and regal beauty had set his heart aflame, of Jeanne, the daughter of Old Victor.

And now the long-hoped-for Sunday had arrived; he had dressed himself carefully, with many a lingering glance in his broken glass; he had been halfway down the street on his journey to the house of the fair Jeanne when Doctor Lemaire, coming out upon the porch of his store, had called to him. He had come back sullenly enough, and the old doctor, smiling compassionately, had said: "I am sorry, Lacour, but you cannot go to church this morning. There are some people from the prairie who will ride in for medicine, and you must give it to them."

So therefore it was that Jean Marie Lacour was

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angry, and therefore it was that his indignation became greater every time he gazed at the church before him, in which at that moment knelt his beautiful Jeanne.

Suddenly there came to him the muffled sound of the organ, telling that the mass was over and that in a moment the deserted street would be thronged with a bustling crowd of home-going people. Rising from his comfortable seat the clerk stretched himself lazily, and after carefully arranging the folds of his flaming cravat, he seated himself in one of the straight hide-bottomed chairs that were scattered about him, for the throne of the old doctor was sacred.

And now the broad street was crowded with the hurrying throng of worshipers, while the dust from many vehicles rose in clouds, shutting out the scene from the watchful eyes of the clerk, who, sneezing and beating at the air about him, became angrier than ever.

“And I shall see Jeanne pass by in a moment,” said he savagely, “and I will not be able to take her to her home, because of those cursed people from the prairie.”

Jean Marie Lacour was indeed in a bad humor.

Rising to his feet with a cry he gazed eagerly through the billowy clouds of dust. Far down the street he could see moving slowly through the crowd upon the sidewalk a man and a woman. The man was tall and well-made and carried himself with a swagger. The woman was tall also, with the proud, majestic bearing of a queen. Her eyes were black and her mouth, though full and red, had about it the hard, straight lines of cruelty.

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The clerk gazed at the pair in astonishment until they came opposite the store, when he ran down the steps and accosted them.

"I am sorry that I could not take you to mass this morning, Jeanne," he cried. "I had important business and could not leave the store."

The woman smiled. "It is just as well," replied she. "I had promised to go with Numa to-day."

Jean Marie Lacour opened his eyes very wide. Numa gazed at him with a sneering smile.

"And this evening?" asked the clerk. "You will walk with me then?"

Jeanne tossed her head. "I shall drive this evening with Numa," said she as she moved away.

The clerk gazed after them with a dazed expression, passing his hand before his eyes as though he expected to awaken from a very unpleasant dream. Could it be possible, he asked himself, that he, Jean Marie Lacour, the clerk of the drug store at Landry, the one who had been to school in the city for a whole year, was to be cast aside for a vagabond and a drunkard such as Numa Le Blanc? It was incredible.

He thought of how magnanimous he had felt when he had given his love to the fickle Jeanne. He thought of the great honor he had imagined she felt at the bestowal of his affections upon such a poor ignorant girl. And now she had jilted him with never a look at the beautiful clothes that he had bought to please her. Above all he was doubly exasperated by the knowledge that never in his life before had he loved the heartless Jeanne as he loved her now, at the moment

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of her perfidy. Jean Marie Lacour was in a state of furious amazement.

He did not see the stream of people that passed him, he did not speak to those that greeted him as they went by, he was conscious of nothing until some one clapped him upon the back with a heavy hand. Turning he confronted the old doctor and Father Bertrand, who were surveying him critically.

“Have you gone to sleep standing up, Lacour?” began Doctor Lemaire, when catching sight of the clerk’s face he cried, “Why, what is the matter? Are you sick?”

“No,” replied he in a sulky voice. “There is nothing the matter with me. Why do you ask?”

But the old doctor knew that there was something the matter, and after surveying the gaudy appearance of the clerk for a moment he looked about him for the cause of his discomfort. Suddenly he saw far up the street a man and a woman walking. The woman was very tall and straight, and there was no mistaking her.

Doctor Lemaire broke into a loud laugh, and pointing first at the angry clerk and then at the distant couple, exclaimed, “Look, *mon Père*, and see true jealousy in all its wickedness. Observe what it has done to poor Lacour. You should make a wonderful sermon out of what you have seen to-day.”

Father Bertrand shook his head at the clerk. “You should not become angry, Lacour,” said he. “Cannot Jeanne walk with other people besides yourself?”

Jean Marie Lacour smiled with assumed indifference.

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"She may walk with whom she pleases," said he. "I am done with her. Never again will I trust a woman. Should she ask me upon her knees to forgive her I would tell her *no*."

"You need not worry about that, Lacour," interrupted the old doctor. "She will not do so."

"And when I meet Numa," continued the clerk, his voice rising, "I will——"

But at this moment the arrival of Monsieur Landry accompanied by Mr. Parker caused him to cease speaking and retire hurriedly into the store, leaving the fate of the treacherous Numa forever undecided.

"Why, what's the matter with that boy?" asked Mr. Parker, gazing wonderingly at the retreating clerk. "What's he shouting about?"

Dr. Lemaire shrugged his shoulders. "He is young, in love, and a fool," said he. "But come up and sit down. It has been a long time since I have seen you."

Mr. Parker, who had been greeted warmly by the priest, ascended the steps and was soon seated with the rest of the party upon the long, roomy porch of the drug store. He was very much liked by the people at Landry, and especially by the old doctor, but he was always spoken of as the "Stranger," and he knew that the title would cling to him forever.

"And how are the cantaloupes coming on?" questioned Father Bertrand.

"Fine," replied Mr. Parker. "All up and doing well."

"Monsieur Parker has something more important

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than cantaloupes to tell you of," said Monsieur Landry mysteriously.

"Indeed?" cried the priest and Dr. Lemaire together.

Monsieur Landry nodded his head. Mr. Parker smiled rather sheepishly. "Yes," stammered he, "I'm—I'm—thinking of getting married."

"To whom?" asked the priest and Dr. Lemaire excitedly.

"That's just what I don't know," replied Mr. Parker.

The two questioners gazed at him open-mouthed in their astonishment.

"I see," said the old doctor finally, in a hurt tone. "It is a joke. I am very stupid."

"No, it isn't a joke," cried Mr. Parker indignantly. "Getting married is far too serious a thing to joke about—at least that's the way it looks to me."

"Then, may I ask," inquired Dr. Lemaire, "how it is that you are going to get married when you do not know whom you are going to get married to?"

"Why, you see, it's this way," replied Mr. Parker. "I'm beginning to get awfully lonesome at my place, and it won't be long before I'll begin to get old. I want some one to take care of me, and I don't much care who it is, if she's good-looking and hasn't a bad temper. I can love any woman who meets those requirements, and as soon as I meet one that does and she's satisfactory to a friend of mine, I'm going to marry her. That is, if she'll have me, of course."

Dr. Lemaire nodded, and his face, which had been

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clouded by a frown, was now smiling. "You have a very peculiar way of getting a wife," said he, "but I should think that it will do just as well as any other. Marriage, as you have said, is no joke. People are finding that out every minute of the day. I found it out before I had been married a year, but I am happy to say that, unlike a great many other people, I did not wish that I had found it out before I had ever married." And having paid this tribute to his dead wife, the old doctor laid back in his chair and eyed Mr. Parker keenly.

"And may I ask," inquired Father Bertrand, "where you are going to look for this beautiful, good-tempered girl that you wish to marry?"

Mr. Parker waved his arm about him. "Here in Landry, in the country, everywhere," replied he.

"And he wishes us to help him find her," announced Monsieur Landry.

The priest and Dr. Lemaire looked at Mr. Parker inquiringly.

Mr. Parker nodded his head. "Yes," said he. "That is just what I want you to do, if you will be so kind. You both know most of the girls about here, and I am sure that you could easily find the one I want."

"And supposing we were to find a girl for you, and after you had married her you found that we had made a mistake. What would you do then?" asked Dr. Lemaire.

Mr. Parker's face fell and he scratched his head thoughtfully for a moment.

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"I'll run the risk," said he decisively, "and you can rest assured that I won't blame you, whatever happens. You see," he continued, "I have been thinking of this matter for some time, and I came over to church to-day to sort of look around, you know."

"And did you see any one that interested you?" asked Father Bertrand.

"I saw one girl who was very pretty," replied Mr. Parker, "but Mr. Landry told me that her temper—" He hesitated for a word.

"He is speaking of Old Victor's Jeanne," explained Monsieur Landry.

Father Bertrand and Dr. Lemaire both said, "Ah!" significantly.

"Of course, she would not do," finished Monsieur Landry.

"Hardly," said the old doctor drily.

"She is a good girl, but I am afraid that she has a very violent temper," added Father Bertrand, and as he spoke he rose from his chair and started down the steps.

"I wish to speak to that old man and his niece," said he in explanation of his departure.

He had hardly taken his seat upon his return when Mr. Parker questioned him excitedly.

"I say, who is that girl?" he asked.

"That," answered the priest, "is Aline Telesse. I have just been speaking to her about making her first communion."

"She is certainly a beauty," cried Mr. Parker enthusiastically.

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"She is very pretty," assented Father Bertrand.

"And her temper?" inquired Mr. Parker.

"She has no temper," replied the priest. "She is sweet and gentle always."

"You have found your girl," said Monsieur Landry, beaming.

"And now you have got to win her," added the old doctor laughing.

Mr. Parker was silent for a moment, as he gazed at the retreating figure of the girl. "Where does she live?" he asked, turning to Father Bertrand.

"On Belrive plantation," replied the priest.

Mr. Parker arose from his chair, his face wreathed in smiles, and held out his hand to Father Bertrand. "I cannot begin to thank you," said he. "If you had looked all over the world, you could not have found a girl more suitable. So she lives on Belrive plantation, does she? You remember my saying that the girl must be satisfactory to a certain friend of mine, eh? Well, that friend is Miss Betty Peters, and as this girl lives at Belrive none can know her better than she does. So everything is perfect, and I am going to get on my horse right now and ride over to see Miss Betty. A man can't be too quick about a thing of this sort. Some other fellow is liable to get ahead of him and cut him out."

"You are right," declared the old doctor as he shook his hand. "You cannot set about a thing of this sort too soon."

"I wish you all success," cried Father Bertrand.

"And nothing but failure for the other fellow,"

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added Monsieur Landry as Mr. Parker started down the steps.

"Of course," said Mr. Parker from the sidewalk, "all of what I have said is between ourselves?"

"Of course," assented the three men upon the porch, as Mr. Parker strode hurriedly down the street in quest of his horse.

Meanwhile, inside the drug store, Jean Marie Lacour, having divested himself of his many-colored garments, was seated upon a high stool back of the prescription counter, cursing his lucky rival, while the subject of his maledictions, walking slowly down the broad, shady street, laughed and joked in the best of good humors.

"That boy Lacour," said he to Jeanne, "is very angry because I am out walking with you."

Jeanne tossed her head. "Let him be angry," she replied. "I am sure that I shall be none the worse for it."

"Lacour is a smart boy. He is almost a doctor. He has lived in the city," began Numa insinuatingly.

"And what if he has?" replied Jeanne. "There is one with whom I would rather walk than Jean Marie, even though he has not been to the city." She looked at Numa meaningly.

Numa smiled and laid his hand upon her shoulder. "And there is one," said he, "who would rather walk with you than with any one else in the world. There is one who thinks you the most beautiful woman in all this country. There is one who has dreamed of you many days."

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Jeanne blushed and drew away from him. "We are on the street, Numa," she whispered. "All can see us."

Numa cast his eyes down. "Forgive me," answered he. "When I am with you I forget everything."

And so he went on, whispering words of love and devotion into the eager ear of the stately Jeanne, while she looked up into his handsome face and thought that never did woman have so perfect a lover as he.

Presently they came to the house of Old Victor, and Numa, pressing the girl's hand, threw open the broken front gate with a flourish.

"Farewell for a little while," he cried. "The hours will seem like days until I am back again."

Jeanne looked at him shyly for a moment, and then blowing him a kiss with her fingertips she turned and ran swiftly down the brick walk to the house.

Numa gazed after her, an ugly, sinister smile upon his face. "What a fool you are that you cannot tell love from mockery," said he to himself. "You are a proud girl, Jeanne, and there are many who will be glad to see you humbled."

Turning away he walked down the street until he came to the outskirts of the little town. Here in a barren, grass-grown lot, strewn with broken glass and rusty cans, there stood a small and dilapidated cabin.

It was a very scarecrow of a cabin, with its one broken window, its sagging chimney and its rotten roof of shingles, through whose ragged cracks and breaks the rain and sunshine made their way into the single room beneath.

Kicking open the door Numa entered this room and

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flung himself upon the ragged, dirty bed inside. Save for the bed and a broken chair, the room had no furniture. Above the fireplace ran a narrow, smoke-blackened shelf upon which straggled a long row of empty bottles, the silent reminders of many a drunken orgy.

For a while Numa lay across the bed, his eyes closed, and then, hearing a noise outside, he suddenly sat upright. The door opened very quietly and a white face thrust itself inside the room.

Numa threw himself across the bed again with a grunt of satisfaction.

"So you have come at last, Jean?" said he. "It has taken you a long time to get here."

The little man came into the room and seated himself upon the broken chair. "I walked home with Aline from church," replied he. "It is a long ways."

"And I walked home with Jeanne," said Numa with a chuckle. "She is the greatest fool. I told her that I loved her, and she believed me. Why, she even loves me herself in this short time. I am a terrible fellow with the women, Jean." He laughed uproariously.

"You had best be careful, Numa," cautioned the little man gravely.

Numa rose up and sat upon the edge of the bed, eyeing the hunchback with a look, half of shame, half of amusement. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Jeanne has a bad temper," answered Le Bossu. "When she is mad she is crazy. She will try to kill you, Numa, if you deceive her."

Numa laughed contemptuously. "I am willing to

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take my chances of that," said he. "When I told you, before we came to Landry, that I would pretend to love some girl to make Aline jealous, I had then made up my mind who that girl would be. One day when I came here to sell my birds a girl laughed at me because of my torn clothes. She laughed at me and mocked me because I was poor, because I was ragged. The girl was Old Victor's Jeanne. When I came to Landry in all my fine clothes she did not remember me, she did not know who I was, but I remembered her and I picked her out for the girl that I am going to make a fool of. For every laugh, for every sneer that she cast at me when I was ragged, tired and dirty, I am going to make her pay double. She is a proud girl, Jean, but I am going to humble her. She has had many lovers, and she has treated them all badly. It is her turn now, and a hard turn I am going to make it." He ceased speaking and began to roll himself a cigarette.

"You wish to speak to me about something this morning, I suppose," said Le Bossu, breaking the silence that followed Numa's denunciation of the proud Jeanne.

Numa puffed his cigarette thoughtfully for a moment. "Yes," he answered. "Do you remember the day that I told a fortune for the young lady at old Telesse's cabin?"

Le Bossu nodded. "Yes," replied he. "You surprised me very much. I did not know that you could tell fortunes, Numa."

Numa laughed. "I cannot tell them," said he.

"But you told one that day," persisted Le Bossu.

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“It sounded fine, just as though you had gotten it out of a book.”

“That is just where I did get it,” replied Numa. “I learned it long ago, when I was a boy, and I have never forgotten it. I read many of the books that my father had with him in the woods. Do you know why I told that fortune?”

Le Bossu shook his head.

“I wished,” said Numa, “to see a ring that the young lady had upon her finger.”

“I see,” cried Le Bossu. “And that was the reason why you first looked at the back of her hand.”

“It was,” replied Numa. “Her ring was the same as the one that Aline wears about her neck upon a chain. Have you ever seen this ring of Aline’s?”

Le Bossu nodded.

“I do not know the meaning of these two rings being alike,” continued Numa, “but of one thing I am certain. It can mean no good for me. Therefore, Jean, I must get Aline’s ring away from her. How I am going to do it I cannot say. What I wished to see you about this morning was to ask you to help me get it. Do all that you can to get it, Jean, for I must have it.”

The little man was silent for a while, stroking his chin softly with his long, white hand.

“How did you come to see this ring of Aline’s?” he asked finally. “She shows it to no one.”

“I crept up behind her when she was looking at it alone in the orchard,” replied Numa. “She was angry because I saw it. And how did you come to see it, Jean?”

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"She showed it to me herself," replied the little man.

"And did she tell you who gave it to her?" asked Numa eagerly.

Le Bossu nodded.

"Who was it, Jean?" cried Numa.

"That," replied the little man, "I cannot tell you. I have promised her that I will tell no one."

Numa looked surprised. "Come, Jean," said he in a wheedling tone, "you are going to tell me, I am sure."

Le Bossu only shook his head. Again Numa asked him. Again Le Bossu refused.

For a long time Numa begged and pleaded, using every means within his power to overcome the obstinacy of the little man, but to no avail. Finally he lost his temper. "I have asked you kindly, Jean, to tell me, and you will not answer," he cried with an oath. "Now I am going to make you tell me."

Le Bossu smiled grimly. "You can never make me tell you, Numa," said he, "for I have given my promise not to do so."

Numa became furious. "We shall see about that," he cried, springing to his feet and advancing threateningly toward the little man with clenched fists and blazing eyes.

With a bound Le Bossu left his chair and retreated to a corner of the room where he stood with his back against the wall, one hand fumbling uncertainly inside his blouse.

"Will you tell me now, Jean?" raged Numa, rais-

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ing his clenched fist above the misshapen figure before him.

The little man waved him back with his free hand. "Do not come any closer. Do not come any closer," he gasped. "If you do I swear to God that I will kill you."

There was a look in his white, drawn face that caused the furious Numa to draw back for a moment and lower his arm. There was a gleam in his great brown eyes that caused the bully to smile in a sheepish way and to beg his pardon.

"I am sorry, Jean," he mumbled. "I lost my temper. You know that I would never have struck you."

Very slowly Le Bossu withdrew his hand from inside his blouse and walked to the door. Standing upon its threshold he spoke very quietly, his voice low and earnest.

"I am going to the woods until you are in a better humor," said he. "You are very foolish, Numa. But once before in your whole life have you been as close to death as you were but a moment ago."

"And when was that?" asked Numa, his bravado all gone, his voice trembling.

Le Bossu laughed scornfully. "That," said he, "like the name of the one who gave Aline her ring, you shall never know."

CHAPTER XIII

AUNT BETTY DECIDES

THE spring had burst in its full glory upon Belrive, and far and wide the land was a wilderness of tender green and fragrant blossoms.

Down in the field the brown stretch of the cuts was dotted with innumerable tiny shoots of green with a multitude of slender blades; of long, tender sprouts blending down from the palest of green to the softest of gleaming white.

All day long the big pumping plant upon the bayou worked and throbbed and panted in the hot sunlight. All day long the wheels went round and round with tireless energy, turning the pump that, having seized the brown muddy water from its intake, hurried it through the big discharge pipe and hurled it a mass of foam and spray into the long wooden flume that waited to receive it.

And here the water, released again into the clear open air, rushes merrily along between the yellow cypress walls, its tiny waves and ripples dancing and sparkling in the sunlight, madly waving the long, green slime at the bottom of the flume until it is dashed once more, with a roar and a burst of misty white, into the cavernous depths of the main canal.

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And now the water, its journey almost ended, flows peacefully along between the high, grass-covered levees of the main canal and from there into the laterals, whence it is presently floated into the cuts and sinks deep into the loose, dry earth that has waited so eagerly for its coming.

Here it lies in placid contentment, lazily rustling the tiny spears of rice, tenderly cooling and soothing its delicate blades, until they are fresh and strong and green again.

All day long the water-tenders go among the cuts with sodden clothes and dripping shovels, cutting floats in the field levees, through which the brown water rushes in torrents, damming up other floats with heavy walls of earth, behind which the imprisoned water swirls angrily, ever guiding the cool, life-giving stream from the great flume in its journey over the dry, thirsty fields.

And so the great wheels turn, the water flows, the dry canals are filled to overflowing and the water-tenders rush madly from one cut to another, for the new crop has come and all must work to save it; must strive to help it through its infancy; must feed it with the water that is its life.

It was very gratifying to Mr. Parker, this scene of growth and activity, and as he rode along toward the big house his smile was one of great satisfaction. He had found Aunt Betty away for a week at Sunnyside when he had called after his talk upon the old doctor's porch, and he had utilized the time of her absence in seriously considering the question of matrimony.

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And now he had come to a decision, Aunt Betty was back at Belrive and he was on his way to get her opinion upon this momentous question.

She answered his ring at the door in person, and greeted him warmly.

"I am glad to see you," said she as they shook hands, "and I am sorry that I missed you last Sunday. Come into the parlor and tell me who she is, for I am sure that that is what you have come to see me about."

Mr. Parker nodded his head. "Yes, Miss Betty," replied he. "That is what I have come to tell you."

"And her name?" began Aunt Betty impatiently.

"Aline," replied Mr. Parker.

Aunt Betty gave a little jump of surprise. "You can't mean the Aline that lives here?" she cried.

"She is the one that I mean," answered Mr. Parker. "What do you think of it?"

Aunt Betty thought for a few moments. "I suppose that she will do," said she finally. "I have only seen her once, but from what Marjorie tells me, she must be a nice, sweet-tempered girl. She is pretty also; I had hoped, though, that you would fly a little higher. She has no kin but her uncle, you know, who works in the field."

"Yes," said Mr. Parker. "I know all that, but I don't mind it. She is a pretty girl and a nice one, and that's enough for me. My father worked in a field, too, up in Vermont, and it wasn't half as good a field as Aline's uncle's field is, for it was full of rocks as big as your head. If you are satisfied with her, and she will have me, I will marry her to-morrow."

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Aunt Betty nodded her head approvingly. "That is the way to look at it," replied she. "Where did you meet this girl?"

"I haven't met her yet," answered Mr. Parker.

Aunt Betty's face grew dark. "You are not trying to joke?" she began.

Mr. Parker shook his head emphatically. "No, no, Miss Betty," he cried. "I wouldn't think of such a thing. I have only seen this girl once and that was last Sunday. She was so pretty that I asked about her and found out that she had a good temper, which is my chief requisite in a wife. When I found out also that she lived here I came straight over to see you, for I felt sure that as she was one of your tenants you would know all about her."

"Of course I know all about her," interrupted Aunt Betty, who was angry with herself for allowing her ignorance concerning the girl to become so manifest to Mr. Parker. "I know more about this girl than you will ever know about her. I have simply been drawing you out, that is all. When do you expect to meet her?"

"To-night," replied Mr. Parker. "There is going to be a dance at Eloi Beaudoin's, and Carey has promised to drive me over to it. I hear that she is going with a man named Numa Le Blanc."

"My truthful hunter!" exclaimed Aunt Betty.

"Indeed?" said Mr. Parker. "He doesn't look in the least truthful."

"There is such a thing as sarcasm," replied Aunt Betty. "He told me the truth once, probably for the first time in his life, and he did it for no reason in the

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world, except to be contrary. He will be a dangerous rival, Mr. Parker."

Mr. Parker smiled grimly. "No more dangerous a rival to me than I shall be to him," replied he.

For a while the two were silent, and then Aunt Betty gave her shoulders a little shrug and sat up straight in her chair, which was a sign that she had made up her mind.

"Go to the dance to-night and meet the girl," said she. "If you are satisfied with her, ask her to marry you. Should she refuse you, I tell you candidly that I will help you no further in the matter for two reasons. The first is, that she is one of the tenants here and I do not wish to annoy her and make her dissatisfied with Belrive. The second is that, although I am not opposed to your marrying her, I think that there are any number of girls about here more suitable for you than she is. Should she accept you, I shall do all in my power to help you, and now let us dismiss this matter entirely until you have spoken to her, for we have said all that ought reasonably to be said about it."

"Very well," replied Mr. Parker. "The next thing that I shall say to you about it will be the result of my proposal."

Again the two were silent, each thinking of the forbidden topic of conversation, each waiting for the other to speak of something else.

Finally Aunt Betty broke the silence. "How are the cantaloupes?" she asked disdainfully.

Mr. Parker gave a little jump as though he were coming out of a reverie.

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"They came up and grew all right, and made what the seed book calls fine, strong plants," said he. "The weather was favorable, and there was no frost. You certainly are a weather prophet, Miss Betty, and one that the most careful gardener might go by with perfect safety."

"Thank you," said Aunt Betty, remembering with a shudder her fears and apprehensions of a few weeks before.

"Well," continued Mr. Parker, "as I have said, I have fine, strong plants and they are simply crowded with little melons. I have never seen such a crop in all my life."

"And I suppose," said Aunt Betty, "that you will make an enormous fortune."

Mr. Parker shook his head sadly. "No," answered he, "I won't make anything. You see, I didn't look up the freight rates on cantaloupes until a few days ago, and then I found that by shipping them to the city I would lose a cent on each one of them. It is very discouraging, especially when you consider what a fine crop I have, but I am going to ship some just as an experiment. I feel that I owe it to the cantaloupes to do so."

Aunt Betty regarded Mr. Parker curiously for a moment.

"My husband once knew an old negro named Perrot," said she, "and one day he met him after not having seen him for quite a long while."

"Well, Perrot," said my husband, "What are you doing now for a living?"

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“ ‘I’m trading horses,’ answered Perrot. ‘I sold four Cajun ponies last week.’

“ ‘What did you pay for them?’ asked my husband.

“ ‘Eight dollars,’ replied Perrot.

“ ‘And what did you get for them?’

“ ‘Six dollars,’ replied Perrot.

“ ‘Of course,’ said my husband, ‘you ought to know what you are doing, but I can’t exactly see how you can make much money in such a business as that.’

“ ‘Well, Boss,’ answered Perrot, ‘a man’s got to do something to support his family.’ ”

Aunt Betty ceased speaking. Mr. Parker laughed and rose from his chair.

“Come now, Miss Betty,” said he. “That story can’t apply to me. I haven’t any family.”

“No,” replied Aunt Betty grimly. “I beg your pardon. It cannot. You haven’t even that excuse.”

“Well,” said Mr. Parker as he prepared to leave, “I am very much obliged to you for your advice and I will let you know how my future happiness is to be arranged just as soon as I find out myself.”

“Do,” replied Aunt Betty, who had come out upon the front gallery with her visitor, “and remember, not a word about it until everything is settled.”

With a smile of great amusement upon her sharp, clever face she watched him mount and ride away.

“Did any one ever hear of such a man,” said she to herself as she finally went into the house again.

CHAPTER XIV

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

TRUE to his promise, Carey stopped by for Mr. Parker and found that usually sedate gentleman in a state of pleasurable excitement. As they drove along he held forth volubly upon the beauty of Aline until, finding his companion strangely unresponsive, he relapsed into silence, thinking of what he would say to her when he had met her.

The night was a beautiful one, with a full moon and a cloudless sky dotted with innumerable twinkling stars that seemed to have been strewn from one end of the heavens to the other. A little breeze had sprung up at nightfall and the tall weeds on the roadside nodded grotesquely, bending aside for a moment that one might see the dark stretch of the fields, and farther away the black line of the forest, all white and hazy in the moonlight, picked out here and there with a tiny dot of light from some cabin window.

Presently they came to a byroad barred by a high wooden gate, behind which a long avenue of china trees stretched away interminably. Back of the trees a vast number of twinkling lights told of a house illuminated for some occasion, while the sound of music borne

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faintly on the wind left but little doubt as to what the occasion was.

Driving through the gateway they went up the avenue of china trees which, being in bloom, filled the air with the fragrance of their lilac blossoms; and coming out into a little grove the dance hall was before them.

It was a long, heavy structure, built on one side of the small frame house in which its owner lived, made of bare, unpainted cypress boards, and raised from the ground upon heavy blocks of oak. The lights streamed from its open windows, mingled with the sound of laughter, of high-pitched voices, chattering in French, and the shuffling of many feet.

Carey, getting out of the buggy, led the way toward the dwelling, closely followed by Mr. Parker, who was all impatience to meet the maiden of his choice. Upon the low porch of his house stood Eloi Beaudoin himself who greeted them warmly and led the way into the dance hall, where their appearance was the signal for a sudden hush to fall upon the dancers.

They all paused for a moment to look at the intruders; some with surprise, some with indifference and many with suspicion, for the Cajun is a wary soul, ever distrustful of strangers.

The dance hall, a long board room, its floor smooth and glossy with beeswax, was lighted by a number of lamps fastened to the wall and hanging from the ceiling. Along both sides ran a long row of benches upon which the dancers rested themselves, while at one end was a little wooden platform for the musicians, three

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in number, playing upon the violin, the clarinet and the accordion.

A dance had just ended as Carey and Mr. Parker entered, and they stood for a moment in the doorway watching the couples as they slowly promenaded about the room or sat upon the benches talking and laughing with much waving of fans and mopping of hot, flushed faces.

It was here that one saw these people in all the heterogeneous mixture of their different kinds and stations. Here was a well-to-do farmer from the prairies, his clothes strong and good, yet old-fashioned, speaking solemnly with his neighbor of the price of cotton, of corn or of rice.

Here was an old man from far away up the bayou, white-haired and bent, treated with deference by all, wholly ignorant and illiterate, brought down from his distant home to see the wonders of Landry.

Here was a young man from Landry itself, gorgeous as to apparel, patronizing as to manner, passing the girls with many a smirk and toss of his head—a veritable gilded youth of the village in which he belonged.

Here was a swamper, brown and hairy, powerful of arm and broad of shoulder, his clothes old and torn; bringing with him, it seemed, a breath of the great woods in which he lived.

Here was a merchant from some distant country store, cool and suave, dressed in white linen trousers and shiny alpaca coat, talking blandly of business with many a shrug of the shoulders and raising of the eyebrows.

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And here above all were the girls, bright and pretty every one of them, with their dark hair, their great black eyes and their fresh, rosy cheeks.

It was a happy, pleasure-seeking throng that, having for a moment laid aside its cares and worries, sought to enjoy itself as best it could.

For a while Carey stood in the doorway with his companion looking for Aline, and then, suddenly catching sight of her, he called to Mr. Parker to follow him, and went over to where she sat with her partner upon one of the benches against the wall.

Very sweet she looked in her simple dress of white, and when she saw Carey coming toward her she rose to her feet with a smile of welcome.

"I did not expect to see you at the dance, *M'sieu*," said she.

"I didn't expect to come myself," answered Carey, "but I was induced to by my friend here, Mr. Parker, who, by the way, is very anxious to meet you."

The girl held out her hand. "I am glad to meet one of *M'sieu* Gordon's friends," said she.

Mr. Parker took the little hand that was held out toward him, and (as he afterward told Carey) was "a goner from the start."

The musicians began to tune their instruments; a man suddenly sprang upon the little platform and smote himself upon the chest. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, and his face was flushed as though from drinking.

"*Messieurs et Mesdames*," he cried. "*Moi suis maître du bal. La première chose, ça va être une valse.*"

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La seconde chose, ça va être une polka. La troisième chose ça va être une contradance, et la quatrième chose ça va être une gavotte."

He ceased speaking and the music began; a low, plaintive wail at first, rising louder and louder, devoid of time or harmony, yet having a certain rhythm about it that set one longing to be up and dancing. The musicians beat upon the floor in time to the music, the couples arose from the benches and began to dance.

Mr. Parker turned to Aline. "Shall we try this one?" he asked.

"If you wish to, *M'sieu* Parker," she replied, and in a moment he had whirled her away, leaving her late partner to stare after her in astonishment.

Carey watched them for a moment as they dodged their way in and out among the crowd of dancers that thronged the floor, and then turning away he found a man whom he wished to see, and was soon talking with him, seated at one of the tables that crowded Eloi Beaudoin's dwelling. For a long time he sat there talking in French and drinking cup after cup of fragrant black coffee, for your Cajun, no matter how temperate he is in matters of liquor, is ever a coffee toper, and you must drink with him when he invites you or he will be offended.

The dancing went on, the musicians playing piece after piece with tireless energy. Eloi Beaudoin finally thrust his head into the hall with a shout.

"*Gumbo pare!*" he cried.

The musicians ceased playing, the men took the girls upon their arms and marched slowly into the dwelling,

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for it was the custom that each man must treat his partner to a plate of gumbo.

Mr. Parker followed along with the crowd, his collar wilted, his face purple in his efforts to converse with his partner, a slip of a girl of fifteen, who spoke not a word of English.

"*Je ne non parley Français,*" he kept repeating pathetically.

Carey smiled at him as he came into the room. "Where is Aline?" he asked.

"I don't know," sighed Mr. Parker dejectedly. "I was dancing with this young lady when they stopped for refreshments," and hurrying to a table he was soon making amends for the scarcity of his French with the lavishness of his entertainment.

Carey looked about the crowded room for Aline, but could not find her. Suddenly he felt a tug at his coat, and turning he saw Le Bossu, who was beckoning to him frantically.

"Come quickly, *M'sieu,*" cried he, "or you will be too late. The little man's eyes were wide with terror and he shook with excitement and impatience.

Carey followed him curiously as he trotted away, and in a moment found himself outside in the grove with Le Bossu hurrying along beside him.

"See," gasped the hunchback, pointing toward a dim figure among the trees. "There he is, *M'sieu.* Hurry, hurry, or you will be too late."

And so Carey quickened his pace and came in a moment upon a sight that caused him to cry out in anger, for there before him in the moonlight, amid the

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lace-like shadows of the china trees, stood Numa, wild and drunk and crazy, holding in his arms a struggling white figure that called out to him weakly for mercy.

"It is Aline, *M'sieu*," cried the hunchback. "Hurry, for the love of God."

With a spring Carey was upon the drunken man and struck him to the ground. The girl seized her rescuer with a grip of terror and cowered against him trembling.

"Save me, *M'sieu*, save me," she cried.

Carey put his arm about her and spoke to her very quietly. "Do not be afraid, Aline," said he. "I will not let him touch you again."

For a moment Numa lay where he had fallen as though he was stunned, and then with an oath he sprang to his feet.

"I have owed you a debt for a long time, *M'sieu*, and now I am going to pay you," he panted.

His knife flashed for an instant in the moonlight.

Le Bossu sprang forward.

Carey put his hand behind him and motioned to the little man to move aside. "Stand away, Jean," he cried. "I am going to shoot him."

With a cry the girl seized his arm. "Do not kill him, *M'sieu*," she gasped. "It is murder. Let him go, *M'sieu*, let him go."

Carey lowered his arm. "Throw down your knife," said he.

Numa obeyed him sullenly.

"Now go," said Carey, "and if ever you touch this

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girl again I will kill you, as sure as there is a God in heaven."

For a moment Numa stood irresolute, and then without a word he plunged into the darkness of the trees.

Carey turned to the girl who was now weeping softly. "You are nervous and excited, Aline," said he. "You should go home, and I will take you."

He found his buggy and, helping the girl into it, drove for a while in silence, Aline sobbing softly beside him, her face buried in her hands. After a time she was quiet and he turned to her. "Tell me how it happened, Aline," said he gently.

The girl gave a little shudder and choked the sob that came to her lips.

"It was when they all went out for the gumbo, *M'sieu*," replied she. "Numa called that Jean wished to see me and I went out to him. When I reached the grove I found that he had been drinking and I started to go back to the house again, but he seized my arm and told me that I must kiss him. I tried to get away from him, but he only held me tighter, saying that he would make me kiss him. It was then that I called for help and Jean came. He is so small and weak that he could do nothing, *M'sieu*, and so he went for you and—and—that is all."

"Yes," said Carey. "That is all, for I promise you that he will never trouble you again. I shall see myself that he does not." And then he set about to soothe and calm the girl as best he could.

Finally they came to Belrive and went down the

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plantation road to where the little cabin stood all silvery in the moonlight. About it lay the fields, sleeping snugly beneath their soft, white coverlet of mist.

Carey helped the girl to the ground, where she paused for a moment and gazed up at him with tear-filled eyes. "I do not know how to thank you, *M'sieu*," said she. "I shall never forget what you have done for me. It is little to say I thank you, but it is all that I can do. So good night, *M'sieu*, and again thank you." She held out her hand.

As she spoke to him her face lit softly by the moonlight, her blue eyes filled with tears, her lips trembling, Carey had a mad desire to take her in his arms, to kiss her and soothe her like the child that she was; but he only held the little hand in his for a moment, as he bade her good night.

As he drove back along the plantation road he thought of the girl as he had never thought of her before. He could feel the despairing grip of her little fingers as she had held him but a short while ago. He could feel her slender body trembling against his, the feathery wisp of her hair that had blown against his cheek.

He could hear her cry of joy as he had come to her, her sigh of relief as she had cowered against him. A strange feeling possessed him.

And then he thought of Numa and his anger flared up to a white heat. He wished that he had killed him. How could he dare to touch such a beautiful girl, to think that she should care to kiss him?

Suddenly he gave a harsh little laugh, and sat up

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very straight, his shoulders squared, his chin thrust forward defiantly.

“Carey Gordon, don’t be a fool,” said he to himself severely. “Of what possible interest can this girl be to you? She is a Cajun and one of your tenants. She is no more to you than any of the others at Belrive. You must be dreaming. It must be the moon. This shall not happen again.”

And so true to his resolution he drove along for quite a while, his thoughts far away from any disturbing influence, but when at last he came to Eloi Beaudoin’s and went up the fragrant avenue of china trees he was dreaming again, dreaming in the witchery of the moonlight.

CHAPTER XV

ALINE MAKES A SACRIFICE

IN the big yellow church at Landry Father Bertrand was dismissing his catechism class for the last time, and upon his patient face there was a look of quiet joy, for the children had done well.

His pupils, their lessons over forever, trooped out of the church in joyful silence, and once outside gave vent to their happiness in many shouts and shrill screams of laughter.

The girls, gathering together in little groups, solemnly discussed some question of vast importance, shaking their heads knowingly and pointing about their persons as though they were going about the operation of putting on a vast amount of imaginary clothing.

And why should they not, for in every store in Landry were there many yards of soft white cloth; in every window was there wreath upon wreath of cool, white flowers; in every house was there sewing and cutting and trying on of filmy white dresses: for in seven days these girls would make their first communion, and they must be dressed according to custom, in the finest, the nicest, the whitest of garments that the purses of their parents could afford.

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And so the boys played and shouted, the girls talked together joyously of their new dresses, and all were happy at the prospect of their approaching good fortune. All save one, a girl, who, creeping away from the rest as soon as they had left the church, sadly went her way up the long, dusty road.

She had not gone very far, however, when there came the sound of wheels behind her and a voice called out cheerily, "Wait a minute, Miss Aline, and I'll drive you home."

Turning, she saw a man in a low-covered buggy who was smiling pleasantly at her. Without waiting for her to accept his invitation he drove up, got out of the buggy and very gallantly helped her into it.

"Now," said he, as he got in beside her, "I think that you'll find this much better than walking."

"You are very kind, *M'sieu* Parker," gasped the girl, who was all but breathless from her quick ascent to the broad leather seat. "It is a long walk and I have much to do at home. But am I not taking you out of your way?"

"Not in the least, not in the least," cried Mr. Parker beaming. "I was on my way to Belrive when I met you. I stopped at the church thinking that I would find you there, but I was told that you had left, and so I came on as quickly as I could, hoping that I would catch up with you. And now tell me all about the catechism. You will make your first communion, will you not?"

"Yes," answered Aline, and then in her simple way

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she told him of how she had worked and of how Father Bertrand had helped her, while Mr. Parker beamed and smiled and listened in rapt attention.

Finally they came to the little cabin and Mr. Parker, helping Aline from the buggy, got out himself and tied the horse.

“Can I come in and talk to you for a while?” asked he.

“Certainly, *M'sieu* Parker,” answered the girl, “but I must ask you if you will mind my spinning while you talk, for I have much work to do.”

Inside the cabin she looked about the room for a moment undecided and then pointed through the open door to the orchard at the back of the house.

“It is very cool and nice out there,” she began.

Mr. Parker seized the spinning wheel and hurried it outside. Aline followed him, carrying a chair and the fluffy mass of cotton.

The little orchard was delightfully cool and it was also delightfully sweet, for the pear trees were in bloom and the tall, white shafts of blossoms filled the air with their delicate fragrance. Beneath the trees the ground was covered with a snowy mass of fallen leaves and the aisles between the rows were a miracle of chasteness.

Here amid the fragrant silence, unbroken save by the fall of the tiny petals or the lazy humming of the bees, Mr. Parker placed the spinning wheel and seated himself upon the great oaken bench near-by.

“I guess you're a good deal surprised at my visit, aren't you, Miss Aline?” he asked.

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The girl carefully started her wheel, and then answered him frankly.

“Yes, *M’sieu*, Parker,” she replied. “I am surprised.”

“Well, you see,” said Mr. Parker, “I want to ask you something.”

The girl stopped her spinning and stared at him in amazement. “You wish to ask me something, *M’sieu* Parker?” she cried.

“Yes,” replied Mr. Parker, fumbling in his pocket. “You don’t mind my smoking, do you?”

The girl looked puzzled. “Why should I mind your smoking, *M’sieu* Parker?” she asked.

Mr. Parker drew a cigar from his pocket and endeavored to light it. Match after match broke in his trembling fingers and his face grew purple with embarrassment. He seemed very nervous.

Aline watched him curiously, a smile of amusement hovering about her lips.

“Was it about the cigar that you wished to ask me?” she inquired.

Mr. Parker flung the cigar away and shook his head violently. “No, no. I wanted to ask you if—if—” He stopped short and wiped his face, which was covered with perspiration. He seemed very nervous indeed.

“If what, *M’sieu* Parker?” asked the girl in bewilderment.

“If er—if er—” Mr. Parker stopped again and fumbled in his pocket nervously. “Let me get a cigar,” he pleaded. “I can always talk better when I’m smoking.”

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Again he struggled with the matches only to give up in despair, as he had done before.

Aline looked worried. "Are you sick, *M'sieu* Parker?" she asked.

Mr. Parker looked at her, blushed, cast his eyes upon the ground and dug in the soft earth with the heel of his shoe.

"No," answered he. "I am not sick. I want to ask you if—if—if you will marry me." He blurted out the last part of his speech in a trembling voice, and without raising his eyes waited for his answer.

The girl rose from her chair, her cheeks flushed, her eyes filled with angry tears.

"You would mock me, *M'sieu* Parker," she cried. "For shame!"

Mr. Parker raised his head hurriedly. "When I ask you to marry me, Miss Aline, I mean it," said he simply, and his voice rang true.

Slowly the girl seated herself, and for a long time she sat looking out upon the snowy whiteness of the trees before her, her eyes shining with a softness that was new to them.

Mr. Parker was the first to speak. "What is it to be, Miss Aline?" he asked gently.

When the girl answered him her voice was soft and low and filled with a tenderness that made his heart throb wildly.

"You have honored me very much, *M'sieu* Parker," said she. "Me a poor girl with no parents, without even a name, and I thank you. But it is not for me to marry you. It would not be right. Some day when

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you went among your own people you would be ashamed of me, you would wish that you had never married me.”

Mr. Parker interrupted her hastily. “No, no,” cried he, “I have thought of that. It is I that would be honored, and I would be proud of you all my life, prouder than any one in all the world.”

The girl shook her head. “You are wrong, *M’sieu* Parker. You do not know,” said she. “And even were it not for that I could not leave my uncle. I have my work to do here and I am very happy. Marry some one else and do not think of me, for it would not be right.”

“But, Miss Aline,” urged Mr. Parker, “your uncle could live with us.”

Again the girl shook her head. “It is as I have said,” she answered. “Again I thank you. Please do not say any more, *M’sieu* Parker, for it makes me sad, to refuse you.”

Mr. Parker got upon his feet and held out his hand. His red face was very grave and the hand that he held outstretched trembled a little.

“Good-by, Miss Aline,” said he. “I am going, for I know that it will only annoy you to have me stay any longer. I’m not much of a talker, but I want to tell you something and I hope that you’ll remember it. I don’t know but what I’m feeling a little sad, and I’ve got an ache here in my chest that I haven’t had for a long time. The last time I had it was when my mother died, and I guess it’s the ache you have when you lose something that you want a whole lot.

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“I know from what you’ve said that there isn’t any chance for me, and I’m not going to ask you again, but we can be friends, and that’s what I want you to remember. If you ever need a friend or want anything, just send for me, and I’ll remember the day that you do so as the happiest one in my life.”

As Mr. Parker finished speaking his voice was husky, and he turned away his head.

The girl’s eyes were soft with tears when she held out her hand. “Good-by, my friend,” said she.

“Good-by, Miss Aline,” replied Mr. Parker as he pressed the little hand tenderly.

“No, no,” whispered the girl. “Good-by, Aline. We are friends, you know.”

Mr. Parker coughed violently. “Good-by, Aline,” he cried, and turning sharply away he hurried from the orchard as fast as his legs could carry him.

Aline sat staring before her long after he had left, her spinning wheel standing idle in the petal-strewn grass at her feet, and when she at last took up the neglected thread she spun mechanically, looking down the white and green aisles of the pear trees, her thoughts far away.

Suddenly there was a step behind her and turning she beheld Numa coming down the path.

With a cry she sprang to her feet, her face scarlet, her eyes blazing angrily.

“Go away! Go away!” she cried loathingly. “I hate you.”

Numa came on, his eyes cast down penitently, and stood before her.

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“Will you not forgive me, Aline?” he pleaded. “I am truly sorry, and I have come to ask your pardon.”

The girl drew away from him with loathing, and pointed toward the road.

“Go,” cried she. “Go, before I call for help to drive you away. Were you to ask me a thousand times I would never forgive you for what you have done. I can never forget it. Sometimes I wake at night and think of it until I am cold with fear. Go! Go, Numa, for the love of God! You are a cruel, wicked man, and I fear you.”

She ceased speaking and cowered behind the great oaken bench, her eyes wide with terror, her hands pressed to her heaving bosom.

Numa smiled reassuringly. “Do not fear me, Aline,” said he. “Of all the men in the world I would be the last one to harm you. Let me explain this matter to you. They gave me liquor at the dance, Aline—raw, hot whiskey that burned my throat like fire. They gave it to me because I had never drunk it before, because they wished to make a fool of me. Instead they made a beast, a wild, bad beast, Aline. I do not remember what I did—I was crazy. It is all like some horrid dream. Had I not been mad with the liquor I would never have done what I did. What I have told you I swear, and if you will forgive me I swear also that never again in my life will I allow any one to give me whiskey. And now will you not forgive me?”

Numa sank upon his knees and held out his hands imploringly.

The girl came out from behind the bench reassured

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by the penitence in his voice, but she still pointed to the road and shook her head.

“What you say may be true, Numa,” answered she, “but I cannot forgive you. Some day in the years to come I may do so, but do not ask me now. Go away, Numa. Go away.”

Numa did not rise from his knees, but bent his head lower, and into his downcast eyes there came a gleam of hope, the hope of one who stakes all upon a final desperate play.

“In seven days, Aline,” said he slowly, “you will go for the first time to holy communion. Would you kneel at the altar upon that day with your heart filled with hate for one who loves you as I do? Think of it, Aline. You would go to the altar with my sin unforgiven by yourself, with your sins forgiven by God. Think of it and forgive me, or you will do a great wrong.”

Slowly the girl came forward, her anger all gone from her, her look as penitent as that of the man who knelt before her.

“Here is my hand, Numa,” said she. “I forgive you even as I hope God will forgive the wrongs that I have done.”

Numa seized the hand joyfully and pressed it to his lips. “You are an angel, Aline,” he cried. “When you come to church in your new white clothes you will need but a pair of wings to make you more perfect than any of them in heaven.”

Aline smiled sadly as she again took up the neglected thread of her spinning wheel. “There will be no new

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white dress when I go to the church with the other girls," said she. "You will see no angel, Numa,"

"No new dress for your first communion?" cried Numa in astonishment.

The girl shook her head. "No," she answered. "We are too poor to buy one. I must wear my old white dress that I have worn for so long."

"But I can—" began Numa eagerly when, his face lighting up, he suddenly ceased speaking and endeavored to hide the satisfaction which his whole appearance suggested.

Now Numa had been about to say that he would lend her the money, for he had been gambling a great deal at the coffee house in Landry and of late he had been lucky, but a thought suddenly striking him that here might be a chance for him to gain the much-coveted ring of Aline, he did not finish the generous offer that he had so eagerly commenced.

"But you can what, Numa?" asked Aline, curious at his stopping so abruptly in what he was saying.

"I can try and think of some way in which you can get the new dress," replied Numa quickly.

To this the girl made no answer, and for a while the orchard was silent, save for the low, deep hum of the spinning wheel. Numa sat with his brows drawn together as though he were thinking, shaking his head from time to time and muttering, "No," as though he were rejecting some fruitless plan that he had made.

"Is there nothing that you can sell to get the money for the dress?" he asked finally.

Aline shook her head. "There is nothing," an-

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swered she. "We need every poor thing that we have."

Again Numa pretended to think.

"The ring that you wear upon the chain about your neck," he began.

The girl turned upon him fiercely, thrusting her hand into her bosom where the ring lay as though she feared that he would take it from her.

"How can you ask me to sell my ring?" she cried. "You know that I will never do it."

Numa waved his hand blandly. "You do not suppose that I thought you would really sell it, did you?" asked he. "Of course I knew that you would not. I mean that you could sell it for a little while—that you could borrow the money on this ring. There is a man in Landry who will lend me the money if I bring it to him. You are poor now, but in a little while Telesse will sell his crop and you can get it back again. It will be perfectly safe, I promise you. This is the only good plan that I can think of. What do you say, Aline, eh?"

"It is not a good plan and I will never sell my ring, Numa," cried the girl passionately.

Numa spread out his hands. "Very well," replied he. "Do not be angry. I was only trying to help you. I knew that you would like to have your ring, but I thought that as it was your first communion you would wish to go to it dressed as you should be."

For a long time the girl was silent, torn by the conflicting emotions that were within her. Over and over again she repeated the words which she had heard so long ago, the words which she had never forgotten.

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“ You must keep this ring with the chain always, and you must never show it to any one unless you are in a great deal of trouble.”

Was she in trouble, she asked herself. Should she trust her only keepsake from her dead father, her only treasure, to the care of some unknown one in Landry? No, no. She would not do it.

And then again she asked herself, should she not make this sacrifice that she might go to her first communion as she ought to. Was it not her duty to do this thing, was it not the wish of God that she should do it? Was it not one of the sacrifices that she must make to save her soul?

And so she thought and tortured herself with many questions while the wicked Numa sat and smiled in silent triumph, for he knew well that he would have his desire.

Finally the girl gave a little sigh of weariness, and reaching inside the bosom of her dress brought forth the ring. Slowly she unclasped the chain that held it and slipped it into her hand. Looking at it for a moment she pressed it to her lips and handed it to Numa.

“ Take it to your friend and get the money,” said she. “ It is my duty to wear the new dress. Be very careful of the ring, Numa, and tell the man to be careful also. It is all that I have and I love it dearly. Go now, and go quickly or I shall take it back again. I cannot help it.”

Numa, who needed no second bidding, sprang to his feet and hurried away.

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“I will bring you the money to-night,” he shouted over his shoulder.

Aline sat for a moment where he had left her, and then she suddenly gave a little sob and hurried after him.

“Numa! Numa!” she cried, “I cannot bear it. Give me back the ring. Give it back to me.”

Around the cabin she went and found Numa about to ride away. Loudly she called to him, but he did not seem to hear her and loped away in a cloud of dust.

Slowly and sadly she went back to the spinning wheel, and, laying her head upon it, sobbed as though her heart would break, while the pear trees showered their snowy petals about her as though they, too, wept in sympathy.

CHAPTER XVI

OLD TELESSE ASSERTS HIMSELF

THE sun had just raised its red rim above the mist-covered stretch of the rice fields and the birds in the orchard were beginning to chatter softly when Aline awoke upon the morning of her first communion. Going over to her little window she stood for a long time gazing out at the fast-growing light, her face radiant with peace and happiness, and then as the sunbeams lit up the darkness with their golden rays she went stealthily across the room and drew from its hiding place in an old cupboard a long, flat bundle wrapped carefully in cottonade.

Quickly laying back the coarse blue and yellow covering she drew forth a soft mass of fleecy white and spread it triumphantly before her. It was her new dress, the work of her own hands, the dainty piece of spotless muslin for which she had sacrificed her one treasure.

Lovingly she fingered the snowy ruffles, the long silken ribbons; lovingly yet timidly as though she feared to touch so delicate a thing, her eyes filled with a quiet joy at the thought of its fitness for the ceremony before her.

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“How beautiful it is,” she whispered. “How surprised Uncle Telesse will be.” But as she stood smiling at the prospect of his surprise and pleasure her face clouded and her hands went up to the chain about her neck, for the memory of what she had lost came back to her in a moment of her happiness.

Ever since she had given her ring to Numa her mind had been tortured with fears as to its safety, fears which the most reassuring stories from her wicked lover failed to banish. In vain did he tell her of how the ring lay safe and snug, tightly locked within the strong box of his friend at Landry. She would shake her head doubtfully.

“It must be as you say, but I wish that I had my ring once more,” she would reply. “I do not know why it is, but I feel that I shall never see it again. Could you not ask your friend to let me have it for just a little while that I may see that it is safe? For only a little while, Numa, for a day, an hour. I promise you that I will send it back to him again.”

But Numa would only look distressed and tell her that such a thing was impossible, while at that very moment the ring lay deep within his pocket, for, trusting no hiding place, he carried it with him wherever he went.

And so it was that upon the morning of her first communion, Aline in the midst of her happiness thought of what she had paid for it, and into the blue eyes that gazed so admiringly at the new dress there came for a moment a great longing.

The old man called her as she was wrapping up the

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bundle again, and thrusting it hurriedly into its hiding place she went out to him, all blushing and confused at her innocent deception.

"You are late this morning, Aline," said he as she kissed him. "It does not matter, though, for I will do no work to-day. Go now and get the breakfast while I fix my harness for our drive to Landry."

He did not seem to notice the girl's confusion, but when she had turned to go to the little kitchen he looked at her curiously, muttering to himself.

"Red cheeks that fade quickly to white are evil things," mumbled he. "Eyes that twist and turn away tell of no good. For seven days Aline has acted queerly. She is keeping something from me and if to-day she does not tell me what it is, I will ask her."

When a little later he sat silent at the breakfast table, his food untouched before him, Aline was worried.

"What is it, Uncle Telesse?" she asked. "Are you not well? Why do you look so sad?"

The old man laughed mirthlessly, with a poor effort to appear indifferent.

"It is nothing, Aline," replied he. "I am quite well and I am happy. Do you not see me laughing? Should I not be happy upon the day of your first communion?"

"But you have eaten nothing," persisted the girl. "You have not touched your breakfast."

The old man pushed his plate away and rose from the table. "I ate something before you were awake," said he. And then before she could question him again,

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he went over to where his coat hung upon a peg and began to fumble in one of its pockets.

Presently he returned with a package which he handed to her.

“Here is something that I have bought for you,” said he. “It is for your first communion.”

Quickly she untied the package, a smile of pleased surprise upon her pretty face, and drawing forth its contents she laid them upon the table before her—a small black prayerbook, a rosary made of tiny glass beads, and a long yellow candle tied about with white ribbon.

The old man stood beside her watching her closely, a quizzical look upon his wrinkled face. With a little cry of pleasure the girl reached up her arms and drawing him down toward her kissed him tenderly.

“How can I thank you, Uncle Telesse,” she cried. “It is so good of you to give me these things when we have so little money.”

The old man shook his head sadly. “It is not enough,” said he. “You should have the new dress such as the other girls will wear. I have tried hard to get the money, but I can find no one to lend it to me. I am sorry, Aline, very sorry, but I could do no better.”

The girl stroked his cheek softly and turned her face away that he might not see her look of triumph. “Do not think of the dress,” she replied, “for I shall be very happy to go as I am. And just think of how proud I shall be of my new prayerbook and beads. I am sure that none of the other girls will have any as nice and as pretty as mine are.”

The old man patted her upon the head and for the

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first time that day his face lost its troubled look. "You are a good girl, Aline," said he, "and you are bearing your disappointment bravely. It is a pity that there are not more like you in the world. Go now and put on the old dress, for *le Père* Bertrand has said that he wishes all of the children to come early to the church."

"I shall be ready in a very little while," said Aline as she went to her room, her face wreathed in smiles at the thought of how surprised the old man would be when he saw her again.

Old Telesse went out to the little stable behind the cabin and took down his harness from the wall. Going back to the cabin he seated himself in the doorway and fell busily to work upon a broken strap, knitting his brows from time to time as though he were thinking deeply.

Before him the rice stretched away, an undulating sea of green, to the edge of the distant forest. Thick and rank it lay, slowly waving in the breeze, rustling softly—cut after cut of rippling blades and long, slender stalks from which the newly born grain was bursting joyously, for the rice was in the boot and the pale green heads were beginning to peep forth cautiously from the close embrace of their protecting leaves.

The air was heavy with the coarse, rank odor of the stagnant water that filled the cuts almost to overflowing, while a vast assemblage of cranes and herons flapped lazily overhead or stalked in solemn dignity along the levees. The old man gazed at the big, long-necked birds and smiled with satisfaction, for well he knew

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that they were in search of crawfish—the tiny nuisance to the rice planter, who bores his tunnels through the walls of the levees and lets out from the cuts the water which it has taken so much trouble to put there.

From afar came the muffled report of a gun, and a great cloud of birds showed for a moment against the blue of the sky, driven by some watchful keeper from their feast of stolen grain. A straggling line of boys moved shoulder deep through the heavy stools of rice, pulling out the tall indigo plants whose delicate tops showed pale and feathery in the sunlight.

A water tender walked slowly along the levee, eyeing it critically, testing the little dams that he had made with his long-handled shovel.

The old man heard a step inside the cabin and turning quickly stared in speechless astonishment, for there before him stood Aline, radiant and smiling, clad in the spotless white of her first communion dress.

A wreath of snowy flowers encircled the glossy darkness of her hair and in her hands she held the prayer-book, the rosary and the long yellow candle with its silken ribbon. As she stood in the dark, poorly furnished room, her happy, peaceful face smiling through the gauzy folds of the veil that fell softly about it, she seemed some beautiful creature from another world come down for a moment to glorify this earth with her presence.

The old man pointed a trembling finger toward her. "That dress, Aline!" he cried. "Where did you get it?"

She laughed at him teasingly. "Ah, can you guess,

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Uncle Telesse?" she asked. "Is it not pretty? Are you not surprised?"

The old man did not seem to hear her. "So that is what you have been hiding from me," said he. "Where did you get that dress, Aline? Did *M'sieu* Gordon give it to you?"

There was something in his voice that caused the smile to leave her face, that caused her lip to tremble and the tears to start to her eyes.

"Why, Uncle Telesse," she cried. "How strangely you speak. I thought that you would be so happy, so surprised, and instead you are angry. Why do you ask if *M'sieu* Gordon gave me the dress, when you must know well that he did not?"

The happiness was all gone from her face and her eyes were piteous.

"But the dress, Aline?" the old man persisted. "Where did you get it?"

Very slowly she came over to him and, standing in the doorway, told him all about it. Told him of her sacrifice, of her longing for her ring, of her work upon the dress at night after he had fallen asleep, of her happiness at the thought of his glad surprise, of her disappointment at the way he had spoken to her, while he listened in silence, a little smile of satisfaction lurking at the corners of his mouth.

When she had finished he rose and kissed her, his eyes beaming with love and affection.

"You are a good girl, Aline, and I did wrong to mistrust you," said he. "I should have known that you did not get the dress from *M'sieu* Gordon."

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“But why should *M'sieu* Gordon give me the dress?” she asked wonderingly.

The old man shook his head. “You would not understand if I were to tell you,” answered he. “You are as a child, Aline, and you know nothing of the world. You are young and beautiful, fit to be the mistress of the big house over there among the oak trees, yet you are but a poor Cajun girl upon *M'sieu* Gordon's plantation. He is your master and you are his servant. He seems to have taken a great interest in you, and it has worried me, but I will worry no more, for you are a good girl and I can trust you. And so you gave up your ring that you might have a new dress for your first communion? That was brave in you and I am pleased and happy at what you have done. But we must get back the ring. It would never do to lose it. I will see Numa about it to-day and will get the money from *M'sieu* Gordon, who I am sure will not refuse me.”

The girl gazed at him with shining eyes. “Oh, Uncle Telesse,” she cried. “Will I really get back my ring to-day? I shall be the happiest girl in all this world.”

“Yes,” replied the old man. “I promise you. And now I must go and harness the horse, or we shall be late at Landry.”

Picking up the mended strap he went out to the stable leaving the girl behind him, a picture of quiet beauty framed in the heavy timbers of the doorway.

And so it was that presently they set out upon their journey in the old man's jumper and went out past

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the waving fields of rice to the public road, where they met a long string of vehicles making their way through the heavy dust clouds toward Landry. Falling into line with the rest they came finally to the little town where the broad streets were thronged with people and the various conveyances that had brought them there.

So crowded indeed were the streets that the old man was obliged to drive on past the church and almost to Dr. Lemaire's drug store before he could find a place to tie his horse. Having found a gap between two jumpers he made the pony fast and started back toward the church, the girl walking by his side.

As they were passing the coffee house of Old Pierre a man darted quickly through the opening in the high white fence and entered the building.

Aline gave a little cry. "See, Uncle Telesse, there is Numa," said she eagerly. "Go inside and ask him for my ring, and I will wait for you here."

The old man started away obediently. "I will be back in a moment," said he. "We are late."

He was indeed late, for the people were pouring into the church in a great stream and the street was almost deserted.

Within the coffee house he met Numa, drunk and surly and dressed in a wonderful array of gaudy clothing, the center of a group of young men from the prairie. The old man went up to him and drew him aside.

"There is something I wish to ask you about, Numa," he said.

Numa answered him sullenly. "Well, what is it?"

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growled he. "Speak quickly, for I wish to get back to my friends again."

"Aline told me this morning of how you got her ring away from her so that she could buy her first communion dress," answered the old man. "I want the ring back, Numa."

Numa shrugged his shoulders. "Have you the money to pay to the man who has it in keeping?" he asked.

The old man shook his head. "You are the man who has it in keeping," replied he. "Give me the ring, Numa."

Numa's face flushed angrily. "What do you mean by saying that I have it?" he cried. "You lie when you say so. What should I want with it?"

Again the old man shook his head. "You know that you have the ring, Numa," said he doggedly. "You took it for some bad purpose of your own. You know that it is the only keepsake that Aline has from her dead father, and that she prizes it more than anything else in all this world. You do not know how much she wants it. She would never have parted with it if she had not thought that it was her duty to do so. Will you not give me the ring for her sake? Will you not make her happy, Numa, on this the day of her first communion?"

For a moment Numa did not answer, while the significance of the old man's words penetrated his liquor-clouded brain.

Suddenly he smiled triumphantly. "No," he cried. "I will not. So this ring was her father's, was it?"

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Now that I know this I promise you that she will never see it again."

He turned away toward his companions.

The old man laid a detaining hand upon his shoulder. "Wait, Numa," said he. "You must give Aline back her ring. - If you do not I shall tell her of all your wickedness and drunkenness and of the lies that you told to get it away from her."

Numa turned upon him fiercely. "If you tell her that I will tell something that I know," replied he meaningly.

The old man's face went white, but he answered him bravely. "You may tell, Numa," said he, "Aline must have her ring. There is a reason why she should."

He turned away as he spoke, well knowing that to argue further was useless.

Numa barred his way. "You will not tell her," cried he furiously. "Do you hear? You will not tell her. I will make you keep your mouth shut."

The old man attempted to pass him. "I will tell her," he answered. "You cannot stop me."

With a cry of rage Numa sprang upon him and bore him to the ground.

"I will choke the breath out of you, you old fool!" he shouted, grasping for the old man's throat.

Telesse fought him weakly. "Send for *Père Bertrand*," he gasped, "or Numa will kill me."

Two men seized Numa and strove to drag him from the body of his victim. He fought and kicked at them desperately, one hand still groping for the old man's throat.

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Old Pierre hobbled outside wringing his hands and calling for help. In the road near the coffee house stood Aline waiting patiently for the old man's return, her eyes cast wistfully toward the church, the steps of which were now crowded with the overflow from inside.

Old Pierre called to her shrilly. "Run quickly for *Père Bertrand*," he cried. "Numa is choking Telesse, and we can do nothing with him."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before Aline was speeding down the dusty road, running blindly toward the church, her cry of terror falling loudly upon the silence of the deserted street. Once she stumbled and fell, but she was upon her feet again in an instant and sped on breathlessly toward the great yellow building before her.

CHAPTER XVII

FATHER BERTRAND LOSES HIS TEMPER

MEANWHILE, within the church a vast assemblage had gathered together. A vast assemblage of fathers, of mothers, of friends who had come for miles around to see their loved ones go for the first time to holy communion.

They filled the seats, they packed the broad aisles and the great open space behind the long rows of pews; yet outside there were many who could find no place to stand or kneel and must wait there patiently in the sunlight until the great ceremony was over.

Far up in the front pews near the altar sat the communicants—the girls upon the right side, the boys upon the left: two great blots of white and black, all streaked and colored with the light from the stained-glass windows. Behind them sat the smiling, happy mothers, the proud fathers, the multitude of friends, all of them dressed to a state of misery; conversing in hoarse whispers, nodding encouragingly toward the front pews, gazing expectantly toward the sacristy for the coming of Father Bertrand.

High up in the choir sat Le Bossu, his white face peering above the railing in search of the absent Aline.

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Every now and then there would be a movement in the crowded aisle below him and the little man would lean forward eagerly only to sink back in bitter disappointment.

"I cannot understand it," he kept repeating. "She must be with the other girls in front." And then he would stare again at the white mass of communicants until his eyes were blurred and dim.

A sudden hush fell upon the congregation, and the little man looking before him saw a long, red line of acolytes entering the chancel. Behind them came Father Bertrand clad in a gorgeous robe of bright, shimmering gold.

The organ rumbled, the acolytes stood in a great half-circle. Father Bertrand mounted the steps of the altar. The people rose to their feet.

Suddenly Le Bossu heard a stir in the crowd and he leaned far over the rail with a cry, for there in the aisle below him the people were falling away upon either side to make a narrow lane through which a white, terror-stricken figure was rushing madly toward the altar.

It was Aline, her dress torn and dirty from her fall, her veil streaming out behind her, breathless and panting and nearly spent from her long run to the church. On she went between the two staring lines of people until she came to the chancel steps, and there she fell in a white heap utterly exhausted.

"*Père* Bertrand," she gasped, "hurry to the coffee house and save my uncle, for Numa is killing him. Hurry, hurry, *mon Père*, if you would save him."

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She gave a little sigh and the church went black before her.

For a moment Father Bertrand gazed at her in astonishment, and then he plucked the golden robe from off him and laid it on the altar. Out through the little chancel gate he strode and down the crowded aisle where the people fell back against the pews to let him pass, and stared breathlessly at his set face and glowing eyes. Monsieur Landry and a little group of the older men hurried out behind him in great excitement.

Down the road they went, Father Bertrand walking before them, his white robes flapping wildly in the breeze.

When at last they came to the coffee house they found the furious Numa struggling wildly in the grip of the men who held him. In a corner of the room the old man lay silent, his eyes closed, his face white, his clothes all disheveled and torn. Beside him knelt Old Pierre trying vainly to force some brandy between his clenched teeth.

Father Bertrand went up to the men who held the struggling Numa and waved them aside.

"Let him go," said he. "I will attend to him."

They let him go willingly, for he had handled them roughly in his efforts to break their hold.

No sooner was Numa free than he made a rush toward the silent figure in the corner. Father Bertrand seized him by the collar and spun him around as a child does a top.

"Are you mad?" he cried. "Would you kill this

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old man? You coward. You low, brutal coward, to strike one so old and feeble."

He flung the man from him with a force that sent him staggering against the wall.

With a cry Numa sprang toward the priest. "You go too far, *Père Bertrand*," raged he furiously. "You are a priest I know, but you shall not turn me from my purpose to-day. Stand aside or I will strike you."

He dashed forward again as he spoke, his mouth foaming, his eyes wild and bloodshot, mad with rage and from the liquor that he had been drinking.

Father Bertrand seized his arm as he drew it back to strike him and pinned it to his side. In a moment more he had seized the other arm also, and bringing his great strength to bear upon Numa he forced him slowly to his knees.

Suddenly he let go his hold and stood above the kneeling man in silent, white-faced anger, his hands clenched, his eyes blazing.

"Kneel there and ask God to forgive you for what you have done," he thundered. "If you attempt to rise I will strike you to the ground again. I am a priest of God, I know, but I am also a man. You have attempted to strike me and it is given to every one to defend himself."

For an instant Numa seemed about to rise in furious anger, but the eye of the priest was upon him, cold and hard and unmerciful, and he slowly bowed his head, while the anger left his face and was replaced by a look of deepest shame.

Father Bertrand, seeing this, relaxed his set muscles

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and drew a deep breath, for he knew that the man before him was conquered.

"At last you have come to your senses, Numa," said he. "Pray to God to forgive you, for you have been very wicked."

Numa raised a white, penitent face for an instant and humbly bowed his head, for he could not stand the cold, piercing gaze of the man before him.

"And you, *mon Père*," he pleaded, "will you forgive me? I must have been mad, crazy. It is the liquor and my bad temper, *mon Père*, that does it. Forgive me, for I knew not what I was doing."

Father Bertrand pointed toward the open door. "Go," said he, "for I cannot forgive you now. You have made me too angry. Come to me to-morrow when my anger has gone, and I will forgive you. But go now before I forget that I am a priest of God and inflict upon you the punishment which you richly deserve."

He paused, his great frame shaking with suppressed rage, his breath coming short and hard in his anger.

Again Numa raised his eyes and looked at the priest entreatingly.

Father Bertrand shook his head. "Go," said he once more.

Numa crawled to his feet and slunk out of the coffee house a trembling, shame-faced creature that crept through the great crowd that had gathered in the road with drooping head and downcast eyes. No one touched him or spoke to him as he went along, the people shrinking from him as though he were stricken

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with the plague, and when he came to where his horse was tied he mounted him and rode away unmolested toward the west where the Grand Woods stretched across the horizon in a long black line.

Meanwhile, Father Bertrand having conquered the furious Numa now turned his attention to the innocent victim of his wrath.

The old man had regained consciousness and was seated at one of the tables in the card room where Monsieur Landry strove with poor success to straighten his torn, rumpled clothes.

"He is all right again, *mon Père*," cried the storekeeper brightly. "Numa only succeeded in choking him unconscious before they pulled him away. I was afraid at first that he had killed him."

Father Bertrand laid his hand kindly upon the old man's shoulder. "I am indeed glad, Telesse, that you are not badly hurt," said he. "What was the cause of the trouble between Numa and yourself?"

"It was nothing, *mon Père*," answered the old man evasively. "It was only a few words that I said about some land."

He spoke hurriedly and his face was troubled, for Aline had told him of what her father had said to her so many years ago and he did not wish the story of the ring to become public property.

"What was it that you said to Numa about the land?" asked Monsieur Landry.

The old man shook his head violently. "I do not remember what it was," answered he. "I have forgotten it."

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Monsieur Landry was puzzled. "But if you have Numa arrested for what he has done you will have to remember what the quarrel was about so that you can tell the judge," he persisted.

The old man rose to his feet weakly and hobbled to the door. "I am not going to have Numa arrested," said he. "I do not wish to see the judge. I am going to find Aline, for she will be worried about me."

Monsieur Landry looked at Father Bertrand significantly as he followed the old man out of the card room. "There is more to this than I suspected," he whispered.

As he was passing through the bar his foot struck upon something hard, and picking it up he thrust it absently into his pocket, his eyes fixed curiously upon the aged figure before him.

The crowd in the road cheered lustily as the old man came out of the doorway, and a white figure shot suddenly forward to seize him with a cry of joy.

It was Aline, her face all white and drawn with the pain and anxiety of her waiting.

"Ah, Uncle Telesse, are you very badly hurt?" she cried, holding the old man fearfully. "They told me at first that you were dead, and I thought that my heart would break. How could Numa have been so wicked?"

The old man soothed her with many tender pats and caresses. "Do not fear, Aline," answered he. "Numa did not hurt me. I am only a little bruised and shaken, that is all."

Again the crowd cheered and Father Bertrand held up his hand for silence.

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"God is good," said he, "for he has spared this old man's life even as he will punish the wicked one who sought to take it. It is an awful thing, my children, to see a young man strike an old one, so awful that it caused me to do something to-day that I have not done since I have been a priest. It caused me to lose my temper. I know that it was wrong for me to do so, but I could not help it, and I hope that you will all forgive me as I am going to ask God to forgive me in my prayers. Be as lenient with me as you can, my children, and remember that although I am a priest I am a man also, and that I cannot witness unmoved such a sight as I saw to-day.

"We will go back now and continue the mass that Numa has committed such a sacrilege in disturbing."

He turned away toward the church as he spoke and the people followed behind him in a great crowd, Aline and the old man going along with the rest.

And so they all went back into the church again, the organ rolled and the acolytes trooped into the chancel once more. Again Father Bertrand followed behind them in his golden robes and again the people rose to their feet as the singers in the choir chanted their responses, while far back in a pew near the door Monsieur Landry pondered deeply upon the old man's clemency toward Numa.

"I would give something pretty to know the cause of their trouble," said he to himself. "Telesse was trying to deceive me when he said that it was on account of some land."

Suddenly he remembered that he had picked up some-

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thing in the bar, and reaching down into his pocket he drew it forth and looked at it curiously.

It was the cause of all the trouble—the ring that Numa had dropped from its hiding place in his struggles to reach the old man.

Monsieur Landry turned it about in his hands and gazed at it for a long time.

“If you could only speak you would tell me all that I wish to know,” was his comment as he finally thrust it back into his pocket again.

CHAPTER XVIII

MONSIEUR LANDRY TRIES TO REMEMBER

IT was upon a bright morning in the early summer, some seven days after the events narrated in the last chapter that the quiet of the big house at Belrive was disturbed by a most unusual hurry and bustle. The great hall upstairs was noisy with the pattering of footsteps and the incessant babble of girlish voices, while from the back steps there came the heavy bumping of some ponderous object borne slowly to the lower floor, mingled with the sullen growling of Uncle Bill, who declared that the trunk must have been loaded with brick for the sole purpose of increasing his labors.

And had one been curious enough to investigate he would have found that this disturbance even extended into the sacred precincts of the kitchen where Aunt Felonise was preparing a tremendous lunch, for at twelve o'clock that day Marjorie Gordon and her friend Miss Lawrence were to start upon a journey to the seashore, and Belrive was striving its utmost to give due honor to their departure. For three days there had been a marvelous amount of preparation and now the final arrangements had been made, the last trunk

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had been packed, and all that remained was the long drive to Mouton where the two fair travelers were to start upon their journey.

In her sunny room upstairs Marjorie clicked together the clasps of her bulging valise and arose from the task with a sigh of satisfaction.

"There," said she, "it's over at last, thank heavens, and all that we have to do now is to wait until train time. Aren't you glad, Julia?"

Miss Lawrence from her seat by the window said that she was. "But I do hate to leave Belrive," she added, smiling rather wistfully.

"Every one hates to see you go also," said Marjorie, "and there will be a general rejoicing when you come back Christmas. I think that I'll write a note before we go down to lunch," she added, going over to her desk.

"To Mr. Bayne?" inquired Miss Lawrence.

Marjorie blushed. "Yes," answered she, "I want to send him my address, you know. He has promised to write me all the home news."

This last was said very indifferently.

Miss Lawrence looked out of the window. Marjorie's pen scratched over the paper.

Suddenly Miss Lawrence gave a little jump and a smile hovered at the corners of her mouth.

"Don't you expect to see Mr. Bayne before you leave?" she asked.

Marjorie turned upon her a disappointed face drawn up into an angry frown.

"No," answered she, "I do not. Tom doesn't

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seem to be very much interested in my going away. I have a great mind to tear up this note and not send him my address at all."

Miss Lawrence nodded. "If I were you I would tear it up myself," said she.

Instantly Marjorie became aggressive. "I would like to know what makes you say that," she cried.

"Look out of the window," commanded Miss Lawrence.

Marjorie looked and saw Tom Bayne riding slowly up the avenue of trees, a picture of utter dejection. Instantly she was all smiles and good humor, arranging her dress and hair with many little pats and pulls, and dancing about the room in a flurry of excitement.

"Now be sure and come right down, Julia," said she as she hurried from the room.

Miss Lawrence looked after her with a smile of amusement. "I shall do just as you asked me to, my dear, and stay where I am," said she.

At the front door Marjorie met Tom Bayne, the look of happiness upon her face having now changed to one of great demureness.

"I have come to see you off," he announced, "and I am going to invite myself to luncheon and a seat in the surrey to Mouton and back, so you will have to put up with me whether you want to or not."

"That will be nice," replied Marjorie. "The drive to Mouton is always tiresome and we shall be glad to have you, Tom. Aren't you going to miss Julia, though?"

"I guess I'll miss some one else a whole lot more

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than I will her," said Tom, casting a beseeching look at Marjorie.

That young lady smiled. "Of course you've got to say that out of politeness," replied she.

Tom looked indignant. "I didn't mean it that way at all and you know that I didn't," said he. "I don't expect to come back to Belrive again until you come back yourself, and that won't be for——"

"Two months," smiled Marjorie.

Tom groaned, for he was desperate. Ever since he had heard that Marjorie was going away he had pictured to himself the attentions that she would receive in the little summer colony where she was to visit Miss Lawrence, and the picture of these attentions had been a perpetual torment to him. He had made up his mind that the only course left open to him was to declare his love before Marjorie left and so win or lose her.

He had nerved himself that morning to speak to her and had repeated a carefully made speech during his entire journey to Belrive, but now that he was with her his courage failed him and he could not think of a word that he had intended to say. The fact that this was his last opportunity only made the matter worse and he sat for a while in silence, divided between anger and despair.

Finally he gathered together the remnants of his courage and made a feeble attempt.

"There is something that I want to tell you before you leave, Marjorie," said he.

Marjorie looked at him with a fair attempt at curiosity. "What is it?" she asked.

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Tom leaned forward in his chair and fastened his eyes upon a spot on the floor.

"I want to tell you," began he, "that I——"

Marjorie sprang to her feet with a little cry. "Oh, Tom," said she, "isn't that Carey coming through the gate?"

Tom looked out before him. "Yes, it is," he replied slowly.

Marjorie sank back into her seat again. "I'm so glad that he has come in early," said she. "I am going to miss him awfully."

Tom looked at her half-angry, half-amused.

"You did that on purpose to break me up, my lady," said he to himself. "Now I am going to tell you or die in the attempt."

His blood was up and his shyness had all left him, driven away by her interruption. A quick glance toward the gate showed him that Carey had stopped to speak to a negro. It was now or never.

He looked at Marjorie. Her head was averted, but he could see that she was watching him out of the corner of her eye.

"As I was about to tell you a moment ago," said he, "I came over this morning to tell you that I love——"

"That you love what, Tom?" asked Aunt Betty, who had come out unheard upon the gallery.

Tom sprang to his feet, his face crimson. "That I love the seashore," he gasped explosively.

Aunt Betty smiled quietly. "I should think you would," said he. "Every one loves the seashore. My

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husband once knew a man who liked it so well that he fooled about it until he was drowned. But then he was a poor swimmer, Tom, and he was afraid. It doesn't pay to be afraid at the seashore. One must have plenty of courage to get along there."

She nodded her head knowingly.

A great light broke upon Tom and he gave the little old lady a look of deepest gratitude.

"I'm very much obliged to you for your sermon, Aunt Betty," said he, "and I promise you that I will profit by it. I don't think that I will ever be afraid of the seashore again."

"Of course you won't," replied Aunt Betty decisively, "and I am also sure that if you inquire in the proper manner you will find that Marjorie is not half as much afraid of the seashore as you are yourself."

Having delivered this parting shot she went into the house again.

No sooner was she gone than Tom turned to Marjorie. "I am going to the seashore," he announced triumphantly.

She was silent for a moment before she answered him, her cheeks flushed, her fingers beating a silent tattoo upon the arm of her chair.

"Of course you are the best judge of what is good for yourself, Tom," said she finally, "but if you were to ask me about the matter I should advise you to postpone your trip to the seashore until some time this winter."

Tom gave a start of joyful surprise. "And if I wait until this winter, what then?" he asked breathlessly.

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"That," answered Marjorie, "I cannot say. You will have to wait until this winter to find out."

Tom's face, which had been radiant, took on again its look of despair.

"But, Margey," he pleaded, "that isn't fair. Won't you say just a little something to ease my mind?"

The tinkle of the lunch bell came from inside the house. Marjorie arose from her chair.

"Come on, Tom," said she. "If we are late Aunt Betty will never forgive us. She has been trying to start us off to Mouton ever since six o'clock this morning."

Tom followed her in sullen silence to the dining room, where they found Aunt Betty fluttering about in a state of the wildest excitement.

"Now you sit right down, Tom Bayne," said she as that gentleman was shaking hands with Miss Lawrence, "and don't keep that girl standing about talking or she'll miss her train. I don't want to see her leave, the Lord knows, but if she's going she might as well get off to-day."

"But, Aunt Betty," said Marjorie, "we have a world of time. We are not going to leave here until twelve o'clock, you know."

"People who have plenty of time are always the ones who miss their trains," said Aunt Betty. "Now can any of you tell me where Carey is that he is so late to-day?"

As though in answer to her question Carey at that moment pushed open the door.

"Hello, Tom," he cried, "I'm glad to see you. I

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suppose we'll have to keep each other company now that the girls are going away."

"If you don't sit down and eat your luncheon they won't get away," said Aunt Betty emphatically.

Carey laughed and took his seat. "Very well, Aunt Betty," said he, "I'll speed the parting guest," and he fell to eating his lunch in the most ravenous manner possible, while Aunt Betty eyed him keenly, a puzzled look upon her face.

Ever since the day, several months before, when she had predicted that Carey would fall in love with Miss Lawrence, she had watched him closely for a sign that her prediction had been fulfilled, and so many and different had been the signs she had perceived that upon this, the last day of Miss Lawrence's visit, she was as uncertain as to the outcome of her prophecy as she had been upon the day when she had first made it. At one time she had been certain that Carey had fallen a victim to the fair visitor's charms, but his apparent devotion had been followed by a relaxation of great indifference, and again Aunt Betty found herself a victim of uncertainty.

Now had she known the real state of affairs she would have found that she had been all along very near the truth, for at one time Carey had been as much in love with Miss Lawrence as a man could very well be, and then suddenly his feelings had changed.

Why they had changed he could at first hardly say himself. There had been no quarrel, Miss Lawrence had lost none of her charms and had instead become more captivating every day.

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But nevertheless there had been a change, and Carey, groping in the dark for some reason, saw a light, a faint light indeed, but a light for all that, and with a laugh of derision he had turned his back upon it and had refused to look again. At first he would not even give this light a name and had fought away from it desperately, arguing with himself that if he looked at it no more it would slowly flicker out for want of attention and vanish from his thoughts forever.

And so he had gone his way in fancied security until in the witchery of a moonlit night he had looked at this light again and it had blinded him for a moment, having grown strong and bright in the days of its neglect and banishment. Again he had turned away from it, but this time he had been forced to speak its name, and he had whispered "Aline" in a voice that trembled fearfully.

And now that he knew and recognized this light he only fought against it the harder, telling himself that such a thing was madness, promising himself that he would never look again, trying to divert his mind by paying Miss Lawrence the most marked attention.

So therefore it was that Carey in the grip of the conflicting emotions was an enigma to Aunt Betty, and as she gazed at him now across the lunch table she shook her head despairingly.

"He has most certainly been attentive to her for the past few weeks," said she to herself, "but he may have been trying to make the last part of her visit as pleasant as the first, and he most certainly does not seem very

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downcast at her departure. Now if he looked half as glum as Tom Bayne I should not have the slightest doubt as to what his feelings are."

Carey had indeed none of the appearance of a downcast lover, and he laughed and joked with the two girls about their visit to the seashore until Aunt Betty interrupted with a sharp, "And now, my dears, if you really want to catch the train you had better make a start."

As she spoke she pointed to the clock upon the mantel, the hands of which were closely approaching the hour of twelve.

Instantly there was a scraping back of chairs from the table, a hurried putting on of hats and forcing of forgotten things into overpacked valises as the travelers prepared themselves for their journey.

It took quite a while to say good-by, for the kisses had to be repeated many times, and when at last the two girls were seated in the back of the surrey with Tom Bayne before them and old Bill had started his horses down the avenue of live oaks, they waved their hands and gazed back at the little group upon the front gallery until the trees hid it from their view. They drove through the fields with never a word, and when at last they came out upon the public road, Tom Bayne, who had been rummaging in his pockets, was the first to break the silence.

"I say," said he, "do you know what I've done? I've come off without a single thing to smoke. Stop in Landry for a moment will you, Uncle Bill? I want to buy some cigarettes."

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Uncle Bill nodded solemnly. "Yassir," answered he, and true to his promise he stopped the surrey in front of Monsieur Landry's store.

Tom jumped out and ran quickly inside. Monsieur Landry came forward to meet him.

"What can I do for you, Monsieur Bayne?" he asked.

"I want a pack of cigarettes," answered Tom, throwing the money on the counter. "Please give them to me quickly, for I am on my way with some young ladies to catch the train at Mouton."

Monsieur Landry handed him the cigarettes and walked with him to the door, curious to see who it was that was leaving. When he saw who the occupants of the surrey were he came out into the road.

"And do you mean to tell me that you are going to leave us, Miss Marjorie?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Marjorie, "I am going to spend the summer with my friend here, Miss Lawrence, but I'm coming back again, so you needn't feel so badly about my leaving, Monsieur Landry."

Monsieur Landry laughed and turned to Miss Lawrence.

"And you?" he inquired. "You will come back with Miss Marjorie, will you not?"

Miss Lawrence shook her head. "No," answered she, "you will not see me again until Christmas. I am going to spend the fall at my home on Lawrence Hall plantation."

Monsieur Landry looked puzzled. "So," said he, "Lawrence Hall plantation, eh?"

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"Yes," replied Miss Lawrence, "that is what I said."

"I don't want to hurry you people," called Tom Bayne from the seat in front, "but if you want to catch your train, we had better be moving."

Miss Lawrence held out her hand. "Good-by, Monsieur Landry," said she, "and the best of good luck to you until I see you again at Christmas."

Monsieur Landry gave a sudden start of surprise and gazed at the outstretched hand in amazement.

"Good-by," said Miss Lawrence again.

Monsieur Landry took the hand and bowed low. "*Bon voyage*," he cried, and the surrey rolled away in a cloud of dust.

For a long time he stood in the road gazing after it, his forehead wrinkled in a frown, his eyes wide and staring in speechless astonishment. Suddenly he gave himself a little shake, like a man coming out of a dream, and hurrying into the store went quickly to his desk that stood in the little space enclosed by the railing.

Unlocking one of its drawers with trembling fingers he drew forth something and gazed at it long and curiously. It was the ring that he had picked up in the coffee house the week before.

"They are the same in every detail," said he to himself. "It is wonderful, marvelous. How can it be that this ring which I found in the coffee house is exactly like the one that I have just seen upon this Miss Lawrence's finger? And she lives at Lawrence Hall plantation. Lawrence and Lawrence Hall," he repeated

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slowly. "Where have I heard of those two names before?"

He beat his hands upon the sides of his head as though he sought to awaken his slumbering memory.

"Ah," he cried, "what a cruel thing is this fever. It either brings you death or plunges you into everlasting forgetfulness. Here am I with the secret of what may be a great discovery upon the very tip of my tongue and I cannot remember."

He bowed his head upon his hands, while the ring upon the desk, catching a beam of sunlight, seemed to smile at him mockingly.

"And I cannot remember," said he again, in a voice that was almost a whisper.

CHAPTER XIX

MONSIEUR VARAIN DOES A KINDNESS

IN the office of his huge store at Mouton Monsieur Edmond Varain sat in silent perusal of a letter which he had spread open upon the desk before him.

He was a sturdy, rugged old man, tall and strong and heavy of build, and he bore the weight of his eighty years with the ease and dignity of one but yet in the prime of life. As he sat with his gray head bent over the letter, his dark eyes glancing out keenly from beneath their ragged, overhanging brows, his strong, masterful face a study of force and strength of will, he reminded one of the tall, aged oaks that one sometimes sees in the forest.

Those great monarchs of the woodland kingdom that, stripped by time of their youth and greenness, still rear their bare, white branches proudly amid the life and freshness about them, and stand all bearded with moss and crowned with lichen, the patriarchs of the forest—unconquerable by nature, their iron-like wood impervious to the ax of the woodsman, holding high their hoary heads through all seasons, to bid defiance to wind and weather.

And yet for all the strength and sternness in the face

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of Monsieur Varain there was a look of sadness about it that was ever a marvel to the people at Mouton, for why should Monsieur Varain be sad? they asked themselves.

Was he not the owner of the biggest store in Mouton? Was not his wealth the envy of every man in town? Was he not the most important man in all that country, the one whose advice must always be asked upon questions of grave moment? Why, then, should he wear this look of sadness?

It is true that it was said by some of the women that Monsieur Varain was lonely, for in his great house at Mouton he dwelt by himself, with neither kith nor kin about him, but this idea was scoffed at as ridiculous. Surely so stern and businesslike a man as Monsieur Varain could never know the pangs of loneliness. There was no room in his scheming, calculating brain for any such feeling as that, depend upon it.

But this matter of his living alone gave cause to another speculation among the people at Mouton more engrossing to them than the cause of his apparent sadness. To whom would he leave his fortune?

That he had no kin to claim it was well known. Some said that he would leave it all to Felix, his head clerk, a man who had been with him for years, who had been his one assistant in the days when he had kept a little country store at Coulée Croche, a tiny settlement far away from Mouton. Of the fact that he was fond of Felix there was no doubt, and so the head clerk was looked upon with much respect as the possible heir of Monsieur Varain.

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And then again it was said by others that the greater part of the money would go toward the founding of a school, for Monsieur Varain was greatly interested in the cause of education, and many and liberal were the endowments which he gave toward it.

Of course there were other theories besides these two, the chief ones, but in all their speculation the people of Mouton had come to no conclusion, and Monsieur Varain, as he sat at his desk upon the morning that begins this chapter, was as much a mystery to them as ever.

Having read his letter, he rang a small bell set in the wall at his side, and, lying back in his chair, waited for the person that he had summoned.

In a moment the glass door of the office opened quietly and the head clerk entered. Monsieur Varain waved his hand toward a chair.

"Sit down, Felix," said he. "I have something that I wish to tell you."

Felix took the proffered seat and looked at his employer expectantly, his whole person speaking of the respect and obedience that he felt for him.

He was a small, wiry man with a bright, humorous face, ever joking and laughing except in the presence of his employer, who to him was the most wonderful, the most infallible, the most masterful person in all the world.

Monsieur Varain picked up the letter from his desk and tapped it lightly with his forefinger.

"I have here," said he, "a letter from the teacher of the school at Landry, in which she tells me that she

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will conduct the final exercises of her classes to-morrow. There will be a picnic in the woods on Bayou Portage near Landry at which the children will sing and recite and in other ways give proof of the progress that they have made in the past year, and I have been asked to be present. As a member of the School Board I feel that it is my duty to go to these exercises and therefore I have decided to drive over to Landry to-morrow."

He paused for a moment while Felix nodded his approval of this decision.

"And I have also decided," continued Monsieur Varain, "to take you with me."

A little smile showed for a moment on Felix's face and was instantly repressed.

"Yes," repeated Monsieur Varain, "I have decided to take you with me. You have not had a holiday for some time, Felix, and the drive will do you good. The store can surely get along without us for one day. What do you say to my plan, eh?"

Felix permitted himself a smile of the most exquisite gratification.

"Fine," said he, "fine. H'I t'ink h'I make myself some fun sure h'ad dhoze picnic."

Monsieur Varain's eyes twinkled at this announcement. The peculiar English of his head clerk was as amusing to him, who spoke it perfectly, as it was annoying to Felix, who, strive as he might, could never master the difficult language, and became more unintelligible day by day, despite the fact that he never spoke a word of French unless it was absolutely necessary to do so.

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Monsieur Varain turned to his desk again. "Very well, Felix," said he. "We will consider the matter settled. I will meet you here to-morrow morning at seven o'clock. You may go back now into the store again."

"T'ank you, *M'sieu*," said Felix as he went through the glass door, absorbed in contemplating the all-important question of what he should wear upon the morrow.

So therefore it was that upon the following morning the two of them set out toward Landry behind Monsieur Varain's pair of blacks that could, according to Felix, "Burn dhe win' h'as you dhon never seen before."

The day was a glorious one with a cloudless sky and a fresh, light breeze that seemed bent upon enjoying itself in its soft-whispering journey across the dusty earth before the fierce rays of the noonday sun should put it roughly to flight.

The road ran between high banks of Cherokee and wild honeysuckle, behind which were the fields all white with the newly opened bolls of cotton or golden with the ripened heads of rice, while on every side as far as the eye could see the cane cut the horizon sharply in a long line of misty green.

The air was redolent with the perfume of the wild flowers that grew upon the roadside—great blots of glowing red, yellow and white against the dark background of the hedges, through whose breaks and openings one could see the tiny gray cabins, each teeming with its busy throng of inmates.

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Monsieur Varain threw back his head and drew in great breaths of the fresh, morning air.

“ This is nice, this driving about so early, is it not, Felix? ” he asked.

Felix, immaculate in a new black suit, gave a smiling assent to this query.

“ Yas, ” said he. “ H’it make me feel lik’ when h’I waz dhoze lil’ boy h’ad Coulée Croche. Me h’I use to pass by dhoze coulée earlier h’an’ dhis h’an’ kill dhem duck. H’I see her swim roun’ h’all black, h’an’ h’I say ping wid my gun, h’an’ whad you spoze h’I fin’ me when h’I pick her h’up? ”

“ A big French duck, ” ventured Monsieur Varain.

Felix shook his head. “ H’I fin’ dhoze *poule d’eau*, ” said he. “ H’alwayz dhoze *poule d’eau*. Dhen h’I coss h’an’ go home me. ”

Monsieur Varain nodded his head gravely. “ Yes, that is always the way, Felix, ” said he. “ That is the way of the world. We all of us go after the duck and work hard to get him, only to find after he is ours that he is a *poule d’eau*. The wise people are the ones who go after the *poule d’eau*, for when they pick him up they are not disappointed. I have shot at many ducks, Felix, but I have never picked one up. They have all been *poule d’eau*. All *poule d’eau*, ” he repeated sadly while Felix looked at him curiously, at a loss to understand the philosophy of his observation.

The road turned into a narrow lane, lined upon either side with groves of china trees stripped now of their purple blossoms and hung thickly with little, hard, green balls that twinkled cool and inviting in the sun-

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light, as though to tempt some unwary traveler to taste the bitterness that was within them.

The fields had now given place to long stretches of pasture land all soft and green with thick, velvety grass and mottled with great yellow patches of camomile. It was here that the drowsy cattle lay beneath the ragged willow trees, or stood knee-deep in the tiny ponds that dimpled the smiling land on every side.

The buggy rumbled over a bridge with a noise as of distant thunder, leaving behind it a coulée that cleft the green pasture land like a huge knife of glittering silver. Before them stretched a long expanse of hedge and field behind which a great square church tower stood out against the skyline.

Monsieur Varain pointed toward this tower with his whip. "Landry," said he laconically, and presently they drove into the little town itself and pulled up before Monsieur Landry's store with a flourish.

Monsieur Landry came hurrying out into the road, his face wreathed in smiles, for he and Monsieur Varain were old friends.

"Why, Varain," he cried, "so you have come at last? We had almost given you up."

"Am I then so late?" asked Monsieur Varain, saluting the storekeeper cordially.

Monsieur Landry shrugged his shoulders. "A little late, yes," said he. "Most of the people have left for the woods. We in the country start early, you know, but wait a moment and I will get my buggy and drive down with you."

Monsieur Varain turned to Felix. "How would it

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be for you to drive down in Monsieur Landry's buggy and let him come with me?" he asked. "I have not seen him for some time and there is much that I would like to tell him."

Felix was out in the road before Monsieur Varain had finished speaking.

"Fine," said he as Monsieur Landry took his seat. "Me h'I bin wish to drive dhem horse h'all day."

"You will find my horse hitched and ready in front of my house," called Monsieur Landry as he started away.

"Yas," said Felix, meditatively scratching his head. "Now h'I fin' dhoze girl me h'an' take him long, too."

"I say," called a voice behind him, "isn't that Felix?"

Turning quickly he beheld Mr. Parker driving up the road toward him and he smiled and waved his hand, for he was very fond of that gentleman, who never failed to come to the store and see him when he was in Mouton.

Mr. Parker drove up to Felix and stopped.

"What in the world are you doing out there in the road by yourself?" he asked.

Felix explained his desertion by Monsieur Varain.

Mr. Parker moved over to one side of his buggy seat. "Get in," he commanded. "I'm going to the picnic myself and I'll take you along. You can come back with me or with old Varain, whichever you wish."

Felix climbed into the buggy and they started off.

"And now," said Mr. Parker, "what have you been doing with yourself since I saw you last?"

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"H'I bin sol' dhem mezendice," answered Felix promptly.

"What?" asked Mr. Parker.

"H'I been sol' dhem mezendice," repeated Felix in the voice of one speaking to a deaf man.

Mr. Parker thought for a moment. "You have been selling merchandise, eh?" he ventured.

Felix nodded complacently. "Dhaz whad h'I say," answered he.

Mr. Parker looked at him admiringly. "Gad," said he to himself, "you speak my language almost as badly as I do yours."

Felix now turned to him, his face beaming. "Did h'I done tole you dhad my sis come home termorrer?" he asked.

Mr. Parker looked surprised. "Why, no," answered he. "I didn't know that you had a sister, Felix. Where has she been all this time?"

Felix waved an arm westward. "H'ad Noo 'Leens," said he dramatically. "H'ad dhoze conven. He bin dhere two year."

Mr. Parker looked interested. "How was it that she didn't go to the convent at Mouton?" he asked.

Felix gave him a look of the deepest scorn. "Hah!" he cried. "Why he dhon go to dhem conven' h'at Mouton, you h'ask? Hah! he go to dhoze conven' h'ad Noo 'Leens h'an' see h'all dhem sight. Dhoze big house so high h'as dhoze tree. Dhem crowd whad you fin' h'alwayz on dhoze street. He seen im h'all h'an' he learn everyt'ing. He play dhoze piano lik'—lik'—hell, h'an' he sing—Hah! jez lik' dhoze bird.

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H'im goin' tak' you h'aroun' h'an' see him w'en you come to Mouton. He de finez girl whad you never did see."

Mr. Parker looked pleased. "I shall be delighted to meet her," said he as they finally came to Bayou Portage and the long strip of woodland where the people had gathered together for the picnic.

It was an ideal spot which they had chosen, a tiny open glade thickly grown with grass and strewn with wild flowers, overhung by the great branches of the trees that grew about it. Here in the silence of the forest a great crowd had congregated, filling the quiet air with their shouts and laughter, scaring the birds from their nests until they flew about and screamed discordantly at this unwonted noise and clamor, while the tall, live oaks looked on in silent bearded dignity and seemed to frown angrily at this rude disturbance of their sanctuary.

At one side of the little glade was the Bayou Portage, a quiet, limpid stream, flowing lazily along between low, rush-grown banks bordered upon either side with cypress trees and great overhanging masses of muscadine, that cast their shadows all twisted and distorted upon the smooth, brown bosom of the stream.

Close into the banks the water lay black and cool in the shadow of the oaks, while out toward the middle it slipped along all gold and amber in the sunlight, touched here and there with tiny patches of blue or white where it mirrored the sky above it. And here again it was green and brown, laced with a myriad of

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softly moving shadows as it passed along beneath the great green vault of the forest, ever gliding along toward the far-distant sea marsh.

As Mr. Parker drove up to the glade the exercises were just beginning, and the proud mothers and fathers had grouped themselves in a circle about the open space in which the children were huddled in a bashful, frightened crowd.

Their teacher, a timid, shrinking little woman, fluttered about among them in a fever of excitement, encouraging them with many nervous nods and smiles, repeating the simple pieces they were to say, with heavy emphasis laid upon forgotten words.

"Remember, my dears," said she again and again, "that Monsieur Varain has come all the way from Mouton to see you and you must do your very best to please him."

In the center of the ring of spectators Monsieur Varain sat in the seat of honor—a great armchair brought out for the occasion, draped with moss and garlands of wild flowers.

The teacher having arranged the children in a square came over to him.

"We are all ready if you are, Monsieur Varain," said she timidly.

Monsieur Varain rose to his feet and bowed gravely. "I wait your pleasure, Madam," replied he.

Monsieur Landry, who was master of ceremonies, stepped out before the waiting people and spoke in French.

"For the first number," said he, "the children will

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sing 'America,' accompanied by the band from Landry."

The band stepped forward—a clarinet, an accordion and a triangle, the musicians red and embarrassed at their unusual prominence.

The teacher raised her little baton.

Instantly they broke into the wildest discord, the clarinet shrieking madly above the other instruments as though it were in agony at the terrible sounds that were being drawn from it. The children moved slowly in a great circle singing mechanically the words of the song, half of which they did not understand.

The accordion faltered and stopped, likewise the triangle, but the clarinet kept on until the bitter end, its owner blowing away with puffed-out cheeks and distended eyes as though his very life depended upon his finishing the piece that he was playing.

The children posed in a carefully arranged group, waving tiny American flags, the solitary musician lowered his instrument and stood purple-faced and panting. The first number was over.

Monsieur Varain applauded heartily, and the others, following his example, made the forest ring with the evidence of their appreciation.

The man who played upon the clarinet came forward bashfully, pushed from behind by his two companions.

"H'i would lik' to say for dhem band," he gasped, "dhad dhey have not practice dhoze music bud once."

He retired in an agony of confusion.

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Monsieur Landry came forward and announced the second number.

A tall, lank boy stood forth and groped his way fearfully through a recitation.

And so the exercises went on, number following number in endless sequence until Monsieur Landry came forward for the last time.

“The final number will be a song by one of the young ladies of the school,” he announced.

Monsieur Varain gave a sigh of relief, for the exercises had been too long. What had at first amused him now tired him, and he welcomed this final number as a release from a very wearisome proceeding.

A girl came forward and, throwing back her head, began to sing. Monsieur Varain eyed her languidly.

She was a slim, straight girl all clad in snowy white, and as she stood beneath the great trees, the sunlight filtering through their heavy branches about her, she was very beautiful.

Monsieur Varain leaned forward and looked at her curiously, putting on his glasses which he had until now kept in his pocket, but her face was at an angle and he could not see it clearly.

The girl sang on, her voice rising clear and sweet in the notes of an old Acadian lullaby, and as she sang Monsieur Varain's thoughts went back to the time when he had been a child, and he could hear again his mother crooning softly by the cradle in the firelight while the fierce north wind roared angrily out of doors. And then he could hear his young wife singing about her work while their little child lay sleeping quietly

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in the yellow sunlight. His eyes were dim and misty.

The girl ceased singing and turned away. Monsieur Varain looked at her eagerly. Suddenly he gave a hoarse cry and smote the arm of his chair in amazement, for it was as though his daughter had risen from her grave and stood before him. He hurried from his chair and went over to where the little teacher was bestowing generous words of praise upon her pupils.

She came forward to meet him, her gentle face glowing with pride and happiness.

"How did you like the exercises, Monsieur Varain?" she asked eagerly. "Were you pleased, or were you disappointed?"

"I was very much pleased," answered Monsieur Varain mendaciously. "They were very good indeed. That last song was especially good and I enjoyed it very much. The girl has a good voice. Can you tell me her name?"

The teacher smiled. "That was Aline Telesse who sang the last song," answered she. "She is the brightest and quickest of all my pupils. Although she only started school this year she has left the others far behind her. She is a poor girl and a good one, Monsieur Varain."

Monsieur Varain nodded gravely, his heavy eyebrows drawn down over his eyes as though he were greatly perplexed.

"And you say that she is very quick and bright?" he asked.

The little teacher answered him eagerly. "Oh, yes,"

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cried she, "she is wonderfully bright. She can enter the convent at Mouton now, but she is so poor that she cannot even buy the books for her studies there. It is a pity, for she is so willing and anxious to learn."

Monsieur Varain took off his glasses and silently polished them as was his habit when thinking deeply.

"I would like to meet this Aline," said he, "for I am interested in what you have told me. Perhaps I may be able to help her."

"I shall bring her in a moment," cried the teacher, and she was off like a flash in search of the girl, whom she found talking to the old man. Without a word of explanation she hurried her before Monsieur Varain.

"This is Monsieur Varain from Mouton, who wishes to meet you, Aline," explained the little teacher, all but breathless from the hurried way in which she had dispatched her errand.

Monsieur Varain held out his hand. "It is a pleasure, my child," said he, "to meet one who is eager and willing to learn. Your teacher has told me that you are anxious to go to the convent at Mouton. Is that so?"

The girl looked at him timidly. "Ah, yes, *M'sieu*," answered she, "it is so. If I could but go to the convent I would be the happiest girl in the world, but you know, *M'sieu*, that I am too poor and I must not even think of such a thing."

She smiled sadly and Monsieur Varain gazed at her with a tenderness in his eyes that was wholly foreign to them.

"Listen, my child," said he, "for I am going to tell

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you something. When I was your age I was as poor as you are. My father worked in the field and I worked with him. The only chance that I ever had to go to school was when the crops were laid by and there was no work to do, and I used then to go to a little school-house not half so large as the one in Landry. It was there, my child, that I got what learning I have ever had, and I got it through hard work by day and by night. What success I have had in life has been due to that learning, scanty as it was, and I believe that could I have gone to a better school my success would have been all the greater. It is, therefore, that I am anxious to help any one who really wishes to learn, for I feel that it is my duty to do so, and it gives me great pleasure to tell you that I am going to send you to the convent at Mouton."

The girl gave a gasp of incredulity. "Ah, *M'sieu*," she cried, "do you really mean it? You are not joking? Do you really mean that you will send me to the convent at Mouton?"

Monsieur Varain nodded. "I do," said he. "I never joke. The convent is closed now on account of its being vacation, but I am sure that if I see the good sisters they will take you and teach you until the next term starts again. I wish you to go as soon as possible, for it will all be very strange and new to you and I would like you to be accustomed to it when the other girls arrive."

The little teacher beamed with happiness. Aline's eyes were sparkling as she tried to thank him.

"I do not know what to say, *M'sieu*," she faltered.

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"If I were to speak a year I could not tell you of the thankfulness that is within my heart. I will try and show you by my work, *M'sieu*, how much I think of what you have done for me."

Monsieur Varain waved away her thanks with a smile. "There, there, my child," said he. "You have nothing to thank me for. I have only done a kindness that it has given me a great deal of pleasure to do. Come to my store at Mouton in two weeks from to-day, and I will enter you at the convent, for by that time I will have made the necessary arrangements. And now good-by until I see you again at Mouton."

He turned away as he spoke, and Aline with a cry of thanks hurried off to tell the old man of her good fortune.

While this conversation had been going on the women had been busy setting out the lunch, and as Monsieur Varain looked about him he found that the little glade had been transformed into a huge dining table, gleaming with snowy cloths, upon which was spread out a tempting array of good things to eat.

Monsieur Landry hurried up to him and seized him eagerly.

"Come, Varain," he cried, "you are just in time. You shall sit here with me and eat some of the best gumbo that you ever tasted in your life."

Monsieur Varain shook his head. "I am sorry," said he, "but I have just remembered that I have an important business engagement at Mouton this evening, and I must hurry back or I shall be too late to keep it."

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Monsieur Landry looked disappointed. "You will surely eat a bite before you leave," he urged. "You will be hungry before you get home again."

But Monsieur Varain was firm in his determination to leave.

"I have only time to keep my engagement as it is," said he, "and I am going to hurry away before the temptation of the delicious gumbo becomes too strong for me. I will not take Felix, as he is enjoying himself and he needs a holiday. He can surely find some one to drive him home to-night. So good-by, Landry, and I am going to ask you to thank every one for the pleasant morning that I have had."

Monsieur Landry watched him as he strode away to his buggy, a very puzzled man. "Varain is a strange person," said he to himself. "He told me but an hour ago that he was taking a little holiday to-day and that he would be with me until to-night. I wonder what could have caused him to change his mind so suddenly?"

Monsieur Varain was puzzled also as he drove homewards, and when he came at last to Mouton he did not stop at his store, but drove directly to his house. Going to his office upon the lower floor he took from a secret drawer in his desk a square of cardboard, and propping it up before him he sat for a long time in silence, studying it carefully.

It was an old photograph, a photograph of a young girl, all faded and worn and mottled with great brown patches of damp.

The sternness of Monsieur Varain's face relaxed as

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he gazed at it and his eyes were soft and tender and filled with tears.

“The likeness is remarkable,” said he slowly, “and her name is Aline. Is this a mere coincidence, or am I at last to make a feeble restitution to my daughter? Ah, Aline, Aline, would to God that I could do something in atonement for my cruelty to you. I will see the sisters to-morrow, and when this girl is at the convent I will send Felix to Landry to make inquiries concerning her parentage. Yes, Felix is the one to send. He is bright and witty, and he could learn more in a day than most people could learn in a year.”

Suddenly he thought of what the head clerk had said to him that morning and he sprang to his feet, his eyes glowing with an eagerness almost boyish.

“Again I have shot at a duck,” cried he. “Perhaps this time I shall pick him up, who knows?” and the face in the photograph smiled at him happily as though it had easily solved this difficult question.

CHAPTER XX

ALINE SAYS GOOD-BY

IT was harvest time at Belrive, and from morning to night the big plantation was a scene of endless activity, for the busy season of the year had arrived—the time when the rice must be cut and threshed and safely stored away from the ever-threatening danger of winds and rain.

The fields were a carpet of green and gold, a marvelous blending of color, from the pale, misty green of the newly formed grain to the rich, golden yellow of the heavy, ripened heads that drooped upon their slender stems, bowed down by their own fruitfulness.

And here where the rice was ripe and ready to harvest the cuts were dry and cracked and filled with loose, peeled earth all covered with thick, green slime, for the water had been taken away that the negroes might come in with their reap-hooks and cut the crop for the thresher.

All day long the cutters ate their way through the high green walls of the rice, seizing the grain by the armful, cutting it with a single quick stroke of their reap-hooks, spreading the severed stalks upon the short, thick stubble to dry in the sunlight, there to await the coming of the stackers.

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These, quick of grasp and nimble of finger, tied the rice into great ragged bundles which were presently taken by the shockers and built into tall, pointed shocks, each one carefully thatched with leaves and straw to keep out the ever-destructive rain.

Here among the shocks the carts made their rounds, each with its complement of loaders, who pitched the bundles into the carts with their long-handled forks and left behind them nothing but the dry, yellow stubble to tell of the crop that had been made that year.

And now the bundles, being safely loaded into the carts, were driven down the plantation road to where the big red thresher roared and groaned and rumbled—ever calling for more rice—and were presently pitched upon its carrier and borne into its gaping black mouth, that gobbled them up like some savage, hungry monster. And here within this great machine, with its twisting belts and swiftly turning wheels, the rice was separated and made ready for the market: the leaves and straw blown out of the wind stacker in a whirling brown cloud, the grain pouring from the bagger in a thick, golden stream that was caught in sacks and was driven away to the storeroom, all ready now for shipment.

Far out in the field, near the edge of the woods, old Telesse was cutting a trail for one of the binders, pausing every now and then in his work to gaze at the huge machine behind him, with its white canvas carrier and its slowly moving reel, the like of which he had never seen before. It was a marvel to him to see the tall stalks of rice cut and tied and left behind in a long

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row of bundles by this wonderful piece of mechanism, and he never tired of watching it.

He had worked hard in the rice ever since the beginning of the harvest, for his own little crop of cotton and corn had been laid by, and as he looked every now and then across the fields to where the cabin shone a tiny spot of white in the vast ocean of green, he smiled with satisfaction, for his crop, though small, was a good one.

And yet whenever he gazed at the cabin there came also upon his wrinkled face a look of sadness which, strive as he would, he could not drive away, for upon the morrow Aline was to go to Mouton to the convent and he knew that he would miss her sorely.

Ever since the eventful day of the first communion the old man had done a great deal of thinking, more in fact than he had ever done in his life before, and the only result that he had achieved by all this mental labor was to find himself a greatly puzzled man.

He had fully expected that Numa, true to his promise, would tell of the man that he had killed so many years ago, the man that he had shot by mistake, and he had gone about for days in fear and trembling, expecting every moment to find himself in the relentless grasp of the law. But Numa, after an interval of hiding in the Grand Woods, had come back to Landry subdued in body as well as mind, had spoken to him humbly, begging his pardon, and the old man had forgiven him, rejoicing at his deliverance from the fear that had for so long oppressed him.

And at all this he had marveled greatly, little know-

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ing that Numa was only striving to enter his good graces again for the better accomplishment of his own wicked purposes.

And after this had come the picnic and the kindness of Monsieur Varain, all of which had been to the old man a mystery fully as great as that of Numa's silence. It was true that Monsieur Varain had sent many a poverty-stricken child the books for its schooling, and he had even sent one or two boys to the great school at Baton Rouge, but then he had known these children well and had watched carefully their work and progress before he had done anything for them. And now he had come to Landry, had seen Aline but a short hour and had promised to send her to the convent; had promised to send her there long weeks before the opening that she might become accustomed to the place, and therefore be unembarrassed when the other girls arrived.

It was incredible and the old man could do naught but puzzle over it, arriving at one conclusion only to reject it for another, until he finally dismissed the affair as too complex for his simple brain. And so to him the last few weeks had been a period of wonder, and as he cut his way through the cool green rice he shook his head from time to time as though to drive away the thoughts that so troubled him.

When he saw Carey, who had ridden up to inspect the binder, he stuck his reap-hook through his belt and went over to him.

Carey waved him a friendly greeting. "How does the rice come on, Telesse?" he asked.

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The old man pointed to where he had been working. "If you will look where I have cut, *M'sieu*," said he, "you will find no red rice or indigo. This part of the field is as clean as the blue sky above it."

"Well," answered Carey, "it ought to be. I have spent enough money pulling indigo and red rice this year to have the field entirely clean from one end to the other. I shall want you to drive a cart to-morrow, Telesse. The binders won't run again until next week, you know."

"I will not be here in the morning, *M'sieu*," replied the old man. "I am going to Mouton to-morrow to take Aline to the convent. The two weeks will be up then."

Carey's face clouded. "That's so," said he. "In the hurry at the thresher I had forgotten all about it. I shall miss Aline almost as much as you will miss her, Telesse. I don't know what I am going to do without my coffee and my little talk with her in the morning."

The old man tried to smile, but his lip trembled and he turned away his head quickly.

"I do not like to think of how much I am going to miss her, *M'sieu*," said he, and without another word he hurried back to his work, ashamed of the suspicious moisture in his eyes.

Carey rode away with a heavy heart, for in the busy days of the harvest he had found time to see a great deal of Aline, and he had come to care for her a great deal more than he liked to admit even to himself.

That he would ever come to really love her was, he often told himself, out of the question. He was a

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gentleman, a planter, and she was his tenant, a poor, ignorant girl as far beneath him as any one could very well be, and yet there was about her some indefinable charm that he had never found in any other woman.

In their talks at daybreak, when the world lay about them a sea of mist and leaden sky, he had learned many things that he had never known before. He had learned that a simple, untaught girl could tell of the things that filled her humble life and make them appear beautiful in the telling, things that to him had always seemed drear and squalid and wholly uninteresting. He had learned also that people could be happy without riches, without honors or position, and that this girl with her pure thoughts, unwarped by the knowledge of the world, could tell him of love, of honor, of fidelity of purpose, of a happiness in simple things that he had never dreamed of before.

And so he learned from her of the many things that made her world, and in return he told her of that other world of which she knew so little, while she listened to him in silent wonder, awestruck at the greatness of it all.

It had been an education for both of them, and as Carey rode away from the old man it pained him to think that these pleasant lessons were now at an end. A dozen times that day he started toward the little cabin only to turn back angry at his weakness, for he had promised himself that now that Aline was going away he would forget her and that he would not go to her to say good-by.

If she came to him it would be a different thing, and she did come at sundown, walking up the plantation

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road to where he stood upon the levee of the main canal, watching the last few minutes of work that day.

"I have come to say good-by, *M'sieu*," said she simply.

Carey held out his hand, and his voice shook a little as he answered her.

"Good-by, Aline," said he. "I shall miss you more than I can tell you. It will be very lonesome for me in the mornings now that you are going away."

For a moment she looked at him with a soft light in her eyes that he had never seen there before.

"And I shall miss you also, *M'sieu*," said she. "I shall miss your many kindnesses, for which I thank you from the bottom of my heart. You have been very good to me and I shall never forget it."

Carey smiled and shook his head. "You have nothing to thank me for," he answered. "What I have done for you has been a pleasure to me, and I want you to promise me that if you ever need anything in Mouton you will let me know about it."

"I promise you, *M'sieu*, thank you," replied the girl.

Carey thrust his hand into his pocket and brought forth a gold coin.

"I want you to take this, Aline," said he as he handed it to her, "not as a piece of money, but as a keepsake from me."

"I shall keep it forever, *M'sieu*," replied the girl softly.

Again Carey held out his hand. "Good-by, Aline," said he, "and may you have all the success in the world with your studies."

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She watched him mount his horse in silence, the gold piece tightly clasped in her little hand.

He took off his broad-brimmed hat and waved her farewell as he galloped up the road, while she stood upon the high levee and gazed after him, her blue eyes filled with a longing and a tenderness that would have troubled him much to have seen.

The sky was a sea of golden fire where the sun had sunk below the dark unbroken line of the rice. The fields lay before her black and still in the short twilight, overhung with mist, where the water still stood in the cuts of unripened grain. Up the wide road the negroes went in a straggling crowd toward the quarters, their day's work done. Some of them were singing and the sound of their voices came faint and sweet from the distance:

“ Bin wuck on de levee all day,
Bin wuck on de levee all day,
Bin wuck on de levee Lord, Lord, Lord,
Bin wuck on de levee all day.”

The air was fragrant with the odor of the sun-dried rice that they had been shocking.

Aline stood upon the levee, a dim white figure in the gathering darkness.

The fire in the west faded to a dull, leaden gray and the night fell quickly upon the fields, for the twilight in Louisiana is short and there is little or no afterglow. The stars came out and twinkled bravely, as though to make the most of their faint light before the coming of the moon.

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Aline looked far up the deserted road toward the big house and raised the gold piece to her lips. Her eyes were filled with tears.

Suddenly she gave a little sob and fell upon her knees in the long grass and tie vines that grew upon the top of the levee. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were bright and her head was bowed as though in shame.

"Ah, *Mon Dieu!* help me," she cried, "for I am like Angele of Anse Le Vert," and her voice trembled with fear; but when a moment later she went back toward the little cabin, in the starlight, she was smiling softly like one who has come upon a new happiness.

CHAPTER XXI

LE BOSSU MAKES A JOURNEY TO THE CONVENT AT MOUTON

IN a quiet corner at Mouton, set far back within the shady limits of the trim garden which surrounded it, stood the convent of the good Sisters of Mount Carmel. It was a very old building, being in fact one of the landmarks at Mouton, and in all the town there was no man who could tell of the time when it had not stood cool and white and stately amid its grove of oak and china ball, seeming to hold itself aloof from the petty strifes and discords of the busy life about it.

It was here in the peaceful quiet of this convent that Aline, through the kindness of Monsieur Varain, had spent four happy months; four months of patient work and study which had borne good fruit and had given to her the knowledge for which she longed so eagerly, while the gentle, black-robed sisters had watched her progress with smiles of satisfaction and had striven in every way to help her.

Coming as she had, during the time of vacation, she had at first been regarded curiously, had been looked upon as one incapable of following the other girls upon the devious paths of learning and therefore sent before them to acquire what knowledge she might before their

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arrival, but her unceasing work, her rapid progress, and above all her gentle, loving nature, had won for her a place in the esteem of the good sisters that had never been occupied before, and when the other girls had finally arrived there was not one among them so beloved by all.

And so the days had passed on happily, each one bringing some new wonder through the medium of her studies, each one endearing her more to the sisters and to all about her.

It was now her chief delight to read, an accomplishment perfected by her stay at the convent, for at Laundry she had only been able to find her way through the simple pages of her primer. From the shelves of the convent library she drew great dusty volumes that had lain there undisturbed for years, lives of saints and of martyrs, histories of ages long past and forgotten, and plunging into them eagerly she read their musty pages with a delight that must have pleased those ancient chroniclers, stern and ascetic though they were.

It was a pleasant sight to see her in the short autumn afternoons when, her studies done for the day, she sat beneath the great oaks in the convent garden, her head bent low over some ponderous volume of ancient lore. Here she would sit for hours, her pretty face alive with the many emotions with which the book inspired her, her little hands turning the faded pages eagerly, impatiently, her whole being following the fortunes of some long-dead saint or martyr with breathless interest.

It was during these pleasant hours in the garden that Monsieur Varain came often to see her, and his

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visits increased as the weeks passed on, until now he had become a familiar figure at the convent.

His interest in the girl had become the subject of much discussion at Mouton, and the chances of Felix's becoming Monsieur Varain's heir had been reduced by the gossips to a minimum. It was also noticed by many that the sad look upon Monsieur Varain's face was slowly yet perceptibly fading away and that he was beginning to look almost young again. "Who, besides this girl," they asked themselves, "could have caused such a change?"

And so Aline became an object of curiosity, and was for a long time besieged with innumerable questions by the carefully primed day scholars from Mouton. However, knowing nothing herself, her answers shed but little light upon the mystery, and the curious ones were forced to abandon this source of information and turn as a last resort to Landry.

But here again they were baffled by the taciturnity of old Telesse, and so they abandoned their pursuit for the solution of this mystery and waited patiently, hoping that in the days to come it would finally force itself upon them.

Now, had these curious ones known all that Monsieur Varain himself knew, they would still have been very much in the dark, for the repeated visits of Felix to Landry had yielded him but little information to bring back to his employer. In vain had he questioned old Telesse. The old man had answered him evasively with mumbled replies that told but little.

He had said that Aline had been given to him when

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but a little child to raise. That he did not know her father and mother, who were dead. The child had been given to him, that was all. Things like that happened every day. He was thankful to Monsieur Varain for what he had done for the girl, and he would like to tell him about her, but he did not know, he never had known, and why should he know now?

And all of these things old Telesse told Felix because he was suspicious, because his master had told him many years ago not to speak to outsiders of himself or of his child, and he had never forgotten.

Monsieur Varain was greatly disappointed. He had hoped easily to learn the parentage of this girl of whom he had become so fond, and he had hoped also to find that she was the girl he was seeking, his granddaughter.

When, many years ago, in his anger at her secret marriage, he had disowned his only child, he had felt a savage delight in his cruelty to her. In those days the memory of his life as overseer had clung to him tenaciously, warping his kindlier nature with all of its lessons, of stern, unbending obedience, of cold, unsympathetic severity, of hard, bitter punishment for faults and misdeeds, and he had felt no remorse in casting his daughter from him.

But in the years that had followed—years of wealth, of ease and of comfort, years in which his mind had been broadened by contact with his fellowmen—Monsieur Varain had come slowly to realize his cruelty to his child, and the fact that this realization had come too late for any reparation on his part had saddened the years of his wealth and influence.

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It was true, as some of the women said, that in his great house at Mouton Monsier Varain was lonely. Its huge, empty rooms seemed to mock him with their eternal silence and hurried him away each morning to seek refuge from his loneliness in the busy life at the store. He could, of course, have found many who would have been glad to brighten this loneliness for him, but such a thing as that had never entered his brain. He had been married once, and to him that chapter of his life was closed beyond the possibility of being ever opened again.

And so he had lived at Mouton a lonely, repentant old man, saddening his life with memories of the past, until he had met Aline. She had come to him as a message of forgiveness from his daughter, a means by which he could make a partial restitution for his harshness to her, and he had sent Aline to the convent and had cared for her as a matter of duty, hoping and praying that here at last was an opportunity to make atonement for his cruelty in the days gone by. But as the weeks passed on Monsieur Varain, won by the girl's love and gratitude, grew very fond of her, and he came to wish that she might be his granddaughter, not so much for her mother's sake as for her own.

And so it was that the fruitless visits of Felix to Landry were a source of great disappointment to him, even as his frequent visits to the convent were a great pleasure.

It was now his habit to go every evening to the convent garden and have Aline read to him, a thing

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which to her was a never-ending delight, for she felt that in this way she could in a manner repay him for his kindness to her. Many and pleasant were the hours that they spent together under the great oaks, the girl reading in a low, clear voice, her face flushed with happiness, the old merchant following every word in silent approval, his stern gray eyes filled with a tenderness whenever he gazed at her, his cold, hard voice touched with a softness and a gentleness whenever he spoke to her, that if known to the people at Mouton would have caused much comment among them.

It was during one of these meetings in the convent garden, upon an afternoon early in November, that Monsieur Varain first spoke to Aline of her father. The girl, who had been reading to him, paused for a moment at the ending of a chapter, and Monsieur Varain laid his hand kindly upon her shoulder.

"Wait for a moment before you begin again, my child," said he. "There is something that I would like to speak to you about."

Aline closed the book and turned to him expectantly.

"Yes, *M'sieu?*" she asked.

"It is of your father that I wish to speak to you," answered he. "Do you remember anything of him?"

For a moment the girl was silent, her fingers straying slowly over the great book in her lap, and then she turned to Monsieur Varain with a curious look upon her face, a look half-puzzled, half-sad, yet filled with the love and gratitude that she felt for the man beside her.

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“In my whole life,” said she, “I have spoken to no one of my father save only my Uncle Telesse and my little friend, Jean Le Bossu, and in all this world I do not think that there is any one else to whom I would speak of him save you, *M’sieu*. You have been so good and kind to me that I will tell you gladly what I know of my poor father, but what I know is little, and it is very sad.

Her voice broke a little as she finished speaking.

Monsieur Varain patted her upon her shoulder reassuringly.

“There, there, my child,” said he, “I do not wish to make you sad. I do not ask you of your father from motives of pure curiosity. I ask you for your own good, and believe me when I tell you that I will repeat what you have to say to no one.”

For a moment the girl gazed before her thoughtfully, as though she was summoning up the scenes of the past, and then she answered him slowly, telling him the little that she remembered of her life at Landry, of her father and the ring that he had given her, of his death and of her life in the Grand Woods which ended with her going to Belrive.

When she finally finished Monsieur Varain was silent for a long time, thinking of what she had told him.

“And the ring that your father gave you,” said he at last. “You will show it to me, will you not?”

Aline smiled sadly. “I would show it to you if I had it, *M’sieu*,” answered she, “but I do not even know where it is.” And then she told him of how she had

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given it to Numa for the money with which to buy her first communion dress and of how the old man had been beaten in his attempt to get it for her, while Monsieur Varain scowled and knit his heavy brows at the cruelty of her wicked lover.

In the meantime, while these two were talking, a man had driven up to the convent to ask for Aline, and, his business being urgent, he was taken at once to the garden, where the girl, catching sight of him, hurried forward to meet him, her face beaming.

"Oh, Jean," she cried, "is it really you? I am so glad to see you. And how is my uncle, Jean? And does he miss me and want me to come home again? I have been reading to *M'sieu* Varain, reading to him out of a great book, Jean, the sight of which I am sure would scare you, and I shall read to you also if you would like it."

She seized the little man eagerly and led him over to Monsieur Varain before he could say a word in reply to her many questions.

"This is Jean Le Bossu of whom I have told you so often, *M'sieu*," she cried. "In all this world there is no one who loves me as he does."

Monsieur Varain held out his hand and smiled kindly at the little man.

"I am indeed glad to meet you, Jean," said he. "Aline has spoken to me of you so often that I have almost felt that I knew you. Have you come all the way from Landry to see her? That is truly kind of you and shows that you love her, even as she says you do."

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The little man shook the proffered hand and stood eyeing Monsieur Varain respectfully.

"I have come to see Aline for her uncle's sake, *M'sieu*," said he. "I bring sad news from the old man. For many days he has been sick with the fever, and he calls for Aline all the night long, for he cannot sleep. *M'sieu le Doctaire Lemaire* has said that she must come to him or he will die."

For a moment the girl stood silent, as though dazed by this unexpected misfortune, and then she turned upon the little man with a sob.

"Ah, Jean!" she cried, "why did you not come to me before this, when he wished for me so. Wait but a moment while I get some clothes and we will go to him at once. But why, Jean, did you not come before?"

"He would not let us send for you until to-day," answered the little man as she hurried off toward the convent.

Monsieur Varain turned to Le Bossu. "This is indeed sad, my friend," said he. "And is there a chance for the old man's recovery?"

"*Le Doctaire Lemaire* has said that if Aline comes to him he may be saved," replied the little man. "She alone can soothe him to sleep. If he can be made to sleep the fever will leave him."

Monsieur Varain nodded gravely. "I see," said he. "God grant that Aline may save him, as you think she will."

"*Oui, M'sieu*," replied the little man simply.

For a while the two were silent, each of them looking toward the convent where Aline had disappeared from

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their sight, and then suddenly Monsieur Varain leaned forward in his chair and spoke to the little man earnestly.

“There is something that I wish very much to know, Jean,” said he, “and you of all men are the one that I think can tell me. As you must know, I am very much interested in Aline, and this evening, just before you came, for the first time since I have known her, I asked her to tell me of her childhood and of her father. She told me all that she remembered, which in a way was a great deal, and which in a way also was nothing. There are many gaps in her story, Jean, which must be filled up before it is complete, and I had counted upon old Telesse to fill them up for me. I had intended driving over to Landry to-morrow to see him, but now that he is so sick the gaps must remain unfilled until he is well again. However, there is one gap which you alone can fill, and I am sure that you will fill it for me when I assure you that I am making the inquiries solely for Aline’s good and not from any motives of curiosity.

“When she told me her story a while ago she spoke of a ring that her father had given her and told me that this ring had been obtained from her by a man named Numa, under circumstances which you of course must know. She further told me that she does not now know where the ring is and that you know this Numa better than any one else in Landry. Now this is the very important gap that I wish you to fill for me, and you can fill it by telling me the whereabouts of Aline’s ring.”

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He ceased speaking and eyed the little man expectantly.

Le Bossu shook his head. "I am sorry, *M'sieu*," said he, "but I cannot fill the gap for you. Neither could Numa himself, for he has lost the ring and is fully as anxious to know where it is as you are."

Monsieur Varain looked disappointed. "Are you sure that he has lost it?" he asked sharply. "Are you sure that he is not deceiving you?"

"If I were not sure, *M'sieu*, I would not have told you what I have," replied the little man slowly.

Monsieur Varain saw the hurt look in his brown eyes and hastened to apologize for the brusqueness of his question.

"There, there, Jean, forgive," said he. "I might have known that such a friend of yours as I hear Numa is would have told you nothing but the truth."

The little man shrugged his twisted shoulders and a curious look came over his pale face.

"Such a friend of mine as Numa is, did you say?" he asked.

"Why, of course," answered Monsieur Varain. "He must certainly think a great deal of you, his best friend."

The little man gave a curious laugh. "Ah, yes, *M'sieu*," said he. "I am his best friend. His very best friend. So every one will tell you. And what is a best friend anyhow, *M'sieu*? Deep in the forest you will find the tiny wild flowers pushing their way through the long grass. Who is their friend, their very best friend? The spring, is it not? The soft, gentle spring

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with its warm winds and its strong, hot sunlight. It nourishes the wild flowers tenderly and raises them green and straight toward the blue heavens, and then, *M'sieu*, all of a sudden it changes. The sun hides himself behind the gray clouds, the wind comes wild and cold from the north, and what of the wild flowers? They wither and droop and finally fall all dead and brown to the cold black earth again, and the tall grass closes over them like a grave, hiding them from the light of heaven. That is the sort of friend that the spring is to the wild flowers and that is the sort of friend that I am to Numa."

The little man ceased speaking and stood for a moment with blazing eyes and quivering body, overcome by the emotions that filled him.

Monsieur Varain looked puzzled. "But I do not understand," said he. "Is Numa, then, your enemy?"

The little man smiled bitterly. "Ah! No one understands, *M'sieu*," he replied. "No one in the world knows save myself, but you shall all know some day, I promise you."

Monsieur Varain shook his head slowly. "You are a curious fellow, Jean," said he, "and I cannot pretend to understand you. You will let me know if ever you see this ring again, will you not?"

"I will, *M'sieu*," answered the little man. "I promise you."

"And here comes Aline," said Monsieur Varain, rising to his feet. "I will go with you to the gate and see her leave."

The girl came toward them quickly, her little bundle

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of clothes clasped under one arm, her head turned every now and then to nod farewell to the dark group of sisters who were watching her from the convent doorway. Her eyes were red from recent weeping, but she smiled bravely when Monsieur Varain spoke to her.

“You will come back again when your uncle is better, will you not?” he asked as they hurried out toward the jumper.

“Yes, *M’sieu*,” answered the girl, “I shall be glad to come back again.”

“I shall miss you very much while you are gone, my child,” said Monsieur Varain gruffly, to hide the tone of sadness in his voice.

When they came out of the convent yard onto the *banquette* Le Bossu jumped down into the road to untie the horse.

Monsieur Varain approached the girl awkwardly and for a moment his stern face was flushed with embarrassment.

“There is a favor that I would ask of you, my child,” he faltered. “If you would not mind kissing an old man like myself it would please me—it would please me more——”

In a moment the girl’s arms were about his neck and a pair of warm lips met his own, flooding him with a wave of peace and happiness that was like strong wine to his cold, lonely old heart.

“Farewell, *M’sieu*,” said Aline. “I shall be very lonely for you, and I thank you for your love and kindness from the bottom of my heart.”

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Monsieur Varain helped her into the battered jumper with as much ceremony as though she had been a princess.

“Farewell, my child,” said he as she drove away. “May God keep you until we meet again.”

He stood upon the high wooden *banquette* and gazed after the jumper long after it had reached the end of the street and passed from his view. Then he turned and walked slowly toward the business part of the town, and the old look of sadness and of loneliness came back gradually upon his face as he went along.

CHAPTER XXII

NICHOLAS WILSON GIVES A WARNING

THAT Dr. Lemaire prophesied correctly in the matter of Aline's return to Belrive was proved soon after her arrival, for the old man, under her soothing influence, sank into a deep sleep that went far to break the violence of his fever. However, he recovered slowly on account of his age, and the chances of Aline's returning to the convent before the Christmas holidays were small indeed.

In these days she saw a great deal of Marjorie, who was back from the seashore, bringing news of Miss Lawrence's engagement to a young man from New Orleans, and hinting vaguely of a similar affair herself, for the sole purpose of torturing Tom Bayne.

Tom, writhing under this torture, began to haunt Belrive, riding over at all hours of the day with many strange excuses for his doing so, until he discovered that Marjorie went each morning to the old man's cabin with some delicacy from the big house. After this he always joined her upon these expeditions, and he would have even gone as far as to help in the preparation of the delicacies if Marjorie had let him, such was his apparent interest in the old man.

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Carey was also interested in the old man's illness, but he visited the cabin seldom. Why this was he hardly knew himself, except that there now lurked within him a vague fear that he might see too much of Aline.

The news of Miss Lawrence's engagement had come to him without one pang of regret, and this, he told himself, was truly a strange state of mind for one who had been but recently in love with that charming young lady. There must surely be some reason, he argued, and although he could have found it, could have found it easily in fact, he did not care to think of it.

Therefore he shunned the old man's cabin, striving vainly to prove to himself that what was so was not so. Filled with a strange unrest he rode moody and silent about the plantation all day, spending his evenings with gun and dog at Belrive's little lake, where the incoming flights of duck were beginning to afford some excellent *passé* shooting.

One cold November evening as he was walking, gun in hand, down the plantation road, his overseer called to him from a distant part of the field. Carey sat down upon one of the levees and waited for Wilson to come up to him, which he finally did after a spirited controversy with his horse concerning the crossing of the main canal.

"I jest don't guess you expected to see us doin' any plowin' this afternoon, did you?" asked Wilson cheerfully, as he pulled up in the road before Carey.

"No," answered Carey. "I thought that it would be too cold."

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"The niggers thought so, too," replied Wilson, "but I didn't. We'd call this sort of weather a mild summer up in Nebrasky, and the children'd be goin' round bare-footed and talkin' 'bout takin' in the swimmin' hole."

He leaned forward in his saddle, chuckling at his joke.

"Well," said Carey, "I'm going to my old swimming hole myself this evening, but I don't think that I'll go in. I'm after duck." He tapped the gun that lay across his knees significantly.

"S'that so?" asked the overseer. "I thought mebby you was gunnin' for some one," and then suddenly his face took on a serious look. "See here, Mr. Gordon," said he slowly, "speakin' 'bout your gunnin' for somebody brings me to what I want to say to you. Now I don't want you to think that I've been meddlin' in your affairs, but I've been hearin' a whole lot of things and I feel like it's my duty to tell you about 'em. There's a Spanish-Mexican sort of feller named Numa Le Blanc over to Landry who's been makin' all sorts of threats against you, and I want to tell you to watch out for him. From what I hear—which has been mostly from the niggers—he's gotten it into his head that you're stuck on his girl, old Telesse's Aline, and he swears that if you don't leave her alone he's goin' to shoot you. Now of course I know all that he's said is foolishness pure and simple, but from what I've heard he's a pretty bad proposition and it won't hurt you to keep an eye on him. If I was you I'd dress up in a gun for a while until I found out whether he means business or not."

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The overseer laughed as he finished speaking, but his voice was earnest and there was a look in his eye which meant that, to him, the matter was a serious one.

Carey sat for a moment in thoughtful silence and then, rising to his feet, he went over to Wilson and held out his hand.

"Thank you, Nick," said he. "You've done me a kindness, and I'll keep my eyes open. I don't mind telling you that I've had trouble with this fellow some time ago, and it was about the old man's niece also." And then he told the overseer about the dance and his fight in the moonlight with Numa.

When he had finished Wilson put his hand behind him and drew forth a revolver. It was an old frontier "Colt's," long and heavy and worn bright from many years' usage, and the overseer, laying it upon theommel of his saddle, patted it fondly.

"Do you see that gun?" he asked. "I've carried it for thirty years, and if I was to go out without it I'd feel as if I was undressed. That gun's saved my life a good many times, and I remember once in particular when it kept me from bein' put away by jest such a sneakin' devil as that feller Numa is.

"It was when I was little more'n a boy, and I was drivin' sheep over the old South Trail from Mexico to Freemont, Nebrasky. On that trip I was foreman of the ewe herd, and perhaps you don't think I had my hands full.

"One of the things that used to bother me most was the way the boys'd steal from the different homesteads we used to pass on our way north. There was a Mexi-

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can in the outfit that was the worst of the lot, and I laid out to ketch him and make an example of him for the rest.

“ Well, one day I come in camp from herdin’, jest about sundown, and there was that Mexican with a big pile of potatoes he’d stole that day. You see, potatoes was somethin’ of a luxury, as we didn’t have no room for none in the trail wagon, and this here Mexican was kneelin’ before a little fire he’d made, peelin’ potatoes with a big butcher knife and fixin’ to have the time of his life.

“ I was so mad when I seen him that I couldn’t think of a cuss word to save my life, and when I lit into him I was tremblin’ like an old man.

“ ‘ Now you jest take them potatoes back where you got ’em,’ says I, ‘ and if the man you stole ’em from shoots the hell out of you before you can explain things to him I won’t have a word to say.’

“ He looked at me for a second or two out of his little beady eyes, and then he jumped at me quick like a cat—with that big butcher knife in one hand. But I was too cute for him, I threw my gun on him and he stopped short, like his works had sort of run down, and then he smiled sort of sickly and made out like he’d only been foolin’.

“ ‘ Ah, Señor Wilson,’ says he, ‘ you don’t think I mean to hurt you?’

“ And then he come at me with both arms wide open, like he was goin’ to hug me, grinnin’ for all he was worth, and I’ll be damned if he didn’t have the butcher knife still in his hand.

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“This time I beat him over the head with my gun, good and hard, and he went down at my feet all in a bunch. When he come to, I give him his money and some mighty good advice.

“ ‘Pull out,’ says I, ‘and don’t show up around me again unless you want to get shot up for keeps. And there’s jest one thing more I want to tell you. The next time you want to hug a man with a butcher knife, put it up your sleeve. You might run across some misguided sport some day who wouldn’t understand your motives and would shoot you up under the mistaken idee that you meant to whittle his spine.’

“And that’s the way it is with these Spanish-Mexican sort of people, Mr. Gordon. You want to watch out for ’em when they’re smilin’ and friendly, for that’s the very time they’re fixin’ to do you up.”

He ceased speaking and thrust the revolver back into its holster again.

Carey, who had followed the story closely, swung his gun across his shoulder with a laugh.

“All right, Nick,” said he. “If Numa tries to hug me with a butcher knife I’ll knock him over the head, just as you did. And I’ll carry a gun and look out for him, as you advise,” he went on more seriously.

Wilson nodded approvingly. “That’s right, Mr. Gordon,” said he. “You can’t be too keerful when you’re mixin’ up with people like this here Numa. I guess I’ll go back to the plows now unless you have somethin’ else for me to do. The niggers are liable to start rattin’, and it won’t do to let ’em get into the habit.” And with a cheery “So long,” he rode across

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the field to the plows, his horse stumbling and tripping over the rough, uneven clods of earth.

Carey started off down the plantation road, and walking briskly (both on account of the lateness of the hour and the coldness of the wind) he arrived upon the borders of the lake just as the shadows of the night were beginning to fall softly about him.

This lake, as it was called, was a long, shallow piece of water, lying in a slight depression of the pasture land at Belrive, grown thick in some places with great clumps of rushes, flowing smooth and clear in others, an ideal spot for duck and other waterfowl. In the soft, muddy ground upon its borders a quantity of snipe were always to be found, and as Carey splashed his way toward the clump of rushes upon the water's edge they darted out from under his feet, and flying close to the ground whipped away with a tantalizing "scape," well knowing that he could not see to shoot them in the half-light.

Crouching down in his shelter of rushes Carey waited for the duck and swore softly to himself, for he had forgotten to bring his dog and he knew that should he kill anything he would be forced to wade out waist-deep in the icy water to get it.

For a long time he knelt in the damp, muddy blind waiting, while the darkness fell, and the scene before him became indescribably drear.

The water stretched away in a long, pale sheet—cold and gray, like steel—mirroring the dull, leaden sky that caused it to shimmer in a faint, uncanny way. The scattered clumps of rushes rose white and ghostly in the

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thin cloud, half-fog, half-mist, that hung low above the water.

The duck now began to arrive, swishing across the lake in ones and twos—quick and sure, like a flash of white light against the darkness of the sky. Carey fired again and again, the reports rolling out like thunder in the silence about him, but the wind was strong, the light was poor and the duck flashed away to the distant sea marsh and safer feeding grounds.

After a time, growing tired of his ill-luck, he rose from his cramped position and stretched his aching limbs. For a moment he stood in the rushes beating the warmth into his numb body, and then as he looked out across the little strip of marsh that separated the lake from the pasture he saw a man splashing his way toward him, his figure sharply silhouetted against the sky-line.

The man had a gun thrown carelessly across one shoulder, and as Carey gazed at him his heart suddenly gave a great throb and his nerves stretched tight and tingling, for in the dim half-light he saw that it was Numa. In a moment his conversation with the overseer came back to him with its warning and tale of treachery, and his hand fell quickly upon the breech of his gun, throwing back the hammers with a faint, metallic click.

The sharp ears of Numa caught the sound and he halted a few feet from Carey with a low, scornful laugh.

“Do not be afraid, *M'sieu*,” said he, laying his gun upon the ground. “I have come to talk, not to fight. See, I have put my weapon down. Now I will come to you and tell you what I have to say.”

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He came a little forward.

Carey lowered his gun, but he eyed the man before him carefully, one finger curled in readiness about the trigger.

“Say what you have to say and do not come any closer,” said he. “I have heard of the threats that you have made against me in Landry, and I have also been warned against your treachery. Do not try any tricks with me, for I tell you frankly that if you do I will shoot you where you stand.”

Reaching down Numa broke off a spear of the long marsh grass and twisted it coolly about his finger before replying.

“So you have heard of my threats, *M’sieu?*” he asked. “I thought that you would. It is true that I made them, and I will not deny to you that you are my enemy. I hate you, *M’sieu*. My God, how I hate you!”

His eyes blazed and he clenched his brown hands desperately in his fury.

Carey’s gun was up in a moment, but the man before him stood as immovable as a statue, and he slowly lowered it again.

Numa shook his head. “No, no, *M’sieu*,” said he. “I meant nothing. It was my bad temper, that is all. That is over now, and I will tell you what I have to say. It is about the girl Aline, *M’sieu*. I love her—ah, God! how I love her—and she will have nothing to do with me. Ever since the day when I hurt her uncle at Landry she has hated me, she has despised me. It was my bad temper, *M’sieu*. I knew not what

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I was doing. I have begged her to excuse my weakness, I have promised her to lead a better life, but she only shakes her head and sends me away without a word. You do not know how I love her, *M'sieu*. Since she has refused to speak to me my life has been as dark and cold as the lake before you."

He bowed his head in the bitterness of his despair and his breath came short and sobbing.

Carey looked at him curiously and let his gun down until its stock rested upon the ground. He knew that for the time being he had nothing to fear from the man before him.

"This may all be very hard upon you as you say it is," he replied, "but it seems to me that you have brought it upon yourself by your own wickedness. Also I cannot imagine why you are telling me this, as I can in no way help you."

"But you can, *M'sieu*," cried Numa. "You can speak to Aline for me and she will forgive me."

Carey laughed. "Do you suppose," he asked, "that Aline will forgive you the wrong that you have done her simply because I ask her to?"

"I know that she will," replied Numa slowly. "She loves you, *M'sieu*. That is why I hate you so."

His voice was low and full of pain, as though it tortured him to say the words that he was speaking.

Carey's face went white and he caught his breath sharply. A feeling of happiness seized him and he fought against it angrily.

"You say that she loves me?" he gasped. "Why do you say that, when you know that it is not so?"

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“It is so, *M’sieu*,” answered Numa slowly. “I have seen it in her eyes when she was speaking of you. A jealous lover is the most watchful of all people.”

“And do you suppose,” asked Carey angrily, “that even if Aline were to listen to my defense of you I would speak to her? Do you think that I would help to bind her to a wild, drunken creature like yourself? You must be mad, crazy, to ask such a thing.”

Numa smiled sadly. He had himself well in hand now and he spoke quietly.

“You are wrong in what you are saying,” replied he. “I know that I am a wild, bad creature, but it is all on account of this girl. If I had her love I would be a different man. I am a creature of passions, *M’sieu*, of fierce, bad passions, and I am mad with love. Sometimes I am even afraid of myself. There is but one person in all this world that can save me, and that person is Aline. Ah, *M’sieu*, if you only knew how I love her you would speak for me, you would indeed. It is the only thing that will save me, the only thing. Will you not speak, *M’sieu*? For the love of God say ‘yes’ to me.” He stretched out his arms imploringly.

Carey shook his head. “I cannot do it,” said he. “It would not be right. There is no use to ask me any more, for I cannot do it.”

Numa’s face grew dark and his voice rose angrily. “Ah, I see,” he cried. “You love her also, *M’sieu*. You wish her for yourself.”

He paused, his rage now too great for words.

In an instant Carey stood over him, his face white as death, his arm half-raised as though for a blow.

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"If ever you speak to me like that again I will kill you," said he slowly. "Now go before I forget myself and shoot you for the lie that you have just told." He turned away as he spoke, but Numa called to him beseechingly.

"*M'sieu, M'sieu,*" he cried. "Forgive me. Forgive me. I swear to you that I meant nothing. It was my jealousy that made me speak to you as I did. If you do not love this girl why then will you not speak for me? I swear to you upon the cross, upon the grave of my father, that if she forgives me I will lead a different life, that I will never touch liquor again. She is the only one that can save me, can make me the man that I ought to be. Will you not speak for me, *M'sieu?* It is nothing for you to do and it will mean so much for me."

Again Carey shook his head and turned to go. "I have told you that I cannot do it," said he.

Numa ran after him and seized him by the arm. He was sobbing now and his eyes were wild. Far away in the distance shone the lights of the big house, tiny dots of yellow that came and went fitfully as the wind swayed the trees before them, and Numa pointing to these lights made his last passionate appeal.

"See, *M'sieu,*" he cried pitifully. "There are the lights of your home. In a few moments you will go to them, to warmth, to wealth and comfort. There you will see the ones that you love, that love you, and they will cheer you and make you happy. And what becomes of me?" He pointed to the wild, dreary scene behind him.

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“I shall go out there, *M'sieu*,” he wailed, “far out there in the cold, the wet and the dark, to the Grand Woods. I shall go to my empty cabin, and there will be no voice to greet me, no loving ones to cheer me. There will be nothing but the moaning of the wind and the rustling of the trees. Think of what you go to and of what I go to, *M'sieu*. You have all and I have nothing. God! Can you wonder that I wish for one to cheer my loneliness? Ah! *M'sieu*, do not refuse me, for if you do I am lost.”

He fell upon his knees and buried his face in his trembling hands.

There was a ring of truth, of pain in his voice that went straight to Carey's heart and he raised the kneeling man to his feet, speaking to him kindly.

“Listen, Numa,” said he. “I am going to do what you ask, because I believe that you really mean what you say. I did not think that you loved this girl as much as you do, and I am sure that through this same love you will be kind to her if she forgives you. Now I am going to make a bargain with you, and if you will do what I ask you I will speak to Aline.”

“I will do anything, anything, *M'sieu*,” answered Numa brokenly.

“Well, then,” said Carey, “here is the bargain. For one week you will not see Aline or you will not communicate with her in any way. During that time I will speak to her for you and will do all in my power to make her forgive you. A little before sunset on the last day of the week you will go to see Aline. I will tell her that you are coming and she will see you. You

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will ask her then if she will forgive you and if she will marry you. Should she say yes I wish you all the luck in the world. Should she say no you must promise me that you will never see her or speak to her again, for it would only annoy her and make you unhappy. This is my bargain and if you will promise to carry out your part of it I will promise to carry out mine."

Numa held out his hand. "I have wronged you in thinking you my enemy, *M'sieu*," said he. "Forgive me. I promise you that I will carry out my part of the bargain."

Carey took the hand which was extended toward him. "And I promise you that for one week I will do all in my power to exonerate you in the eyes of Aline," he replied. "On the morning of the eighth day I will go to the cabin and learn of your success or of your failure, whichever it may be. And now good night and—and—good luck to you."

He pronounced the last words haltingly, as though it cost him an effort to say them.

Numa lifted his hand to his hat for a moment, an homage that in all his life he had paid to no man. "You have a kind heart, *M'sieu*," said he, "and in the days to come I shall look upon you, whom I have thought my enemy, as my friend. Good night, *M'sieu*, and thank you."

As he strode away Carey followed him with his eyes, until he had picked up his gun and disappeared in the darkness, for, fearing treachery, he did not care to turn his back upon this man.

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“It is a pity,” said he to himself as he gazed at the vanishing figure, “that a man who can love a woman so should be so unworthy of her.”

As he walked back toward the big house his mind was in a tumult. What had he done, he asked himself. Would he be the instrument by means of which this girl would throw away her life upon the wicked, worthless man to whom he had given his promise? Had he in a fit of compassion, in a moment of pity, brought about by a carefully worded tale of sorrow, promised to destroy the peace and happiness of Aline, to whom he had always been as a protector? If Aline loved him as Numa said she did, would she not forgive this man by reason of her love for him? And if she did forgive Numa, would he lead a better life as he had promised to do?

He was furious with himself for falling into the trap that had been so cleverly laid for him.

And then again he asked himself, should Aline forgive Numa and should he lead a better life as he had promised, had he not done a good deed? Would he not make two people happy? Would he not be happy himself at having brought about this happiness to others?

He paused suddenly aghast at the cold fear that came over him. “Would it make such a difference to him if Aline were to marry Numa?” he asked himself.

The time had now come when he must answer this question.

For a long while he stood silent, fighting this fight

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with himself, and then he raised his face to the dull sky above him.

“Oh, God!” he cried, “let her refuse him. Let her refuse him. Numa was right in what he said, if not in what he meant, for I do love her, and I want her for myself.”

CHAPTER XXIII

NUMA SETTLES AN OLD SCORE

IT was late the next morning when, after a night of drunkenness at the coffee house, Numa set out from Landry.

It was later still when he rode away from the house of old Victor, a cruel smile twisting his lips as he thought of the mission of vengeance that he had accomplished.

Passing the place a short while before he had seen Jeanne and had called to her to come out to him. Then, sullen and angry from the effects of his debauch, the sight of her had aroused the cruelty that ever lay dormant within him, and he had determined to vent his spite upon her. He had also thought of his bargain with Carey, of his last desperate chance for happiness, and he had determined that he would humble this girl and so settle the matter for good and all before he received Aline's final answer.

So he had told her of the time she had mocked him when he had tried to sell his birds in Landry, of his pretended love for her and of his real love for Aline, while she had listened to it all, white and speechless, unable in her despair to utter a word of protest. Then he had thanked her for her usefulness to him as a foil

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in his quest for Aline, and with a mocking smile had ridden away for his stay in the Grand Woods.

Jeanne leaned over her little front gate and watched him until he vanished up the street. Then she turned away with a sob and very slowly went to her room, where she threw herself across the bed and wept with mingled shame and disappointment.

When the first wild rush of her grief was over she arose and sat upon the edge of the bed to think. The blow was a hard one, for, despite his treachery, she knew that she still loved Numa and would love him for all time. Women such as she give their love but once, and then give it so thoroughly that they can never take it back again.

So it was by reason of this very love that she could not bring herself to the thought of harming Numa. Yet this insult must be revenged. To punish him and yet have him come to no harm, that was the question.

And now she thought of the girl Aline, and her eyes snapped viciously. Here was the solution. She was the one upon whom her vengeance would fall, and it would fall upon Numa also, if he really loved her. Would not any harm that came to her trouble him more than any that could possibly come to himself? And would she not also be revenged upon this girl who had stolen her lover away from her?

In her excitement Jeanne sprang to her feet, pacing up and down the room like a caged animal, and her face at this moment was not pleasant to see.

Suddenly she dropped back upon the bed again in limp despair, for another thought had come to her.

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How was she to punish Aline? How could she harm this girl, who, unknown to most of the people at Landry, was almost unknown to her? This was the question that she asked herself again and again, as with wrinkled brows and tear-stained eyes she sat upon the edge of the bed in thoughtful silence.

“Who could help her in this matter?” she asked herself, for she knew that alone she could do but little. If she could have the assistance of some man it would help her greatly, but who was there that would give her such assistance?

There were many it was true who would willingly face Numa in an open fight, but whom could she find to do this other thing? Who would help her to harm a weak, defenseless girl that had but an old man to protect her? Such a man must be mean and cowardly, a man too craven to fight by any fair means, too clever to be discovered by those he fought, and yet too stupid to discover the deception that she would practice upon him in her pretended love. Where could she find such a man?

And so she sat and racked her brain until (happening to glance out of the window) she saw a figure that caused her to spring to her feet with a cry and hurry outside.

Jean Marie Lacour was returning from his dinner to the drug store.

Jeanne called to him from the doorway. “Wait a moment, Jean Marie,” she cried. “I am going to the store and I will walk with you.”

Jean Marie stopped instantly, and coming to the

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fence leaned over it with an expectant smile. He had seen but little of Jeanne in the past few weeks, and what little he had seen of her had given him but small satisfaction. He had told himself that his quest was hopeless and it had hurt him, for he really loved her. Therefore when she called to him and asked for his company he was at a loss to understand it.

“Wait for me, I shall be ready in a moment,” called Jeanne, and hurrying into the house she left the astonished clerk to stare after her in pleased amazement.

When she reappeared a few moments later her face bore none of the signs of her recent emotion, and she smiled upon the amazed man so sweetly that he was instantly transported to the seventh heaven of delight.

“Ah, Jean Marie,” said she, “I am indeed glad that I caught sight of you. It has been some time since I have seen you.”

Jeanne Marie assumed an air of injured innocence. “Whose fault has it been?” he asked.

“You must know that I have been very busy lately,” answered Jeanne, “and it has been some time since I have come out to walk upon the streets.”

Jean Marie looked at her curiously for a moment, as though he was not quite certain that she was in earnest. He wondered at her pleasant treatment of him and, like the crafty creature that he was, he determined to take advantage of it. There were several things that he wished to find out, and he saw no better time for finding them out than the present.

“Of course you have been busy,” said he. “Every one in Landry knows that.” He smiled meaningly.

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Jeanne looked surprised. "Of what are you speaking?" she asked.

"Why, of your coming marriage to Numa," answered Jean Marie smoothly.

Jeanne gave a scornful laugh. "You are joking, surely," said she. "I did not expect the people at Landry to understand what I have been doing, but you, Jean Marie—you who have been to the city—I thought surely that you would understand."

Jean Marie assumed an air of great wisdom. "Of course," he replied, "I have seen more than the people here, but I have not exactly understood you. You have been——"

He paused and looked at her vaguely.

"I have been playing with Numa," answered Jeanne slowly. "I have been playing with him, as I have played with men all my life. You did not think that I loved him, did you? What fools men are. They think in their own conceit that every woman that smiles upon them is in love with them."

Jean Marie nodded sagely. He was beginning to understand. "I see," said he. "You do not love Numa. You have been fooling him, just as you have fooled the rest." He paused and his face was lit with a smile of great satisfaction, for there was in this news just a little of the punishment that he feared to inflict upon his rival.

"Of course I have been fooling him," continued Jeanne sweetly. "You did not think that I would throw myself away upon a man like Numa, did you? Ah! No. I will look a little higher, I promise you. I

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will marry a man who has seen something, who knows something."

She eyed Jean Marie nervously, for her attack had been very direct, and she feared that he might become suspicious, but one glance at his face, radiant with his own shallow egotism, reassured her, and she gave him a look that set his heart to thumping in a terrible manner.

Jean Marie swallowed the bait eagerly. "What a girl you are, Jeanne," said he with a sigh of admiration. "I should have known that you would look higher."

"I will look higher," answered Jeanne insinuatingly.

The clerk turned upon her a look of bashful uncertainty and she cast down her eyes demurely.

"As you know, Jeanne, I have been to the city and I have seen many things," said Jean Marie haltingly. "I offered you my love before, and you cast it away as a worthless thing. What if I were to offer it to you again?" He looked at her expectantly.

"If you were to offer it to me again I would accept it," began Jeanne slowly, and then she paused.

Jean Marie gave a glad cry and started forward.

"—Upon one condition," finished Jeanne.

Jean Marie's face fell. "And the condition?" he asked.

They had now come within a short distance of the drug store, where Jeanne knew that it would be impossible to speak to the clerk as she wished, so she laid her hand lightly upon his arm.

"Let us walk past the store," said she, "for I have

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much to tell you, and I do not wish to speak of what I have to say before other people."

She turned as she spoke and led the way down a side street that opened out upon the road to Mouton, where the two walked along in silence until the town was left behind them and the houses had given place to the hedges that shut in the road with their high green walls.

Jean Marie was the first to break the silence, his impatience having by now become unbearable.

"And the condition, Jeanne?" he asked anxiously. "What is the condition?"

Jeanne turned to him with her sweetest smile and spoke to him in the most coaxing tones imaginable.

"I have a grievance against a certain person," said she, "and this grievance has made me revengeful. I cannot hope to gain my revenge alone, Jean Marie, and I wish you to help me. If you do help me I will believe that you really love me, and then I will love you also. That is the condition, and now it is for you to say whether you will help me or not. There are many who would jump at the chance."

Jean Marie's face was a study of conflicting emotions, and he gazed at Jeanne in silent appeal. His love for the girl was battling with his cowardliness, and the struggle was a fierce one.

When he finally answered her, his voice trembled as much with fear as with disappointment—the disappointment of one who, having his most cherished ambition within his grasp, is suddenly, through his own weakness, forced to relinquish it.

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“ I am sorry, Jeanne,” said he slowly, “ but I do not think that I can do what you wish me to. I am a business man and I know nothing of fighting. I would stand no chance against this man upon whom you wish to be revenged. Also, if I am not mistaken, the man that you wish me to harm is Numa. I have seen him shoot, and that is enough. What good would it do me to have you love me after I am dead. No! No! Jeanne, I cannot do it.”

Jeanne turned away her face for a moment that he might not see the scorn that was pictured upon it.

“ You have not let me tell you all,” said she. “ When I said that I had a grievance against a person I did not say whether that person was a man or a woman.”

Jean Marie gave a joyful start. “ Ah! If it were only a woman now—” he began.

“ It is a woman,” interrupted Jeanne, “ and if you are careful no one need know that you have had anything to do with the matter. You have heard of the girl at *M'sieu* Gordon's plantation that is called Aline?”

Jeanne Marie nodded.

“ She is the one,” said Jeanne in a low voice.

“ And why do you wish to harm her?” began the clerk.

“ That is my affair,” interrupted Jeanne. “ Will you do it?”

Jean Marie looked puzzled. “ What is it that I must do to harm her?” he asked.

“ That is for you to decide,” answered Jeanne. “ I only wish that I knew what to do. She will be a hard

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one to injure, Jean Marie, and my poor head is too empty to think of any plan, so I have turned to you. Surely a person such as you are, who has traveled and seen the world, can settle a little matter like this."

"Of course you do not wish me to injure her bodily?" inquired the clerk anxiously.

"Of course not," answered Jeanne. "What I wish you to do is to spread some report about her that will harm her. I would do it myself and gladly, but who would believe me? They would laugh at me and say that I was jealous. But they will believe you, Jean Marie, because you are a man, and you are not supposed to be jealous. Ah! Why will they ever treat us as though we were children? If I were but a man for a day, an hour, I would show them whether I am a child or not."

She clenched her hands and turned upon the clerk with blazing eyes.

"Well, what do you say?" she cried fiercely. "Will you do it? Is it yes or no?"

Jean Marie, assuming a most solemn air, motioned her to be silent. "I am thinking," said he—and then suddenly he gave a cry of satisfaction and turned to her triumphantly. "I have it! I have it!" cried he excitedly. "The store is a great place for talk, as you must know, and I hear there many things of many people. I have heard it said that this Aline is a great favorite of *M'sieu* Gordon's and that he goes often to her cabin to see her. That he has even given her money—gold money, Jeanne. What if I were to have something to say of them, of those two, the next time that they are

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talking at the store? Do you understand? You know what I mean, eh?"

Jeanne looked at the clerk admiringly. "What a clever fellow you are, Jean Marie," said she. "I would never have thought of it myself."

She did not think it necessary to tell him that she had given him the key to this idea in what she had said to him, or that she had thought of this plan as soon as she had seen him.

Jean Marie pulled out his big silver watch and looked at it guiltily.

"My," said he, "I am over half an hour late. The doctor will be very angry, and I must think of some excuse. I am going to hurry back and you must come along a little later, for I do not wish the doctor to see us together. I have my excuse to make, you know. And now, will you not give me a kiss, Jeanne, as a little advance for what I am going to do for you?"

The road stretched away before them deserted and the tall hedges shut them in on either side from the sight of any possible intruder. Jean Marie put up his lips.

With a sigh Jeanne bent down and kissed him, barely hiding the shudder that passed over her as their lips met. She had begun this thing and she must see it to the bitter end.

She watched the clerk as he hurried away, a look of deepest contempt upon her face.

"Ah, what a miserable creature you are," said she. "The hardest thing that I have ever done is to pretend to love you. But you will pay dearly for it all when

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your turn comes, and it will come the moment that I am through with you."

When Jean Marie reached the drug store he found the old doctor absent upon a sick call, and he found also a girl who was waiting for a prescription. He gave a guilty start when he saw that it was Aline, and hurrying behind the counter he handed her the medicine.

"Is that all, *M'sieu?*" she asked as she paid him.

"Yes," answered Jean Marie, "that is all. All for the present I mean," he added under his breath as she turned to go.

CHAPTER XXIV

LE SAUVAGE

TRUE to his promise, Carey, in the days that followed his interview with Numa, paid many visits to the little cabin on the edge of the field. To do all that he had agreed to do was, he told himself, his solemn duty, and the defense that he made for Numa was both eloquent and hearty in the extreme.

It was no easy task for him to do this thing, for now that he had acknowledged to himself his love for Aline every word that he said in favor of Numa was a blow aimed against his own happiness. It would have been hard for him indeed had it not been for the girl herself, who, listening to his defense of Numa, always in respectful silence, had, when he had finished speaking, but one answer to give him.

“What you say, *M’sieu*, must of course be true,” she would always reply, “but I cannot forgive Numa. You do not know all and I cannot tell you, but if you only knew you would not blame me.”

One day she asked a question that he found it hard to answer. He had just finished a long speech in Numa’s defense when the girl turned upon him with a curious look in her eyes.

“Why is it that you are so anxious to have me for-

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give Numa?" she had asked. "Do you wish me to marry him, *M'sieu?* That is the only thing that I would not do for you."

Carey had not answered her at first, but had thought a long time before replying. He had felt that to intimate to her in the slightest degree the love that he felt for her would have been a gross breach of the trust that Numa had reposed in him.

"I cannot answer your question, Aline," he had finally said to her, "but one of these days I will explain to you all that I wish." And without giving her a chance to question him further, he had left the cabin, enraged at his ever-ready sympathy that had of late caused him so much trouble.

And so the days had passed slowly for him, each one endearing the girl more to him, each one making him regret more keenly his agreement with Numa. He was not unconscious of the fact that his frequent visits to the cabin were the cause of much speculation among the people at Belrive, and he had laid much stress upon the old man's sickness, using it as an excuse for the many hours spent in Aline's society.

But the old man was now much better, was up and working about a little in his garden, and Carey saw that this excuse would no longer answer his purpose. Therefore he was greatly worried at the thought of the possible construction that people would put upon his actions, and these thoughts, together with certain rumors that had come to him faintly from Landry, filled him with a foreboding and a restlessness to tell of his love that was well-nigh unbearable.

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It seemed to him that the week would never pass, and he hailed the coming of each day with delight, as the time grew nearer when his fears and worries would be at an end. He wished a thousand times that he had limited the time of Numa's probation to a day, and he felt that the ending of the week would find him the happiest man alive. What he meant to do then he could not fully decide.

That the announcement of his love for Aline would cause an endless amount of trouble with his family he knew only too well, and he could not bear to think of the pain that it would give them. They would think him mad and would send Aline away in disgrace to the Grand Woods, where he could not help but acknowledge she rightfully belonged. How, he asked himself, could they see in her the many perfections that to him were so apparent? And when they sent her away what was he to do? Would it not be better for them all if Aline were to forgive Numa and marry him? Surely this would be the easiest solution of the matter. And then his love for the girl would cry out fiercely against such a thing, and he would forget his family, his troubles and all in thoughts of Aline.

Therefore when the morning of the seventh day arrived he had come to no decision.

As he rode to the stables in the gray dusk of the November daybreak he told himself that the time had now come when he must act; the time when he must choose between the duty that he owed his family and his love for Aline. His visit to the cabin that morning was a short one, and when, the day's work over, he

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came out upon the plantation road and started up toward the big house he had come to his decision.

If Aline, for some untold reason, should change her mind and marry Numa this incident in his life was closed, he told himself, and closed in a manner that was best for all, himself not included.

If on the other hand Aline should refuse Numa (as he felt sure she would) he decided to keep his love for her a secret, for a time at least. He would let her finish at the convent and gain what education she could, while he would try by degrees to break to his family the news that he loved her.

He was very well satisfied with this plan, especially as it gave him time in which to perfect his affairs for the future, and as he rode slowly homeward his heart was lighter than it had been since the night of his meeting with Numa.

He wondered what Numa would say to Aline when she had refused him and where he would go when he left her, for he knew that such a man as he could not stay near the girl he loved and keep from seeing her. In the honesty of his own heart he did not think of the possibility of Numa's breaking his given word.

And then he thought that perhaps Aline, won by Numa's pleading (as he had been) might change her determination to refuse him, and he found himself by this strange chain of circumstances, praying for the failure of the very thing that for the past week he had striven with all his power of speech and influence to aid.

As he drew near the big house he saw a horse tied to the rack in front, and he rode forward eagerly, hoping

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that it might be Tom Bayne, whose cheerfulness would help him to forget the many troubles that harassed him. The visitor, however, proved to be Mr. Parker, who was just preparing to take his leave after a long and glowing description of his new girl to Aunt Betty. This girl, the beautiful and accomplished sister of Monsieur Varain's head clerk, had so occupied the thoughts of Mr. Parker that he did not remember the real object of his visit until Carey's arrival.

"You're just in time," cried he as Carey entered the doorway. "I stopped by on my way to Landry to get you to come over to the political meeting. We've just got to re-elect Paul Hebert for Mr. Landry's sake, if for no other reason, and old Varain is coming over to give us the latest news from Mouton. We'll have a big powwow sure enough, and you've just got to come."

Carey agreed readily enough, any diversion being welcome at this time, and in a very few moments he was in the saddle again, bound for Landry and the old doctor's drug store, where the politicians were to meet.

They found the old doctor waiting for them upon his front porch, and he hurried out into the road with a smile of welcome.

"I am glad that you both came over," said he, "for your standing with us in this election will help us a great deal. I have just had a message from Varain saying that he will arrive a little later than he expected, on account of some unforeseen business, but he assures me that he will be here before dark. Let us sit upon the porch and wait for him."

And so they sat upon the porch and talked of poli-

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tics, while quite a little crowd of idlers gathered upon the steps below them, waiting eagerly for the stories and anecdotes that they knew would be forthcoming.

For a time the talk upon the porch held straight to the course of the political situation, and then suddenly it veered to the merits of the candidate himself, Paul Hebert.

"Well, if good, cool nerve and grit stand for anything, he ought to win hands down," declared Mr. Parker vehemently.

The old doctor smiled. "He is a plucky man," said he. "Almost as plucky as his father."

"And was he a deputy sheriff also?" asked Mr. Parker.

The old doctor shook his head. "No," he replied, "he was a sheriff, and there was only one man in all this country as brave as he was."

"And that man was Le Sauvage," added Monsieur Landry.

One of the listeners on the steps gave a sudden start and the old doctor, whose quick eyes took in everything, called out to him.

"What is the matter, Jean?" he asked.

Le Bossu (for it was he) shrugged his twisted shoulders and spread out his hands in a gesture of weariness.

"It is nothing, *M'sieu le Doctaire*," answered he. "Nothing but one of the sudden pains that I have so often."

"And who was this Le Sauvage?" asked Mr. Parker. "From his name I should judge that he was a pretty savage person."

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Doctor Lemaire nodded. "He was savage to his enemies," he answered. "He was quite a celebrated character in this part of the world some years ago, and his memory is still green in the thoughts of the old people like myself. I suppose that I remember him better than most people, as I happened to see quite a good deal of him at one time."

The old doctor paused and drew a cigar from his pocket. He knew that he would be called upon to tell of his experiences with Le Sauvage, and he could always talk much better when he was smoking.

"Would you mind telling me about this savage gentleman?" asked Mr. Parker. "You have aroused my curiosity to the highest pitch by what you have said already."

The old doctor lit his cigar and tucked it into the corner of his mouth.

"It is rather a long story," said he, "and one that most of the people here have heard many times, but as we have nothing to do until Varain arrives and as you have never heard it, I will tell it to you.

"I must begin by telling you that all of these things took place shortly after the war, when this country was in a state of lawlessness. At that time the courts at Mouton (which were for the most part filled with Republican carpet-bagger officials) were so corrupt that the conviction of a criminal was almost impossible, and crime after crime was committed, the culprits receiving no other punishment than a short stay in the parish prison.

"Now you must understand, my friend, that the

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reason for this was very plain to the better element at Mouton. They knew that the public officials, being more or less criminals themselves, could not afford to antagonize their friends, and in some instances their partners—the apprehended criminals. Such a state of affairs as this could not, as you can understand, be borne forever by the better element, and so finally they determined to take the law into their own hands.

“Accordingly they organized what was known as ‘Le Comité des Vigilantes,’ and Hebert, the father of our candidate, was one of its leaders. It is needless to say that I myself was a member, as was also your friend here, Monsieur Landry.

“The purpose of this organization was to punish those criminals who had escaped their just dues through the dishonesty of the courts at Mouton, and so well did we perform our duty that in a short time we had driven all of these criminals from the town. With them went also a great many of the public officials, and they took refuge in a place near here called Ile des Cyprès. Now this Ile des Cyprès was almost an impregnable place. It was a succession of small cypress islands lying far out in the open sea marsh—a place where one might lie well hid in the close cover of the islands and have at his mercy the enemy on the open marsh before him.

“So here, for some time, the outcasts dwelt in safety, and it is probable that they would have stayed there for the rest of their lives had they been content to leave well enough alone. But it seems that when one is once dishonest he is dishonest forever, and that is the way

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that it was with these people. No sooner were they left in peace on their islands than they began to start their old tricks again. Coming out from the marshes in a great crowd they would terrorize the country around them, robbing, burning, stealing the women, and in some instances committing murder, and then with the Vigilantes close upon their heels they would retreat to their stronghold, there to defy us.

“ Now the leader of the criminals in these raids was a man who, on account of his fierceness, the people had named Le Sauvage. He was of tremendous height and stature, as strong as two ordinary men and possessed of a courage and fearlessness that was the marvel of all who saw him.

“ He was the heart and soul of the fugitives, and we felt that could we capture him or kill him, the taking of the rest of them would be comparatively a simple matter. It is useless to say that we tried in every way to capture Le Sauvage, but all our efforts failed, and the fugitives grew bolder every day, committing robberies and stealing women almost under our very noses.

“ I had been very anxious to see this man, the stories of whose bravery made a deep impression upon me, and being much younger than I am now I was foolish enough to pray one night that I might meet him. My prayer was answered the very next day.

“ I had been to see a sick person who lived far out in the country, near the sea marsh, and I was returning home in my buggy, tired out by a very long drive. My road lay through a very desolate lane, bordered upon either side by thick Cherokee hedges, and I was driving

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along a little before sunset when suddenly a loud voice called to me to halt.

“Now, as I have told you, the times were troublesome, and we were all of us prepared for danger, so I pulled in my horse quickly and slipped down one of my hands to where my pistol lay upon the seat beside me.

“Instantly the voice called to me again. ‘Throw up your hands, Doctor,’ it said, ‘and do not attempt to reach your pistol. I do not wish to kill you, but you will force me to in a moment.’

“You may be sure that I threw up my hands at this, and as I did so, a man stepped out from where he had been hiding in the hedges and came toward me.

“In one hand he held a pistol that was pointed directly at my heart, and it needed but a glance from me to tell that the man who stood before me was the one that I had longed so to see—Le Sauvage. He was a large man, larger than I ever expect to see again in my life, and his face, although it had about it an almost indescribable look of sadness, was handsome in the extreme. It was one of those faces that we seldom see: strong and clear-cut, and having about it a certain winning air that was almost irresistible.

“He came to the buggy and without a word took up my pistol from the seat and thrust it into his pocket. Having done this he climbed into the buggy and, taking the seat beside me, started the horse.

“I must have presented a strange picture of fright and astonishment at this unexpected proceeding, for he turned upon me with a laugh.

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“ ‘Do not be afraid, Doctor,’ said he. ‘If you will but do what I ask you to, you will come to no harm, I assure you.’

“His voice was strong and clear; the voice of a born leader, and yet it was touched with the same sadness that his whole person suggested.

“Being somewhat reassured by the tone of his voice and the friendly way in which he looked at me, I answered him with as fair an attempt at indifference as I could.

“ ‘And what is it that you wish me to do?’ I asked.

“He pulled at his mustache for a moment as though he was choosing carefully the words for his answer, and then he turned and met my eyes squarely with his own.

“ ‘I have a sick wife, Doctor,’ said he slowly, ‘and if she does not have medical attention soon she will die.’ He pointed an arm before him. ‘She lies out there in the sea marsh, where none can go to her and where none would go to her, if they could. Like myself, she is an outcast. Therefore as no one will come to her I have been forced to come out from my hole and bring some one to her. Have you a wife, Doctor?’

“I nodded.

“ ‘And do you love her?’ asked he softly.

“Again I nodded.

“ ‘Then,’ said he, ‘you can understand my position. Can you truthfully say that you blame me for stopping you as I have done?’

“I shook my head. ‘No,’ said I, ‘I do not blame you, and I will do all in my power to save your wife.’

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As you must know, I am one of the Vigilantes, and if I meet you again I assure you that I will do my best to kill you. But for the present I am going with you as a physician, and I would be a sorry creature were I to do anything that is not just and right. Had you sent for me I would have gone to see your wife just as I would have gone to see any other woman. We doctors cannot choose our patients. And now, my friend, until we are back here again in the road and on equal footing, I want you to remember that I am not a Vigilante, but a physician, and I shall expect you to treat me as such.'

"Le Sauvage held out his hand. 'You are a real man, Doctor,' said he, 'and to show you that I trust you, I am going to give you back your pistol.'

"He handed it to me as he spoke, and we drove along in silence until we came to the thin strip of forest that borders upon the sea marsh.

"Here Le Sauvage got out of the buggy and tied the horse. 'I will have to blindfold you, Doctor,' said he. 'The way to my hiding place is a secret one and I cannot let you see it.'

"'And how am I to cross the marsh blindfolded?'" I asked him. 'It is difficult to make your way when you can see.'

"'I will carry you,' was his answer, and before I could laugh at the idea, he tied a cloth about my eyes, and picking me up as though I had been a child, started away with me through the woods.

"Of that journey through the marsh I can tell you but little. It will be sufficient to say that it was a long

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one and that Le Sauvage never faltered. I have never heard of such strength as his.

“When he finally set me down upon my feet and took off the bandage I found that it had grown almost dark, and the sight that met my eyes was one that I will not forget to my dying day. I was upon a little island far out in the sea marsh—an island thickly grown with shrubs and underbrush and having upon its eastern edge a single huge live oak. The ground about this oak had been cleared away to make room for a rude hut, built of cypress logs and roughly thatched with reeds and mud, and Le Sauvage, pointing to this hut, bade me enter.

“‘You will find her inside, Doctor,’ said he. ‘It is not much of a home, and the fact that my wife is living in it will give you some idea of the love that she bears me.’

“Pushing open the shaky door of the hut I entered, to find myself in a bare, cheerless room, the floor of which was the hard, uneven ground of the island. A wood fire burned in one corner, laid on a shallow hearth of brick, and by its feeble light I could see the figure of a woman—the patient that I had come so far to see. She lay upon a ragged mattress that was stretched out against the wall, and when I bent over her I found that she was a young woman, scarcely more than a girl, still beautiful despite the ravages of care and sickness. That she was very ill I saw at a glance, and after having done what I could for her I went outside to her husband.

“He was standing at the foot of the oak tree talking

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to another man, and as soon as he saw me he dismissed him and came forward to meet me. He did not speak to me, but I could read the unspoken question in his eyes and I laid my hand upon his shoulder.

“‘Your wife is very ill,’ I told him. ‘And if you do not get her away from this place she will die.’

“‘I pointed toward the edge of the island, where through the openings in the brush you could see the mist that lay above the marsh like a great white cloud.

“‘That is what is killing her,’ said I. ‘She cannot live here two days longer.’

“‘Le Sauvage said nothing to this, but turned his face away. After a moment he again faced me with the blindfold in his hand.

“‘You have done all that you can for her?’ he asked.

“‘Everything,’ I answered.

“‘Without a word he put the blindfold over my eyes and picking me up in his arms began the journey across the marsh. When we reached the buggy he took off the blindfold and untied the horse. He drove me away in silence, and it was not until we had arrived at the place where he had stopped me that he uttered a sound. Here he stopped the horse and turned to me with a sad smile upon his careworn face.

“‘I am afraid that I have been poor company,’ said he, ‘but you will have to excuse me.’

“‘He climbed slowly into the road and held out his hand.

“‘I had intended offering you money for your visit, Doctor,’ he continued, ‘but from what I have seen of

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you I do not think that you would take it, and I know that it would hurt me now to offer it to you. Therefore, I am only going to thank you. We may never meet again, but I want to ask you to think as kindly of me as you can. I will not attempt to tire you with my story, but I will tell you two things, which I hope you will not forget. I have been a gentleman, and I have also been greatly wronged. Perhaps if you knew my story you would not think as badly of me as you do now, but no matter. Good night, Doctor, and again, thank you.'

"'And your wife?' I asked him, 'what are you going to do with her?'

"'I will move her to-morrow,' answered he. 'There is an old house between here and Landry that is empty and I will take her there.'

"Now when he said this I sprang from my seat with surprise, for I knew the house of which he spoke, and I also knew that hunted as he was it would be certain death for him to go to it. With the whole country alive with watchful Vigilantes he would be seen and captured before he had been in the house a day.

"'You must be mad,' I cried. 'Do you not know that the house is in an open field not three miles from Landry? The Vigilantes will be swarming about you before you have been there an hour. Do you suppose that it would be possible for any one to see you and mistake you for another person?'

"I was so much in earnest that I caught his arm and fairly shook him in my excitement. He put my arm aside with a smile at my vehemence.

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“ ‘ I know all that you say, Doctor,’ said he, ‘ and I thank you for your interest, but it is the only thing that I can do. I knew that the marsh was killing my wife before you told me, and I have thought of this thing for a long time. There is not a house in all this country that would receive me. I know that it is a big risk, but I am going to take the chance. I could have my men guard me, but after all it is none of their affair. I stole my wife, Doctor, stole her from her quiet home in the prairie, and she loves me for having done it. It was I who brought her into the poison of the marsh, and it is only just that I should take her out again.’

“ He turned away as he spoke, and again I seized his arm.

“ ‘ It is certain death, my friend,’ I cried, ‘ and your wife has but a small chance of living if you do bring her out.’

“ He laid his hand for a moment upon my shoulder, and the sadness in his face was pitiful to see.

“ ‘ She is my wife, Doctor, and I love her,’ answered he. ‘ And besides, if it does turn out wrong, I sha’n’t care very much. I am tired, Doctor, tired of it all. Do you not understand? Good night, and God bless you. I know that you will not betray me,’ and giving my shoulder a little squeeze he plunged into the hedges and left me.

“ I drove home that night with my brain in a whirl, amazed at finding that I, a member of the Vigilantes, was in sympathy with the leader of the fugitives, a man who but a few hours ago I would have killed like a dog. It was monstrous, and yet, my friend, such was

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the power of Le Sauvage that I do not think any one who knew him could have kept from loving him."

The old doctor paused for a moment to light his cigar, which he had let go out long ago, and Mr. Parker smote the arm of his chair enthusiastically.

"I don't blame you for liking him," he cried. "He was what you might call a real man. And did he bring his wife to the empty house?"

"Yes," answered the old doctor, "he did. It could not have been later than four o'clock the next evening when I heard a terrible knocking at my front door, and on opening it I saw a large crowd of Vigilantes waiting upon their horses in the road outside. They did not need to explain their mission, and when they called to me that they had trapped Le Sauvage I could not help but feel sad. It took but a moment to saddle my horse, seize my rifle and join them, and as we rode along they told me that which I knew only too well would happen.

"Le Sauvage had been seen to enter the empty house, the place was now surrounded to prevent his escape and all that remained was to wait the arrival of re-ënforcements (as a guard against a possible ambush) to decide whether they would take him dead or alive.

"When we reached the house we found it surrounded by the Vigilantes, who were in command of Hebert, and upon our arrival he gave the order to advance and secure our prisoner.

"The house stood in what had once been a cornfield, and taking advantage of the shelter that the rows afforded us, we lay behind them and crawled toward our

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prey, Hebert leading us. It would have been madness to have tried to take the house by a rush, for Le Sauvage would have shot us down like sheep. And so we crawled along, each of us expecting to receive a bullet, until we were within a short distance of the house. It was then that Hebert rose to his feet and called to Le Sauvage to surrender.

“ ‘Come out, Le Sauvage,’ he cried, ‘and I promise you that you shall have a fair trial by jury. If you refuse to surrender we shall kill you, if it takes the last man of us to do it.’

“As he finished speaking the door of the house swung open and Le Sauvage stepped out upon the porch. I have never in my life seen a few short hours make such a change in any one as they had in him.

“He seemed an old man, and his broad shoulders were bowed as with the weight of many years. In the hollow of one arm he held a tiny, newborn infant, wrapped in an old bit of blanket, and holding it up that all might see it, he raised his haggard face to address us.

“A dozen rifles were aimed at him as he stepped out, but at sight of the child Hebert ordered them to be lowered.

“As he looked at the armed men about him the face of Le Sauvage was lit with a scornful smile, and he straightened himself for a moment with his old gesture of pride and defiance.

“ ‘Your numbers compliment me, gentlemen,’ said he scornfully. ‘I see that it has taken the fighting men of two cities to capture me. But we will not argue that. You have come, however, gentlemen of *les Vigi-*

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lantes, at a very inopportune moment. I have in a few short hours become two things—a father and a widower. My wife lies dead in the room behind me, my son I hold in my arms. Now I do not wish to deprive you of the pleasure of killing me, neither do I wish to be taken alive, but I have a favor to ask of you. It is a strange one, and I hope that you will grant it, if only for its strangeness. Give me but a few hours in which to bury my wife and make provision for my child, and I promise you that I will come back to this house and fight it out with you. My wife was a good woman, even as I am a bad man, and she deserves a Christian burial. My child is but a poor, weak thing and he has never harmed you. Give me the rest of this day (it is but a few short hours at most) and I promise you that I will meet you here at sunrise. There is one among you who will answer for my being here in the morning, and now, gentlemen of *les Vigilantes*, I throw myself upon your mercy as a generous foe. I shall await your decision inside.'

"He bowed as he finished speaking and went into the house again.

"I knew that he had meant me when he had said that there was one who would answer for his return, and rising to my feet I made my friends a little speech. I told them of what had happened on the preceding day, and then, fired by this man's sad position, I made the one great speech of my life. When I had finished Hebert turned to the *Vigilantes*.

"'All of those who are going back to Landry will follow me,' said he.

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"When I tell you that I was sixth in the line that formed you will understand how eagerly the men followed him. At the bend of the road I turned and for the last time saw Le Sauvage. He was leading his horse, upon which he had placed the body of his wife, and in the hollow of his arm he still held the child."

The old doctor paused, pulled at his cold cigar and threw it into the road.

"And did Le Sauvage turn up in the morning?" asked Mr. Parker breathlessly.

"Yes," answered the old doctor, "he did, but I did not see him. I asked Hebert to excuse me, and he did so willingly. When the Vigilantes arrived at the house they found Le Sauvage waiting for them on the porch, and they say that he looked like death.

"'I have kept my promise, gentlemen of *les Vigilantes*,' said he, 'and I have much to thank you for.'

"He started to enter the house, but Hebert called to him to stop.

"'You are a brave man,' he cried, 'and I will not see you pulled out like a rat and shot to death. If you will go inside the house and promise me safe entrance alone I myself will settle this matter with you.'

"Le Sauvage, so it is said, bowed at this.

"'You are a man after my own heart,' answered he.

"'I shall be in in two minutes, and we will begin to shoot as soon as I have closed the door,' said Hebert as Le Sauvage went inside.

"When the two minutes were up Hebert went inside and closed the door behind him. Those outside heard a single shot and then Hebert came out again.

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“The Vigilantes began a great cheer, but Hebert stopped them.

“‘There is nothing to cheer about, my friends,’ said he. ‘I have killed an unarmed man, that is all,’ and when they searched the body of Le Sauvage they found that he had spoken the truth. They found the arms afterwards lying outside the window, where Le Sauvage had thrown them.

“And so that is the story of Le Sauvage, and after his death the Vigilantes had but little trouble in driving out the criminals from the Ile des Cyprès. Hebert was the first sheriff elected by the new government at Mouton, and he served his people well until his death some years ago. And now, if Varain is going to keep his promise about getting here before dark, he will have to hurry.”

The old doctor spoke truly, for the twilight was thickening fast and the stars were already beginning to come out.

Mr. Parker lay back in his chair and stretched himself. “He was a brave man—Le Sauvage,” said he, following the trend of his thoughts.

“Yes,” answered the old doctor, “he was and——”

But a voice interrupted him.

“He was something else also, *M’sieu le Doctaire*,” said the voice.

The old doctor turned sharply about and beheld Le Bossu, who was standing up on the steps and eyeing him eagerly.

“And what else was he, Jean?” asked the old doctor kindly.

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“He was my father, *M'sieu le Doctaire*,” answered the little man.

His words caused the greatest excitement among the group upon the porch. A dozen questions were asked him in as many seconds, but the little man only shook his head.

“I am sorry, but I cannot tell you, and besides, Monsieur Varain is coming up the road,” said he as he slipped away in the gathering darkness.

CHAPTER XXV

ALINE GIVES HER ANSWER

IN the meantime, while the old doctor was deciding the fate of Le Sauvage, the fate of another man had been decided, and in almost as unsatisfactory a manner.

The shadows of the evening had barely fallen upon the vast wilderness of the cypress swamp when Numa saddled his pony and set out from the Grand Woods toward Landry.

That his mission was important one could have told by a glance at his face, which was now smiling, now sad, and now black with hate, according to the emotion that for the moment possessed him.

The week that he had spent in the woods had been a sore trial to him, and never did prisoner welcome his release from confinement as did Numa the arrival of the seventh day. If the time had passed slowly for Carey it had passed twice as slowly for him.

Alone in the solitude of the forest, save for an occasional visit from Le Bossu, he had chafed fretfully at the tedious dragging of the hours, cursing himself, his love and all else in his impatience. It was true that he could have gone to Landry, but he knew that to do so

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would mean a long period of drunkenness, which, if heard of by Aline, would forever ruin what chances he had of winning her, and so he had passed the time of his probation deep in the forest, hunting and fishing, thinking always of the day for which he was waiting so eagerly.

When it finally arrived it found him in a strange mood. He was hopeful one moment, despondent the next—one moment he was cursing his love, the next he was blessing it as the one bright spot in his dreary life. Long before the sun had pushed itself above the dark line of the trees he was out in the forest searching for the late wild flowers, and when at noon he returned to his hut his arms were laden with them. From the very heart of the forest he had stolen these treasures, the flowers Aline loved—great masses of white and pink and yellow blossoms that filled the air with the fragrance of the forest from which they had come.

He held them in his arms now as he rode along, and, shrewd schemer that he was, he knew that their silent appeal would prove a stronger plea for him than all of the eloquence in the world.

On his way to Belrive he racked his brain for a speech that he could make to Aline, but the words would not come, and he decided to leave what he would say to the chance of the moment.

Aline opened the door of the cabin for him, as he was about to knock upon it.

"*M'sieu* Gordon told me that you would come this evening, and I have been expecting you," said she as she stood aside to let him enter.

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When he had come inside the living room of the cabin Aline closed the door and faced him expectantly. Numa held out his mass of flowers.

"They are from the Grand Woods, and are the last this year," said he simply. "I thought that you might like to have them."

With a cry of joy the girl took them and laid her cheek lovingly against them.

"In all this world, Numa, there is nothing that you could have brought me that would have pleased me more, save only my ring," she cried. "I have been very angry with you, but these flowers have brought you your pardon, Numa. You have touched my heart by this simple thing as you have never touched it before."

She smiled at him and held out her hand.

Numa's face was flushed with happiness as he took the hand and held it for a moment in his own.

"How kind and good you are, Aline," said he. "The woods lost its fairest flower when you came to Belrive. If I could have found the ring I would have brought it to you long ago, I assure you, but as I have told you, it is lost and I know not where it is. And you say that *M'sieu* Gordon told you that I would come this evening? That is strange, for I did not know that he ever gave me a thought. Who am I, though, that *M'sieu* Gordon should think of me?"

"It is true that I said I was coming to see you, where he could hear me, but who would have imagined that he would have spoken to you of the matter?"

As he threw out this feeler Numa eyed the girl

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keenly. He was anxious to know of the manner in which Carey had kept his promise, and he knew that in her answer the girl would tell him all that he wished to learn.

A puzzled look came over Aline's face, and she sat for a moment staring before her in thoughtful silence.

"*M'sieu* Gordon has taken a strange interest in you of late, Numa, and I cannot understand it," said she slowly. "For the last week he has spoken often and kindly of you, and he has asked me many times to forgive you. It is all very strange, for, as you well know, he has had trouble with you on account of myself, and at that time he told me to beware of you."

Numa rose and going over to where the girl sat by the hearth, leaned an elbow upon the mantle and bent over her.

"Perhaps he has seen that I really love you, Aline, and he wishes to help me," he suggested softly.

Aline nodded her head. "I have thought of that also, Numa," said she, "and I spoke to him of it one day. I told him that I could never marry you, and I asked him if he wished me to. He did not answer."

Numa's face was ashen gray as she finished speaking, and the arm that rested upon the mantle trembled painfully.

"You told him that you would never marry me," he cried. "Ah! Aline, you do not mean it. Tell me that you do not mean it."

He turned upon the girl entreatingly, his eyes filled with an unutterable longing.

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Aline laid her hand soothingly upon his arm.

“Do not speak like that, Numa,” said she gently. “You must know that I cannot marry you, for I have told you so often. Come, do not be foolish. I have forgiven you, and let us be friends, good friends like Jean and me. Cannot people love one another as friends, as well as they can as lovers? Come, Numa, do not let us talk of love again.”

She spoke to him rebukingly, as one would speak to a spoiled child.

Numa drew himself up to his full height and stood before her.

“Listen, Aline,” said he. “What you ask is impossible. We cannot be friends, for I love you too well, and I have come to-day for my answer—my final answer. In all this world you will find no man that loves you as I do. And now I ask you, will you marry me?”

He stood before her a silent statue of despair, waiting for the words that he knew would come.

Aline shook her head. “I gave you your answer the first time that you asked me,” she answered slowly.

With a cry Numa fell upon his knees before her.

“You cannot refuse me,” he gasped. “You cannot do it. All my life I have loved you, even from the day when as a little boy I told you that I would come some day and marry you. Many times I have asked you, and your answer has always been the same. Now you must say yes, Aline. You must say yes. If you do not say so, I am lost.

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“Do you know what your refusal means to me? It means that I must leave here, that I must go away from Landry an outcast and a broken man. It means that I will lose all love of life, all interest in the few things that have made my little world. It means that I am doomed to a life of bitter, hopeless despair. A life in which there will be no gleam of hope, no care for the future—only the torturing thoughts of the past and of what might have been. Have pity on me, Aline, and do not send me away to what I have told you of. If you refuse me now, I am a lost man. You are the one person in all this world who can save me, and you will not do it. Save me, Aline, save me, for the love of God.”

He raised his haggard face to hers and stretched forth his arms imploringly.

Aline laid her little hand upon his head and stroked it soothingly.

“You must not speak like that, Numa,” said she. “It is wicked. I know that you think that your life will be very hard, but you are mistaken about what you have told me. You will soon forget me, Numa, and in the days to come, when you have married some good woman, you will think of this time and wonder how you could have said such foolish things.”

She laughed as she finished speaking, as though to lend force to her words; and Numa, whose temper lay ever near the surface, sprang to his feet, his face aflame with anger. In the bitterness of his own heart he could not see the tender sympathy that filled Aline’s, and his anger flared hot within him, for he

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thought that she was mocking him in the moment of his misery.

“I see,” he cried furiously, “you would mock me, would you? You would drive me away with a laugh at my unhappiness? You are a hard, cruel girl, Aline, and God will punish you for what you have done this day. And, do you wish me to tell you why you have refused me? It is because you love another man, and that man is *M’sieu* Gordon and he——”

But Aline had turned upon him with a look in her blue eyes that caused him to halt and stammer in what he was saying.

“Stop!” she cried. “Stop! I tell you, Numa. It is you who are hard and cruel. Is this the way in which you pay me for having forgiven you? I strove to soothe you, Numa—to drive away the unhappy thoughts that filled your brain—and you in the wickedness of your heart have not understood me. I have given you one more chance for my friendship, and again you have proven unworthy. Had you been good and kind and gentle, in the days to come you might have gained that for which you tried so hard. I did not know how much you really loved me until *M’sieu* Gordon spoke to me, and I determined to give you a chance. I was trying you this evening, Numa, and had you been patient you might in time have taught me to love you. But you have had your chance, and through your own bad temper you have thrown it away. Now go, and I pray that we may never meet again.”

She went over to the door, and opening it waited for him to leave.

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Numa stood for a moment in puzzled silence, the significance of it all coming to him slowly. The anger had all left his face, and his tall figure was bent and shaken.

“Aline,” he began, “I did not know. I promise——”

But the girl shook her head.

“It is too late, Numa,” answered she. “You have thrown your chance away.”

Again Numa’s anger rose, fierce and burning. Anger at himself for his blindness, anger at Aline for the test that she had subjected him to, and above all, anger at the thought of the chance that he had lost, and of what might have been.

“So you tried me, Aline, did you?” cried he fiercely. “You have put me to the test, and I have failed. But I would have failed always. It would have been the same thing a year from now, two years from now. You love *M’sieu* Gordon, as I have said. I know it, and you know it, and we both have known it for a long time. But you are doing a mad thing in loving him, Aline. He will not marry you as I would. He has been kind to you and has given you many things, things that a poor man like myself cannot give you, but he does not love you.”

He paused for breath, and catching sight of the flowers in Aline’s arms, he tore them rudely from her.

“See,” he cried with a bitter laugh. “See my poor present.”

He dashed the blossoms to the floor and set his heel upon them.

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“That,” he cried, “is what this *M’sieu* Gordon will do with your love when he is tired of you. Why, he is tired of it now, you fool. You poor, blind fool. Do you not know why he wishes you to forgive me? He hoped that I would marry you, that I would free him of you. Now do you understand it all?”

He towered over the girl triumphantly, filled with a mad exultation at the pain that he had caused her.

For a moment Aline gazed at him numbly, as though his words had stunned her, and then she turned upon him fiercely, pointing to the open door.

“What you have said is a wicked falsehood, Numa,” said she slowly. “In all this world there is not another as wicked and as cruel as you are. Go, as I have told you to, and pray to God to forgive you for what you have done this day.”

She picked up the crushed flowers and gave them to him.

“Take them with you,” said she, “for they are no longer sweet since you have touched them.”

Numa walked to the open door and, turning, leaned against the heavy oaken sill. Raising the flowers with a gesture of contempt he cast them angrily from him.

“So they are no longer sweet since I have touched them, are they?” he sneered. “And who are you to say such a thing? Who are you to refuse the honest love of an honest man? It seems to me that you should be proud to have my offer of marriage after what is said of you at Landry, Aline. After what is said there of you and *M’sieu* Gordon.”

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Aline's face was gray with dread as she turned to him.

"After what is said of me in Landry, Numa?" she faltered. "I know not what you mean. It has been a long time since I have been to Landry. What do they say there, Numa?"

She looked at him anxiously, the fear that was at her heart making her voice sound hard and dull.

Numa laughed harshly.

"Yes, what do they say?" he sneered again. "Can you not guess, Aline? Can you not imagine what has been said of the attention that *M'sieu* Gordon has shown you? Do you suppose that when a man like *M'sieu* Gordon is attentive to a girl like yourself people will think nothing? If you wish to know what the people at Landry have to say of you go to them and ask them. Then perhaps you will think better of what I have said to you to-day. And tell your uncle that in the days to come they may have something to say of him also."

He flung himself furiously out of the cabin as he spoke, leaving the girl to stare after him in silent, white-faced agony.

When old Telesse returned from the field at sunset he found her sitting in the open doorway, with set face and burning eyes.

"What is the matter, my child?" he asked her gently, as he took a seat beside her.

"Ah! Uncle Telesse, I have waited for you so long, I have wished for you so much," she cried, and then she told him all. Told him of what had happened that

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day and of what Numa had said to her, her voice breaking pitifully as she went along.

When she had finished the old man bowed his troubled face upon his trembling hands, for the blow was a hard one.

"This is a bad affair, my child," said he sadly, "and there is still more trouble to come for me. I do not know what we are to do."

He stared out across the fields in pathetic silence, the picture of despair.

The girl rose to her feet, and standing before him raised her head proudly.

"I know what we will do, Uncle Telesse," said she steadily. "To-morrow at daybreak we will go to Landry and hear what they have to say of us. Numa was right when he told me that I should go. We will show them that we are not afraid to face them, like the honest people that we are. And then we will come back and——"

Her voice broke and she turned away with a sob.

"We will come back, and what?" asked the old man, looking at her hopefully.

"And go away," answered Aline in a quiet voice.

The old man gave her a curious look out of his gray eyes.

"And where will we go, my child?" asked he.

Aline came over to him, and putting her arms about him laid her head upon his shoulder like a tired child.

"We will go back to where we belong," said she softly. "We have come out into the world, and it has

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not understood us. We are forest folk, Uncle Telesse, and in the forest we belong. Let us go back to the place where we are understood, the place that we love—to the birds and the trees and the sweet, blue sky—to our home in the woods.”

CHAPTER XXVI

MONSIEUR VARAIN PICKS UP HIS DUCK AT LAST

THAT the political meeting at Landry was a complete success was a fact agreed upon by all that took part in it, and to Monsieur Varain in particular it was so eminently successful that he never forgot it to the day of his death.

Being detained by unexpected business he did not reach the drug store until it was quite dark, and immediately upon his arrival with the faithful Felix the little party went for their discussion to the store of Monsieur Landry, which had been brilliantly lighted for the occasion.

Here, in the ghostly silence of the great building, amid the fragrant odors of the groceries, with which the air was laden, the politicians sat and laid their plans for the coming election.

It was late when they finally adjourned, and Monsieur Varain, who had presided as chairman, was glad to dismiss the meeting, for he had had a long day and he was tired.

Monsieur Landry, who was the soul of hospitality, insisted that the whole party should follow the example of Monsieur Varain and his clerk by spending the night with him.

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But his guests insisted that they must leave. Carey had to be in the field at daybreak, Mr. Parker was obliged to go to Mouton early in the morning, and the old doctor, who lived just across the street, assured him that he felt equal to the journey.

So Monsieur Landry saw them off, with many expressions of regret, and closing the store went with his two remaining guests to his house.

"You are tired, Varain," said he as they stopped for a moment in his comfortable dining room.

Monsieur Varain nodded.

"Yes, I am," he replied. "I have had a long day of it. But if it is not too much trouble, I am going to ask a favor of you. I am accustomed to drinking a cup of coffee before I go to bed, and I do not think that I could sleep without it."

Monsieur Landry assured him that it would not trouble him in the least.

"I drink a cup myself sometimes," said he, "and I have an oil stove in the store that I warm it on. If you will wait a moment I will fetch it so that we can make our coffee here," and waiving aside Monsieur Varain's protestations that it was too much trouble he hurried out to the store.

As he was hunting for the stove he discovered the old doctor's glasses lying where he had left them upon his chair, and he locked them in his desk with a smile.

"Lemaire is getting absent-minded," said he to himself as he turned away to look for the stove again.

When he finally unearthed it and returned to the

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dining room again he found Monsieur Varain waiting there for him alone.

“Felix was tired and so I sent him to bed,” explained Monsieur Varain in answer to the query of his host.

Monsieur Landry lit the stove and put the coffeepot upon it.

“I shall have your coffee in a moment—” he began, when he was interrupted by a knock upon his front door.

“Now I wonder who that can be, knocking at this time of night?” muttered he as he left the room.

In a moment he returned with the old doctor.

Monsieur Varain looked surprised. “Have you reconsidered your refusal to spend the night with us, or has your housekeeper refused to let you in at this late hour?” he asked.

Dr. Lemaire shook his head. “Neither,” answered he. “I am paying the penalty of old age by becoming absent-minded, that is all. I have left my glasses here, and without them I can see nothing.”

“If you will come with me I will get them for you,” said Monsieur Landry. “I saw them when I went into the store just now, and I put them in my desk for safe keeping. Then you must help us drink our coffee before you return home, Lemaire.”

The old doctor agreed to this, and as he went out with Monsieur Landry, Monsieur Varain followed behind him.

“I will keep you company,” said he, “and incidentally rob Landry of one of his cigars.”

When they entered the store, Monsieur Landry led

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them to his little office and set the lamp that he carried upon the desk. Unlocking his private drawer he reached inside for the glasses and handed them to the old doctor with a laugh.

"There," said he. "You should thank heaven that they fell into honest hands."

Monsieur Varain, who stood behind him, leaned forward curiously.

"Where did you get that ring, Landry?" he asked. "There seems to be something about it that is familiar to me."

Monsieur Landry took the ring out of the drawer and held it up in the lamplight that his friend might see it.

"That ring has puzzled me greatly," answered he, "and I should like to get your opinion concerning it. Suppose we take it back to the house with us and look at it while we are drinking our coffee."

"A capital idea," agreed Monsieur Varain. And so they took the ring back to the dining room with them, and putting it on the table in the glow of the lamp drew their chairs about it, waiting for the coffee to boil.

After he had examined the ring closely, Monsieur Varain turned to his host.

"Where did you get it?" he asked again.

"I found it," answered Monsieur Landry, "and in a most peculiar place. I picked it up from the floor of the coffee house here. It was upon the day of the first communion at *Père* Bertrand's church, when Numa acted so badly." And then he told Monsieur Varain

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of the fight that old Telesse had had with Numa and of his strange actions afterwards.

Monsieur Varain listened to him with the greatest interest, and when his host had finished he again picked up the ring and examined it for a long time in thoughtful silence.

“I have seen this ring before,” said he. “Of that I am certain. But where I saw it I cannot now remember. Do you know anything more concerning it, Landry?”

Monsieur Landry, who had been waiting for this question, smiled mysteriously.

“I do,” answered he. “What I am now going to tell you is, to me, the strangest part of it all. But a few days after I found this ring I saw upon the finger of a young lady, here in my store at Landry, another so exactly like it in every particular that you could not have told the two apart.”

He paused impressively, to give effect to what he had said.

“And the young lady?” cried Monsieur Varain impatiently. “What was her name?”

Monsieur Landry raised a fat forefinger to emphasize his words, and leaning across the table spoke very slowly:

“The young lady was a visitor at Belrive,” said he, “and her name was Lawrence—Miss Julia Lawrence, of Lawrence Hall plantation. I have heard of the name and place before, but I cannot remember when or where I heard it. Ever since the fever, as you know, I have——”

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He broke off speaking, suddenly, to stare in astonishment across the table.

Monsieur Varain had risen to his feet with a cry and now stood before him white and trembling, trying vainly to say the words that his quivering lips refused to speak.

The old doctor was at his side in a moment, supporting him, while Monsieur Landry hurried to the sideboard for some brandy.

But Monsieur Varain waved his friends aside impatiently and resumed his chair.

“It is nothing, nothing, I assure you,” said he. “I am growing old, and it unnerved me a little to hear unexpected news. And such news as I have just heard. Do you know, my friends, to whom this ring belongs? It belongs to the girl at Belrive that is called Aline, and that girl is my granddaughter.”

In his astonishment Monsieur Landry dropped the brandy bottle.

“Impossible!” he cried excitedly.

Monsieur Varain smiled and shook his head.

“It is only too true, I am happy to say,” replied he. “I have searched long for my grandchild, and I am sure that I have found her at last. I must indeed have been blind not to have understood this thing at once, but what you have just said convinces me. I have thought all along that this girl Aline was the one I was seeking, but I have so far been unable to find any proofs of her identity. I know that it is very late, but I am sure that you must be curious to understand this matter, and as I am too excited to even think of

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sleeping I will explain it to you, if you care to listen to me."

Monsieur Landry was in his seat in a moment.

"And I assure you, my friend, that I have no intention of going to bed until you explain this matter to me," he cried.

"It is needless for me to say that I am equally interested," added the old doctor from his seat at the head of the table.

Monsieur Varain slipped the ring upon his finger and gazed at it sadly for a moment.

"I will begin by telling you where I saw this ring before," said he. "It was upon the finger of Monsieur William Lawrence, of Lawrence Hall plantation, and this same Monsieur Lawrence afterwards married my only child. At the time that I saw the ring I was overseer of his father's plantation, but at the time he married my daughter I was his father's enemy. We had a quarrel, the details of which I will not go into now, and I left Lawrence Hall, vowing vengeance upon the whole Lawrence family.

"Therefore, when this young William Lawrence met my daughter secretly, taught her to love him, and finally married her, while she was on a visit to a friend, you can imagine my rage and mortification. I cast my daughter from me, and she went to New Orleans to live with her husband. His father, furious like myself, had disinherited him, and he was in the direst poverty.

"My wife died in less than a year after my daughter's marriage, and I was left alone in the world. It was then that I began to relent toward my daughter,

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but my foolish pride would not let me forgive her, and she died without my ever having seen her or having written a line to her. I was a hard-hearted man in those days, my friends, and I have paid dearly for my cruelty.

“How I made my money and built my store at Mouton you well know, and in the days of my prosperity I sought to make some restitution to my dead daughter. I knew that she had left a child, and I determined that if I could find this child I would do all for it that I would have done for its mother. I am sure now, my friends, that I have found her, and you must know what a pleasure and a happiness it is to me to have done so. I have been a lonely man, with all of my wealth and position, and the thought that I will have my grandchild to make happy my declining years seems almost too good to be true.”

He turned upon his friends with a beaming face, and fairly hugged them in his delight.

Monsieur Landry, who was almost as excited as Monsieur Varain, turned to that gentleman with a sudden intelligence in his eyes.

“Do you remember how strangely you acted at the picnic, when you first met the girl?” he asked. “Did you suspect then that she was your grandchild? Was that the reason that you sent her to the convent?”

Monsieur Varain nodded a smiling assent to these questions.

“Yes,” answered he. “I was suspicious then. She was the image of my dead daughter.” And then he

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told of his hopes, his fears, and his failure to learn anything of the girl's parentage, while his two friends listened to him in rapt attention.

When he had finished the old doctor turned to him with a curious smile.

"You have told us everything but the fate of the father," said he. "What became of him?"

"He is dead, the girl told me herself that he was," answered Monsieur Varain. "He left New Orleans just before my daughter's death, and settled somewhere in the country, I know not where. My daughter died as she was going to the place, and I was told of her death by friends, who did not know of the husband's whereabouts."

The old doctor leaned back in his chair and lit a cigar.

"I will supply the information," said he. "The father died within a short distance of Landry, at Mr. Parker's place, in fact, and I was his physician."

Monsieur Varain gazed at him in utter astonishment.

"You cannot mean what you are saying," cried he.

The old doctor smiled grimly. "I assure you that I do," he replied, and then he told him of the fever epidemic and of the man that had died in the long white house, while Monsieur Landry listened to him in eager silence, shaking his head from time to time, as the memories of the past came back to him.

When the old doctor had finished, Monsieur Landry sprang to his feet in the wildest excitement.

"It has all come back," he cried. "My memory

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has returned. Ah! Why did I not think of this before. Did you not know who this girl was, Lemaire, you who remembered all?"

"Of course I did," answered the old doctor. "Did she not live with Telesse, who was this man Lawrence's overseer?"

"Why, then, did you not tell me who she was?" cried Monsieur Landry.

The old doctor looked at him curiously. "Was she a person of sufficient importance to warrant my speaking to you of her?" he asked.

Monsieur Landry nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, you are right," said he. "Who would have thought that she was a relation of the rich Miss Lawrence at Belrive? And the two rings must have been cut with the Lawrence crest. The one here must have been given to this Aline by her father."

"It was," answered Monsieur Varain, "and it was taken from her by a man named Numa. It was he who dropped it in the coffee house and lost it. And now, my friends, I must hurry to my granddaughter, for I have been separated from her too long already."

"But think of the time of night," remonstrated Monsieur Landry. "You must wait until the morning, my friend."

Monsieur Varain laughed. "How foolish I am," said he. "I have forgotten everything in my excitement. But I will go to Belrive the first thing in the morning, and you, Landry, must go with me to help explain, and to tell the story of the father."

"I shall be happy to do all that I can," answered

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Monsieur Landry. "And now let us go to bed, or we will get no sleep this night."

They saw the old doctor to the door, and then Monsieur Landry led the way to the spare room where his guests were to spend the night, for Monsieur Varain had insisted that his host should not go to the trouble of preparing two rooms.

Monsieur Varain entered, and lighting the lamp went over to where Felix lay upon the cot that had been prepared so as to leave the big, double bed for his exclusive use.

For a moment he bent over the sleeping clerk, and then, the impulse to tell of his discovery becoming irresistible, Monsieur Varain gave the cot a little shake.

Felix sat up and rubbed his eyes in sleepy bewilderment.

"Whaz dhe matter?" he asked excitedly. "Iz dhoze house h'on fire?"

Monsieur Varain hastened to reassure him.

"No, no," he answered. "I have good news to tell you. I have picked up my duck at last, Felix."

For a moment Felix gazed at him in puzzled silence, and then, the memory of their drive coming back to him, he sank back upon his pillow with a sigh.

"Daz fine," said he, "but for me she h'iz h'alwayz dhe same h'alwayz dhoze *poule d'eau*."

CHAPTER XXVII

OLD TELESSE SEEKS A RECKONING

THE bleak November day had scarce begun to break when Carey arose upon the morning after the meeting at Landry.

The impatience with which he dressed himself sorely puzzled the slow-witted boy who brought him his coffee, for his master had been almost apathetic of late, and when Carey finally hurried out to his horse the little negro gazed after him curiously.

"I 'clare toe goodness ef I don' b'leeve Misto' Carey's done bin tuck queer in de haid," said he to himself. "All dis week he bin cussin' me fo' wakin' he up soon in de mawnin', en now he done wake up 'fore I calls him."

But had he known the reason of his master's impatience he might have changed his opinion as to the cause of it, for the eighth day had at last arrived and Carey was hastening to learn what Numa's fate had been.

His visit to the stable was a short one that morning, and, giving Wilson a few hurried orders, he galloped away toward the fields as fast as his horse could carry him.

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The morning was cold, for the wind had blown from the north all night and had died away at daybreak, leaving the air raw and chill. But the clearness of the sky gave promise of a strong, warm sunlight to come, and as Carey rode along his spirits rose with the fresh, keen air and the glory of the morning.

The fields were bare and drear, scarred with the furrows of the fall plowing, showing no life save for a few ragged crows and blackbirds that stalked about in moody silence. On every side the levees and canals cut the barren stretch in long black lines, all streaked and dirty with the sodden ashes of the fall burning.

It was a dreary scene, and as Carey looked about him he was for a moment touched by the loneliness of it all, but the sight of the little cabin—now glowing softly in the rosy flush of the sunrise—revived his drooping spirits, and he rode on toward it with smiling face and eager eyes.

Arriving at the cabin he tied his horse to the picket fence and knocked impatiently at the door. There was no answer.

Again he knocked and again there was no answer.

Being now curious as well as a little worried, Carey pushed open the door and went inside. The square living room was neat and clean, as Aline always kept it, and a wood fire burned brightly upon the open hearth, but save for the crackling of the fire and the ticking of the clock upon the mantel, the place was silent.

Going over to the window Carey looked out at the little stable, and finding it empty, with wide-opened

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doors, he drew a chair to the fire and sat down to wait for the absent Aline.

“They have gone to Landry,” said he to himself, “but what took them there at this hour of the morning I cannot imagine.”

How long he waited he did not know. The sun rose in a burst of golden glory, and the teams trooped into the field in a long, straggling line, while Carey sat in the little cabin and counted the minutes that dragged like years.

And as he waited his face grew grave at the thoughts that came to him. “Was it not possible,” he asked himself, “that Aline had accepted Numa, and had gone to Landry at this early hour to marry him before her resolution became shaken? Was it not probable that, won as he had been by the pleading of her wicked lover, she had at last consented and had gone at once to carry out her determination?”

Thus he argued to himself until he came finally to believe that this could be the only explanation of the girl's absence at such an early hour.

Rising from his seat he turned toward the door, when there came a sound of a step upon the little front porch. In an instant he was back in his seat again, his head bent toward the fire as though he had not heard a sound.

The door swung slowly open and he turned quickly as though startled by this unexpected entrance.

In the doorway stood Aline, and as Carey looked at her he sprang to his feet in sudden alarm, the cold dread coming over him that his fears had been realized.

The girl's face was white and drawn as though from

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much suffering, and the pain in her eyes was pitiful to see. With one hand she steadied herself in the doorway, her slight figure shaking with sobs that told of unspeakable grief and misery.

In an instant Carey was at her side, his eyes searching hers appealingly.

"Aline, Aline!" he cried, "you have not married Numa, have you? Tell me that you have not. It is what I have feared ever since I came and found you gone."

The girl looked at him curiously through her tears, and shook her head.

"Why should you think that, *M'sieu?*" she asked. "Did I not tell you that I would not marry him for all the world? No! No! *M'sieu*, it is not that that troubles me. It is something worse."

There was an unmistakable note of relief in Carey's voice when he answered her, and laying his hand lightly upon the girl's arm he pointed toward the chair that he had placed by the fire.

"Sit down, Aline," said he, "and then you must tell me what troubles you. You are cold and tired, and you must rest yourself before you speak."

He led her gently toward the chair and helped her into it.

With a sigh of weariness the girl seated herself and held out her numb fingers toward the welcome blaze.

"Thank you, *M'sieu*," said she. "It is cold outdoors and I am tired, for I have walked all the way from Landry. My uncle stayed behind to attend to some matters and I hurried home to gather our few

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poor things together, for we are going to leave Belrive, *M'sieu*."

She turned away her head as she spoke, while Carey gazed at her in astonishment.

"You are going to leave Belrive?" he cried. "You cannot mean what you are saying."

Aline smiled sadly. "It is the truth that I am telling you," replied she. "I have been very happy here, and you have been very kind to me, *M'sieu*; almost too kind I am afraid, for it is on account of your kindness that I am forced to leave."

Her voice broke, and she buried her face in her hands, sobbing.

"If you do not understand I will explain to you, *M'sieu*," she added slowly without raising her head.

Carey stood for a moment in silence, staring at the fire, the red flush of anger rising in his cheeks, and then he very slowly nodded his understanding.

"I think that I know what you mean, Aline," said he quietly, "but you must tell me all. I know that it will be painful to do so, but perhaps I can help you, and I think that it is my right to know."

The girl raised her head and faced him bravely, her love shining through her tear-stained eyes as the sunbeams shine through the clouds of a rain-swept sky.

"Yes, *M'sieu*," said she. "It is your right to know. I will first tell you of Numa, and of what he said to me yesterday. He came as you said he would a little before sunset, and he asked me again to marry him. Again I told him that I could not do so, and I tried my best to make it easy for him, to comfort him, and he——"

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She paused, her cheeks flushing at the thought of Numa's cruelty.

"And he?" asked Carey anxiously.

"And he behaved like the wild, bad creature that he is, *M'sieu*," answered the girl. "He thought that I was mocking him, and he called me hard and cruel, and then, *M'sieu*, I told him that which I have told no one. When you spoke to me so kindly of him I determined to give him a chance to prove his love, and if he had acted kindly I might have married him as he wished me to, in the days to come. I gave him his chance, and through his own wickedness of heart he threw it away, and when I told him that he had done so he told me of that which is said of me at Landry, of that which I have but a short while ago heard with my own ears. He mocked me and taunted me, *M'sieu*, until I could have died of shame.

"He asked me who I was, to refuse his love after what was said of me, and when I asked him what it was, he bade me go myself and learn.

"And so I went this morning, *M'sieu*, and I have heard—I have heard what they say of me—a poor creature that they would never think of save to harm. Ah! *M'sieu*, my heart is broken that they should say such things of me. I have come out into the world like the poor, weak forest creature that I am, and they have wounded me, even as they always wound the other creatures of the forest. It is left for me now to creep back to the woods again and heal my hurt as best I may."

Rising from her chair she went over to the window

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and pointed out toward the west where the Grand Woods lay, all gray and brown in its winter dress of clinging moss and withered leaves.

"See, *M'sieu*," she cried, "there is my home. There is where I should have stayed, there where all were kind to me, where all loved me. In all the forest, *M'sieu*, there was not a creature that was afraid of me, and I left them to come out into the world where all are so cruel. Ah! why did I leave the woods? the big, kind woods where the birds sang to me all day and the great trees lulled me to sleep each night with their whispering music. See how cold and sad the forest is to-day, it looks as though it felt for me in my sorrow. It is the one thing that cares for me in my trouble and is kind. The only one save you, *M'sieu*, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I am sorry that I cannot do as you would have me do and marry Numa, for in that way I might pay you for your kindness, but I cannot do it, *M'sieu*, I cannot do it."

She sank back in her chair again, sobbing pitifully, her head bowed with shame and sorrow.

Carey went over to the fireplace and looked at her with troubled eyes.

"I did not wish you to marry Numa, Aline," said he softly. "It was the one thing in the world that I did not wish you to do. I spoke to you kindly of Numa because in a moment of sudden sympathy for him I promised him that I would do so, and I had to keep my promise. But the time of the promise has passed, and I tell you now, Aline, that if you had married Numa it would have broken my heart."

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When he had started speaking to the girl his voice had been soft and gentle, as it always was when he spoke to her—the voice of the kind and generous master. But as he went on, his heart overflowing with love and pity, there came into his voice a tone that caused Aline to raise her head and look at him in sudden happy amazement.

“*M’sieu!*” she cried, “and so you did not mean it? Numa said that you wished me to marry him to be rid of me, and I knew that you did not mean that, *M’sieu*. I knew that it was not so.”

For a moment she faced him, radiant with love and happiness, her eyes answering the silent message in his, and in that moment Carey cast discretion to the winds. With a cry he seized her in his arms and crushed her to him, heedless of the look of terror in her eyes.

“Aline! Aline!” he cried, “I love you. Do you understand? I love you, and I want you for my wife. I have loved you all along, even as I know that you have loved me, and now——”

There was a sudden crash of glass behind him and he turned quickly, the girl still held in his arms.

Framed in the jagged glass of the window that he had broken was Numa, his face black with hate, his eyes blazing with insane rage and jealousy. In his hands he held a long, heavy rifle, and paying no heed to the broken glass, that tore and cut him cruelly, he thrust it into the cabin before him.

“Aha! *M’sieu* Gordon, my friend, *M’sieu* Gordon!” he cried furiously. “So this is the way in which

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you have kept your promise to me. This is what you have been doing while I have been waiting in the woods. No wonder Aline refused me. No wonder they say what they do of her at Landry. You are a fine gentleman, *M'sieu* Gordon, but you are a poor friend. I thought that you had settled the debt that was between us, the debt that you have owed me ever since the dance, but I have been mistaken. I always settle my debts, *M'sieu* Gordon, for that is my rule, so therefore I will settle this one now."

He raised his rifle as he spoke.

With a quick movement Carey thrust the girl behind him and turned to face his enemy.

"I have kept my promise to you, Numa," said he quietly, "and you know well that I have. You also know that you have broken your promise in coming to see Aline after she refused you."

He looked at the man before him unflinchingly.

Numa, surprised at his unconcern, half-lowered his rifle.

"What you say is of no use, *M'sieu*," he cried angrily. "I have come to settle the debt between us, and I am going to do it."

A second time he raised the rifle, his finger now curling about the trigger.

With a scream of anguish Aline sprang forward toward the window.

"Numa, Numa!" she gasped, "do not shoot. I will do anything you ask, I will marry you to-day. *M'sieu* Gordon kept his promise, I swear to you. He made me forgive you, he made me——"

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There was a sudden crash of smoke and flame and the girl staggered back unsteadily.

For a moment Numa stood in terrified surprise, aghast at what he had done, and then, with a splintering of broken glass, he was gone as quickly and as unexpectedly as he had come.

Aline gave a sudden gasp and stumbled forward blindly upon her knees.

In an instant Carey had her in his arms, striving vainly to stay the bright crimson flood that ever widened upon her bosom. The girl lay back against him white and still, her eyes closed, her cheeks pale and bloodless.

With a cry of agony Carey raised her drooping head and called to her desperately.

"Speak to me, Aline," he pleaded. "Tell me that you love me, that you are not going to die in this the moment of our happiness. It is too terrible. It cannot be. Speak, Aline, open your eyes and speak to me."

He clasped her to him in an agony of despair and raised her face to his.

The girl sighed and opened her eyes weakly. In a moment Carey had laid his face against hers, his eyes filled with a hope and a longing beyond words.

"Thank God you have heard," he whispered. "Now you must fight for your life, your strength, until some one comes to us that can help us. You must fight, Aline, with all your heart, with all your soul. You cannot leave me now when I love you so."

The girl smiled sadly and shook her head.

"There is no use to fight, *M'sieu*," said she weakly.

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“I am shot to death, and I will die. I can feel it coming, *M'sieu*, and there is no use to fight against it.”

She closed her eyes and lay back against him again, as though the words had used up her remaining strength.

Carey was sobbing now, and the shaking of his body seemed to bring her back for a moment to consciousness.

“No, no, *M'sieu*,” said she slowly, “you must not do that. It is the will of God, and surely He knows best. It is best, *M'sieu*, as you yourself must know. We never could have married, for that would have not been right, and we would have both been so unhappy. As it is, I am dying happily, for you have said that you love me. Had I lived after what you told me it would have been but a torture to me, and now that I am going to die it is a happiness. I saw Numa at the window when you took me in your arms, and I tried to warn you, *M'sieu*, but you would not listen. It is God's will, and you cannot help but know that it is for the best. And yet——”

She raised her eyes to his, the love and life that were in them struggling bravely against her overpowering weakness.

“And yet I would have been so happy could I have lived a little longer, *M'sieu*. Could I have——”

She paused and raised an arm weakly, her face alight with love, yet awestruck at the thought of what she was about to ask.

She raised the arm halfway to his shoulder and hesitated for a moment.

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“ Could I but—” she paused, and the dying light in her eyes was now appealing.

“ Ah! *M'sieu*, can I but once? ” she whispered. “ I love you so, *M'sieu*, and it would be such a happy memory in the other big world to which I am going—to which I am going all alone.”

The other arm had crept about his neck now, and with a sob Carey gathered her to him. For a moment her lips lay against his and her cheeks were flushed and her eyes shining.

“ So happy, *M'sieu*, I am so happy,” she whispered softly.

She gasped suddenly and her body stiffened in Carey's arms.

“ So happy, *M'sieu*,” she panted, and her head sank back wearily, the life and happiness vanishing from her eyes like a light that is suddenly quenched.

With a cry of anguish Carey laid the limp body back in his arms and called to her fiercely, desperately, appealingly.

“ Aline! Aline! ” he cried, “ come back to me. Do not leave me. I love you, Aline, and if you die the happiness is all gone out of my life.”

He shook her desperately, chafing her cold hands and laying his lips against hers again and again, as though he hoped to infuse into her some of the life and warmth of his own body, but the girl lay white and still like death itself.

In his despair Carey beat upon the hard wooden floor until his hands were bruised and bleeding, calling desperately for some one to aid him.

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"Help! Help!" he cried again and again, and then after what seemed to him an eternity his calls were answered and the door was flung suddenly open to admit an excited group of men.

In the lead was old Telesse, and behind him came Monsieur Varain and Monsieur Landry.

The old man halted upon the threshold of the door and stared before him vaguely, as though he could not believe the sight that met his eyes.

"*M'sieu! M'sieu!*" he cried, "what is the matter? What has happened to Aline?"

He sprang toward the silent figure of the girl in an agony of fear and apprehension.

In a few quick words Carey told them of what had happened. "It was Numa," said he brokenly. "He shot her through that window, and if we do not get a doctor soon she will bleed to death. Take my horse one of you, and hurry to Landry. Do not spare him. Thank God that he is a fast one."

"Your horse is gone," said Monsieur Landry. "Numa must have taken him, but I will do the best that I can in my buggy," and the kind-hearted store-keeper hurried out with tears in his eyes at this sudden and unexpected calamity.

"Poor Varain," said he to himself. "It is too sad that he should lose his grandchild at the moment of his finding her."

In the meanwhile, inside the cabin the three men had taken the girl to her little room and had laid her upon the bed.

Monsieur Varain knelt at the bedside, his face buried

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in the covers, his strong body shaking with inconsolable grief.

"She is my grandchild, my friends," he sobbed. "The one person in all this world that I hold dear, and now at the moment when after long and weary searching I have found her, I am forced to lose her. It is a judgment upon me for my wickedness and cruelty in the days gone by."

Mastering his grief with an effort, Carey went over to the older man and laid his hand kindly upon his shoulder.

"We must be brave and strong," said he. "I love her even as you do, Monsieur Varain, and I had hoped to make her my wife. And you say that she is your grandchild? When did you learn of this?"

With a sudden summoning of all his strength Monsieur Varain straightened his bent figure and rising to his feet faced Carey calmly.

"I learned of this last night, after you left me at Landry, Monsieur," said he. "And so you love this girl and wish to marry her? That is brave in you, Monsieur, when you consider her birth and station."

Carey held up his hand for Monsieur Varain to stop, and shook his head, smiling sadly.

"It was not the birth and station that I was marrying," said he softly. "It was the girl herself. Where in all this world is there another as good, as sweet, and as kind as she?"

Monsieur Varain nodded.

"True," he replied, "and if this girl recovers will

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you marry her, as you have just said you intended to do? There has been talk in Landry and——”

“And it has been the talk of liars,” cried Carey. “I will marry Aline, if God spares her to me, upon the first day that she is well enough to do so.”

In a moment Monsieur Varain was at Carey's side and had grasped his hand warmly.

“You are a gentleman, Monsieur, and what is more, you are a man,” said he. “It is a pleasure for me to tell you that this girl, whom you thought a poor, low-born creature, is as well born as yourself and fit to be the wife of any man. Her cousin was your guest at Belrive, her name is Lawrence, her family home is Lawrence Hall plantation, and here she lies shot to death by a wretch, and this—this, Monsieur, is the end of it all.”

He sank upon his knees at the bedside and buried his face in his hands.

With a cry Carey staggered toward him, his grief now too great to bear.

“God!” he gasped, “to learn this at this moment. Ah! what a fool I have been. It was her birth, the heritage of her blood showing through her sordid surroundings, and I could not see it. Why did I not know this a week, a day ago. I could have done so much, and now it is too late, for there is nothing to do, nothing to do.”

He bowed his head in an agony of grief and despair.

“You are wrong, *M'sieu*, there is something to do,” came a voice from the other room, and Carey looked up quickly.

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In the doorway stood old Telesse, his eyes fastened sadly on the still figure upon the bed. He had left the room the moment that they had made Aline comfortable, and had shuffled about the living room upon some errand of his own.

As he stood in the doorway he showed none of the grief that convulsed the features of the other two men. His face was set and gray, with never the mark of a tear upon it, and one might have thought that he felt no pain but for the look in his eyes. The look of stolid, heart-broken misery, that told of a grief too great for words or outward sign.

In one hand he held his rifle—an old muzzle-loader, large and heavy and long of barrel—and holding it up for Carey to see he patted its battered stock meaningly.

“You are wrong, *M’sieu*,” said he again. “There is this for Numa.”

Laying the rifle against the wall he tiptoed across the room to the bed and bent above the still figure of the girl. For a moment his lips touched hers and his body shook with the fury of his suppressed grief. Then he straightened himself suddenly, and going over to the mantel took from it the little bags that held his powder and bullets. Very carefully he drew out the long ramrod from his rifle, and very carefully he rammed home the charge, his face as expressionless as though it had been carved from solid stone. When he had finished his loading he put the ammunition back upon the mantel, and swinging the rifle across his shoulder turned to go.

“Aline will die, *M’sieu*,” said he slowly, “and

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Numa must answer for what he has done. All his life he has made me unhappy, and I have stood it without a word. But he has gone too far, *M'sieu*, and now I am going to bring him back to Landry and to punishment. He boasts that he always pays his debts, and now he owes a bigger one than he has ever owed in his life before. I am going to seek a reckoning, *M'sieu*, and I will bring him back to Landry, dead or alive."

In the doorway he turned and looked toward the bed, and for a moment his head was buried in the hollow of his arm, for he was again overcome by his grief.

Suddenly Carey left the bedside and hurried over to him.

"Wait, Telesse," said he. "You have forgotten your powder and bullets. Numa will not go with you without a struggle, and what if you should miss the first time?"

He went toward the mantel as he spoke, but the old man shook his head, the stolidness of his face losing itself for a moment in a grim smile.

"No! No! *M'sieu*, I shall not need the powder and the bullets. It was one shot that killed Aline, and it will be one shot that will kill Numa," said he, as he softly closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LE BOSSU TELLS HIS STORY

THE sun hung low in the western sky and already the black line of the forest was faintly gilded with its dying light when old Telesse rode into the Grand Woods in search of Numa.

All day long he had hunted in and about Landry, with the grim perseverance born of despair. All day long he had asked of those he had met the same, oft-repeated question: "Have you seen the man who shot my girl?"—while the people shrank from the hopeless look in his gray eyes.

And now, having heard no news from the fugitive, he had come to the place where he hoped to find him—the place of all others where he thought that Numa would be. Well did the old man know that, once in the Grand Woods, Numa would wait, for a time at least, until he could find some permanent place of safety. And therefore it was that he first searched the country in and about Landry, and came at last to the woods when he had despaired of finding the fugitive elsewhere.

Riding slowly down the grassy track he came presently to his old cabin, standing silent and deserted in the shadows of the barren, weed-grown clearing. For

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a moment he stopped before it and sat with bent head and tear-dimmed eyes, overcome by the thoughts of the happy days that he had spent there; then he straightened himself in the saddle, his face took on again its look of grim determination, and he turned his pony's head toward the deeper forest and Numa's hut.

When, a little later, he came upon it, he found it as silent and as deserted as his own cabin had been, but his face was lit for a moment with a smile of satisfaction at sight of the torn, trampled turf about the doorway. Climbing quickly from the saddle he pushed open the shaky door of the hut and went inside.

Its one room was in a state of the wildest confusion, as though its owner had left it in sudden and hurried flight. The few poor pieces of furniture were thrown about it in a broken heap, the blankets were gone from the two pallets upon the floor, and the tiny closet in which the flour and food was stored stood with open door, bare and empty.

Pinned to the overturned table by a long black thorn was a scrap of paper covered with loose, straggling writing, and the old man, picking it up, gave it one despairing glance and cast it from him, for he could not read. The bit of paper fluttered lightly from his hand and lay with the writing downward, a tiny spot of white against the brown of the mud floor.

With a sigh of disappointment the old man turned to go.

"Ah! if I could but read, how much I might learn from that writing," said he to himself sadly. "Numa has been here, and Jean also. But where have they

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gone? Numa has left a paper behind him for Jean, of course, so therefore Jean did not come with him. In this paper Numa has told Jean of where he has gone, and I could tell where he has gone also if I could but read."

He reached down and picked up the paper with trembling hands.

"I must bring it to Landry and ask some one to read it for me," said he resignedly, as he began to fold it carefully.

Suddenly he gave a startled cry and tore open the folds in feverish haste, for scrawled upon the back of the paper in rough, crooked tracery was a tiny map, marked with innumerable dots and crosses and a thin, crooked line that meant some stream.

For a long time the old man gazed upon it, and then he folded it up and tucked it into the lining of his hat.

"It is the Île des Cyprès," said he to himself, as he went out to his pony. "It is the Île des Cyprès, and I will find Jean waiting for me at the edge of the sea marsh."

Mounting his pony he made off in a long, curving line through the swamp that opened before him like a great silent vault in the shadow of the night. It was a long ride and the slow pace of the pony made it all the longer, as he picked his way through the bewildering maze of cypress knees.

The sun sank below the edge of the forest, and the moon crept into the sky, filling the swamp with its weird, white light.

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On every side the trees rose in thick, straight lines, stretching away interminably, to be lost at last in the smoky haze of the marsh fog. Here were the tall cypresses—the monarchs of the swamp—their tapering trunks fluted with many a dent and hollow, their bushy tops all bearded with feathery moss, their long, shiny knees dotting the ground far and near, as though placed there to trip the daring stranger who would invade the mystery of their solitude. And here also were the sweet gum trees, their roots sprawling about the ground in great, twisted knots, showing pale and white in the moonlight, splotted with great squares of lichen, looking for all the world like huge, crawling monsters that, having received their deathblows, had writhed and twisted themselves into a horrid, tangled mass awaiting death.

Here also was the vast, mysterious silence of the swamp, broken only by the dull, monotonous thudding of the pony's hoofs upon the soft ground.

It was a weird, uncanny ride, and the old man heaved a great sigh of thankfulness when he finally arrived upon the banks of the Bayou des Arbres.

Tying the pony to a cypress tree he picked his way through the soft mud to the water's edge, where a battered pirogue lay half-buried in the watery ooze. Very carefully the old man slid it into the water and crept inside.

For a moment he sat with bowed head and trembling shoulders, as though his courage had failed him, and then he gave a sudden hard gasp, and thrusting the paddle into the soft mud of the bayou's bank gave a

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savage shove. The pirogue slipped out into the shadows of the stream and his journey to the sea marsh was begun.

Like the ride, it was a long, weird journey, made more ghostly by the ever-moving shadows of the trees that hedged in the little stream on either side.

And so the pirogue glided along silently like some dark specter under the heavy canopy of the cypress swamp, while the stream grew narrower and narrower and the trees grew thinner and thinner, until finally it came to the edge of the woods, where the old man paddled more slowly and peered about him anxiously, awestruck at the sight that met his eyes.

Before him lay the open sea marsh, all white and silvery in the moonlight, overhung with a filmy cloud of mist and fog that scattered its moisture upon the tall marsh grass in a vast array of tiny drops, which shimmered softly, like pearls. Far away in the distance, and barely discernible through the fog wreaths, a dark blot stood out against the misty whiteness of the marsh, and the old man, looking at it for a moment, swung his pirogue into the shadows of the forest and raised his voice in the long, mournful cry of the marsh fowl. Again he called, and yet again, crouching in the muddy bottom of the pirogue, his head bent forward listening intently, and then from out of the marsh came an answering cry, faint and low at first, rising louder and then suddenly ceasing, in perfect imitation of a wandering bird that has finally returned to its nest.

The old man nodded his head appreciatively.

“Jean is wonderful,” said he to himself. “If he

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had not answered my call I would have sworn that it was the bird itself."

A dark streak shot suddenly down the narrow lane of the bayou and a pirogue glided into the shadows beside him.

Le Bossu laid down his paddle with a sigh of satisfaction.

"So you found my map and understood it?" he asked. "That is good. Numa came to the cabin in search of food while I was away, and finding none he left me a note telling me to bring him some to-night. Then he went on to his hiding place. I came at once to the marsh, and left the map behind for you, knowing that you would come to the woods."

He pointed out toward the dark blot with one of his long arms.

"Numa is out there on the Île des Cyprès," he continued. "He told me in his note that he had killed Aline. Is this so?"

He asked the question in a dull, hopeless voice, well knowing what the answer would be.

The old man bowed his head.

"It is so, Jean," answered he, "and I have come to bring Numa back to Landry to answer for what he has done. I know that you have been his friend and that you would help him, that you will bring him food to-night. Now I love you as I would love my son, Jean, but I must tell you now that you shall not stand between Numa and myself to-night."

The old man's voice was hard, and he laid a hand meaningly upon the long rifle that lay across his knees.

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Le Bossu laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh, for it had in it all of the pent-up bitterness and hatred of many years. Thrusting his paddle into the bayou the little man held it up so that the water trickled off of it in a long row of tiny drops that glistened for a moment in the moonlight and then fell back into the stream again with a soft splash.

"See," said he, "I have thrust my paddle into the bosom of the bayou and I have hurt it so that it has cried. There are the tears, Telesse. In just such a way did Numa, long years ago, thrust into my heart, and were I to take my paddle and do as I have just done from the mouth of the bayou far, far out into the great sea, I would not bring forth the tears of bitterness, of agony that his wickedness has caused me. Listen, Telesse, for I am going to tell you to-night that which I have told to no one.

"You say that Numa is my friend, as all say he is? Now I am going to tell you what sort of a friend I am to Numa. Le Sauvage was my father, Telesse, and I was born in the house where he was shot, near Landry. Of him I will tell you nothing, as you have heard his story so many times, and I will tell you therefore of my life with the old woman in whose keeping he left me when he returned to die at Landry. She was a good old woman, Telesse, a member of his band, and she lived on one of the islands far out to the east from the one where Numa now is. When she was driven from her home along with the rest by *les Vigilantes*, she went with me to the swamp near Mouton, and it was there that I grew up. It was there that I grew up tall

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and straight and good to see, for you must know that in those days I was not bent and twisted by the anger of God as I am now.

“We lived in a little cabin far down in the swamp, the old woman and I, and it was then that I learned that which I know of the forest and of the wild things that live there.

“All through the bright summer and all through the cold winter I worked cutting down the tall cypress trees, and the dollars that I brought each month to the old woman were many, for I was straight and strong, and I worked well in those days.

“And so I lived in the swamp and grew to be a man and was as happy as the birds that sang about me as I worked, and then came to me my first sorrow. The old woman died.”

Le Bossu faltered, and again he thrust the paddle into the water and watched the drops as they splashed slowly down in the moonlight.

“Tears, Telesse,” said he sadly. “My first ones. I knew not what it was to be unhappy. I buried her with my own hands, near the little cabin, and then I set out from the swamp and walked many days, for I had to forget my sorrow. And so at last I came into the prairies, and I looked at them in wonder, for I had never seen such a country before. And then one evening, when my heart was sore and my body was weary from my long journey, I came to a house far out in the prairie, and I found what I had come so far to find—peace and happiness once more.

“It was a girl, Telesse, and such a girl.”

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The little man paused and held out his arms as though he strove to grasp in them the image that was before him in his memory. In his eyes there was a light that the old man had never seen there before, and the happy smile upon his lips was the first one that had been there for many a day.

“It was in the evening, Telesse,” said he softly, “and as I came upon her the sun was setting behind the edge of the prairie, the great prairie that was as empty and as lonely as my own heart was; the prairie that was filled with love and life when my eyes rested on her, even as my heart was also.

“Her name was Madelaine—the little Madelaine, I called her—and the name suited her well, for she was very small. Her cheeks were like the flush of the setting sun, her smile was like the dawn when it wakes the flowers in the early morning, and her eyes, her eyes, Telesse, were like the waters in the forest when they hold upon their bosom the picture of the heavens, all warm and dancing in the sunlight.

“I loved her from the moment that I saw her, and in the happy days that I spent in the prairie I taught her to love me also, and the sadness in my heart was gone, and I was very happy—happy for the first time in my life.

“And so I stayed in the prairie until I could stay no more, and then I left the girl and went back to my home in the swamp, to work and make the money for our wedding day. It was happy work, Telesse, for the thought was ever with me of what my work would bring me, and so the days went on, and at last I had

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made the money that I needed to bring me my happiness.

“It was a bright day in the early winter when I set out for the prairie, and it seemed to me as I went along that the whole world was rejoicing with me in my happiness, for never was the sky as blue, never were the flowers as sweet, and never did the birds sing as gladly as they did upon my wedding day. And so I set out after my lovely bride, happier than I had ever been in my life before, and when I came to the house in the prairie, and ran forward in my eagerness to see her, the old man with whom she lived met me at the gate, all bowed and broken by sorrow, and told me——”

The little man paused and buried his face in his hands, while his poor twisted body shook with the memory that came back to him. Suddenly he raised his white face and laughed, the harsh sound going out across the silent marsh like the cry of a lost soul. Dipping his hand in the water Le Bossu shook the drops in a whirling spray before him.

“More tears, Telesse, many more tears,” said he bitterly. “The old man told me that while I was at work in the swamp making the money for my wedding, another lover had come to the prairie. A bad lover, Telesse, who taught the girl to forget me and to love him. Who disgraced her, Telesse, and then left her to bear her shame alone. And she had left her home and had gone away, they knew not where, and that—that was my wedding day.

“The man, as you must know, was Numa, and I

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swore that I would never rest until I had killed him. For two long weeks I searched for him in vain, and in those weeks I went many times to Mouton and drank the liquor that they sold there to drown the thoughts that ever came to me.

“And in that time the money that I had made for my wedding slipped away as easily as the water that a moment ago I poured from my hand, and I found myself penniless and unable to go on with my search for Numa.

“It was then that I went back to the swamp to work for more money, and so the days passed bitterly, until there came to me the bitterest day of all.

“It was deep in the swamp that it happened, Telesse, and I had worked hard, standing up in my pirogue to chop down a tall cypress, the largest in all the forest. Deep into its yellow heart I drove my ax, and then as it began to groan and crack and tremble I pushed hard with my paddle to get away, and the pirogue did not move. I can hear the roar of the great tree now as it came down upon me, crying out in the happiness of its revenge, and it was then, in the moment of its falling, that I knew that God was angry with me and was punishing me. Punishing me for the murder that was in my heart, punishing me for my vow of vengeance and my drinking. It was many months before I was well again, and when I crept from my bed I was the poor twisted creature that I am now, but I had learned my lesson.

“I found Numa in the days that followed, but I did not kill him, for I knew that God did not wish it,

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so I became his friend and made another vow. I vowed that I would stay with him all my life until some one took upon him the revenge that God had forbidden me to take, or until he gave me some good reason for killing him.

“If he had ever struck me once, Telesse, I would have killed him. If he had ever given me any good reason to, I would have stabbed him with the knife that I have always carried, for that would not have been revenge. But he never gave me any reason for killing him in all the time that we lived together.

“There was once a time in Landry, last winter, when I had my knife raised above him, but there came a sign from heaven, and I did not strike.

“And so you know all now, Telesse, and you must know also that the time that I have been waiting for has come at last. You are here to take Numa back to Landry, and I am here to help you.”

The old man reached across his pirogue and laid his hand upon Le Bossu's shoulder.

“Poor Jean,” said he, “how I pity you. And now for Numa.”

He picked up his paddle as he spoke, but Le Bossu seized his arm.

“Are you mad, Telesse?” he cried. “If you go out on the open marsh Numa will shoot you like a dog. There is but one thing to do, and I have planned it all while waiting for you. If I get you out on the Île des Cyprès safely you will bring Numa back with you, will you not? You will give me your promise that you will bring him back dead or alive? You will tell him

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that I sent you for the sake of the little Madelaine, before you bring him off the island dead or alive?"

Le Bossu's voice trembled with excitement and his eyes glowed eagerly.

The old man nodded.

"I will bring him back dead or alive, and I will tell him that you sent me for the sake of the little Madelaine, I promise you," answered he.

Le Bossu leaned forward in his pirogue and smiled his approval.

"That is right," he whispered, "and now I will tell you my plan. In his note Numa told me to bring him food to-night to the edge of the forest, and to burn some grass as a signal for him to come and get it. He knows that I cannot bring it to him, as the marsh is heavy and I am not strong enough to cross it. Now you must go far out on the eastern edge of the forest until the island is between you and where we are now. There you must wait until you see the signal burning, and then as Numa leaves the island you must come onto it from behind and be waiting there for him when he returns. He will come back from this edge of the forest to the island, and you must hide behind the great oak that is there. Keep your rifle on him from the time that you see him, and do not attempt to capture him until he lays down his own. It is a hard task, Telesse, and the marsh is heavy, so you had best be going before it grows too late and Numa becomes suspicious. I will give you plenty of time to get behind the island before I burn the signal."

The old man stepped from his pirogue and pulled it

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out onto the low bank of the bayou. Then he reached out a hand to Le Bossu.

“Good-by, Jean,” said he. “You are a good boy, and I thank you. If I do not come back, you will seek yourself to capture Numa, I know, and will lead those at Landry to his hiding place. Do not grieve for me, Jean, if I should not come back, for since Aline is dead I do not care so much to live. In a short while there will be two of us on Île des Cyprès, and you know yourself that but one of us will come back alive. And so good-by, Jean, good-by and God bless you.”

The little man held the proffered hand for a moment and there were tears in his eyes when he finally let it go.

“You will find me here, Telesse, when you return, and together we will bring Numa to Landry,” said he slowly. “We will bring him in the pirogue, by way of Bayou Portage, for it is lonely there, and we will have none to trouble us. You will come back, Telesse, never fear. God is just.”

The old man swung his rifle across his shoulder, and started away. For a moment he turned and looked once more at Le Bossu, and then with a wave of his hand he plunged into the dark labyrinth of the forest.

Straight to the east he held, ever keeping the island in view, and when after an hour's steady walking through the heavy mire at the forest's edge, he finally paused, a dark blot marred the open sweep of marsh that stretched away to the point where he had left Le Bossu.

Sitting down upon a fallen tree the old man drew

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an arm across his face, for despite the cold wind that blew from the north it was wet with perspiration.

Holding up his arm in the moonlight he smiled at it grimly.

“More tears for Numa,” said he slowly, and as he spoke a flash of light showed for a moment in the western fog before him.

The old man rose to his feet with a sigh of weariness.

“I have walked very slowly or Jean is in a hurry,” said he to himself, and taking up his rifle he stepped into the marsh, striking out across its treacherous depths toward the Île des Cyprès, that showed so faint and ghostly in the grip of the moonlit fog.

CHAPTER XXIX

NUMA PAYS HIS DEBTS

FAR out in the desolate sea marsh stood the Île des Cyprès—a little mound of dry, clayey soil thrust up by some freak of nature from the muddy, rush-grown flat about it. There it stood in the silvery moonlight, thickly grown with myrtle, with casino, and ragged, stunted palmettoes, laced with the myriad of shadows cast by the single huge live oak that stood sentinel upon it.

And behind this oak a man lay waiting—an old, withered man, worn and tired, and smeared from head to foot with slimy mud from his long journey across the treacherous sea marsh. Crouching behind the gnarled, weather-beaten trunk he waited patiently, his rifle ready in his hand, his head bent forward eagerly, listening: ever listening for some warning sound from the great white waste about him.

It was very quiet on the Île des Cyprès, and the noises from the marsh came loud and clear. The hoarse croaking of the frogs, the squeak and patter of the muskrats, and the long, mournful cries of the marsh fowl that whirled in endless flight through the misty fog wreaths, as though doomed by some relentless fate to flutter restlessly through all their wretched lives.

But save for these sounds the silence of the marsh

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was unbroken, and after a while the watcher crept cautiously from his hiding place and bent above the rude fire that burned fitfully near the foot of the great oak. He was numb and cold from his long journey, for the north wind was bitter as it swept across the barren marsh, and the heat of the fire was grateful to his shivering body.

How long he knelt by the flickering fire he did not know. The wood burned itself away to dull, glowing embers, the stars paled, the moonlight lost itself in the swaying shadows, and the wind blew cool and strong, fresh with the sweetness of the coming day.

A sudden sound broke the silence of the dying night and the old man crept cautiously to his hiding place again. Once more came the sound, the low, whistling, sucking sound of the marsh, as it reluctantly releases its grasp upon the feet of those who dare to tread the many pitfalls of its muddy depths.

The old man grasped his rifle tightly and listened to the sound as it came nearer and nearer, sucking, popping, whistling, broken now and then with the sullen splashing of shallow water.

In the east a long rosy streak showed suddenly against the darkness of the sky. The trees began to show themselves slowly in the growing light. The palmettoes thrust their long fingers skyward and waved them wildly in the morning breeze. The myrtles shook their tiny leaves joyously, as though in sudden merriment at the coming of the morning. The old man crouched low in the shadow of the oak and waited breathlessly.

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The noise from the marsh came loud and clear, and then it ceased entirely. There was a sudden crashing, breaking sound from the thick growth of myrtles upon the island's edge, and a man dragged himself slowly into the little clearing by the oak tree.

It was Numa.

Peeping cautiously from his hiding place the old man gave him a quick glance and sank down again in silent amazement, for he did not know the Numa that stood before him.

Gone was the old, careless, boyish look that had made his face so handsome. Gone was the quick sparkle of his eye, the bright happy smile upon his lips, and in their place was the dull, lifeless look of hopeless sorrow. His face was gray and drawn and his eyes were dark with agony and pain.

Stopping at the fire he laid down the food that he carried and placed a few dry sticks upon the dying embers, his rifle ever ready in his hand, his eyes ever fastened upon the thick hedge of myrtles that screened him from the marsh—eyes that were wide and staring now, with the frightened, desperate look of the hunted.

A noise came from the marsh and he sprang into the myrtles with rifle cocked and ready, to return in a moment with ashy face and trembling limbs, all unstrung at the gnawing of some vagrant muskrat.

For a moment he stood at the fire, striving to control himself, and then with a hoarse cry he threw himself against the great oak, trembling and sobbing in a frenzy of utter fear and dejection.

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“ Ah, God! ” he cried. “ What have I done? What have I done? ”

The wail of his cry went out over the desolate waste like the moan of a soul in torment. His rifle slipped from his trembling hand and lay at his feet unheeded.

The moment had come, and the old man stepped from his hiding place, his long rifle leveled before him.

“ I have come to bring you back to Landry and to justice, Numa, ” said he.

With a cry Numa turned and saw him, standing for a moment in speechless terror, his face like death, his eyes rolling about wildly, desperately, seeking some means of escape.

“ Telesse! ” he gasped. “ How did you get here? Has Jean betrayed me? Jean, the one friend that I thought would help me? ”

He lay back against the tree and his arms dropped to his side in apparent weariness.

The old man shoved the muzzle of his rifle against Numa's breast and shook his head meaningly.

“ No, no, Numa, ” said he. “ We will have none of that. Keep up your hands or I shall be obliged to shoot you. ”

Numa's hands went up instantly, and again he asked his question.

“ Was it Jean that betrayed me? ”

The old man smiled grimly. “ Yes, ” answered he, “ it was Jean, and he told me to tell you why he did it before you left this island. He did it for the sake of the little Madelaine. ”

Numa's face was ghastly in the light of the coming

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day and his hand went for a moment to his throat as though he were choking.

“The little Madelaine,” he whispered hoarsely, “and Jean was——”

“To have married her,” answered the old man slowly.

Numa’s head sank upon his breast.

“I see, I see,” he moaned. “That is why Jean was ever with me, waiting for his revenge. And you, Telesse, think of how I have tortured you with the memory of the man that you did not mean to kill, and Aline—God! but I owe a debt, Telesse, an awful debt, and I must pay it all to you, to the world, before I go.”

The old man nodded thoughtfully.

“Yes, Numa,” said he, “you owe a great debt, and you must pay it. All your life you have made my life a torture to me with your threats. All your life you have played upon my fears, making me do that which I should not have done, and now it is only just that I should bring you back to the punishment that you deserve. I stood your threats, Numa, and did for the most part what you commanded me, and perhaps I should have gone on in that way to the end of my days had you not gone a step too far. You may tell them all that you know of me in Landry when I bring you there, but bring you there I will. Why did you kill Aline, Numa? The girl that you loved, the poor, innocent child that never did you any harm. Why did you do it, I say?”

The old man’s voice was commanding and his gray eyes flashed as Numa had never seen them flash before.

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Numa raised a hand to heaven.

“I swear to you that I did not mean to kill Aline,” answered he. “The shot was meant for *M’sieu* Gordon. I aimed at him carefully through the window and then as I pulled the trigger Aline rushed before him and——”

His voice broke and he covered his face with his hands as though to shut out the vision that came to him.

“And then you killed her—my child and your loved one,” the old man finished for him sadly. “Why did you do it, Numa? Why did you do it? I could have stood all your threats, your torture—anything but that.”

Numa sighed and drew his hand across his ashen face.

“*Mon Dieu!* It is all like some horrible dream,” he groaned. “It cannot be true, and yet it is true. Ah! Telesse, Telesse, what have I done? What have I done?”

He closed his eyes and lay quietly against the tree, apparently exhausted by the emotion that tore his very soul.

After a time he raised his head wearily and held out his hands with a gesture of despair.

“I am ready to go, Telesse,” said he brokenly. “You may tie my hands and I will go before you as peacefully as a child, for my heart is broken.”

The old man, caught by the ruse, lowered his rifle and fumbled in one of the pockets of his coat.

“I had a piece of cord when I left——” he began,

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and then he stopped suddenly, for Numa had stooped for his weapon like a flash and was rising with it ready in his hands.

The old man's rifle leaped to his shoulder, a long, black streak, and the roar of it rolled out upon the marsh like the thunder of some monstrous cannon, scaring the marsh fowl until they filled the air in whirling clouds, screaming discordantly.

Numa's rifle clattered to the ground and he staggered against the oak, clutching wildly at the ragged hole in his breast.

"God! Telesse, you have killed me," he panted. "I never thought that you would do it."

He laughed horribly and drew his hand across his brow, leaving a long bloody smear behind it.

"You will take me back to Landry, and I will go even as I said I would—like—like—a little child," he sobbed as he staggered to the ground.

The old man bent over him and tried with trembling hands to soothe him.

"You made me do it, Numa," he faltered. "If you had gone quietly I would not have harmed you."

Numa shoved him away impatiently and half-raised himself upon one arm.

"Yes, yes," he whispered, "I know that. It was a desperate chance and I took it. I did not think that you would shoot anyhow. But it does not matter. I prayed for death, even as you came upon me. I wanted to die fighting, not at the end of a rope, and yet——"

He paused choking, and lay back again with closed eyes.

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The old man thinking him dead, laid his hand upon his heart, and the pressure of his fingers awakened Numa from his stupor.

He shook his head weakly.

“No, no, Telesse, not yet,” he sighed. “But it will come—in a moment—the death of which I have wondered so often. Do not think too badly of me, Telesse. If Aline had loved me I would have been a different man—a different—man,” he murmured drowsily.

A ray of light from the rising sun fell across his face and roused him suddenly.

“The sun, Telesse,” he cried, his voice now strong and clear. “The sun is rising—rising on my last day. Help me to my feet that I may see it and die standing, like a man.”

The old man lifted him carefully and then at his command let him stand alone.

For a moment Numa stood still and straight, with all of the strength of his old, boyish figure, his eyes fastened upon the eastern sky where the sun was rising in a flood of gold and amber.

Before its growing light the fog was melting away, showing the brown stretch of the sea marsh, all fresh and salt, waving slowly in the morning breeze. And back of the marsh the Grand Woods lay—a long reach of purplish-brown and gray—rising faint and hazy in the light of the early morning.

Numa stretched an arm toward it longingly.

“The woods!” he cried. “My woods, my home, and I am looking at them for the last time——”

His voice trailed off into a wail and his head sank

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upon his breast in an attitude of utter despair. Suddenly he gave a great cry and staggered back, his eyes wide with terror.

“The—the—death. It is coming, Telesse,” he shrieked. “The sun is rising and yet it is growing dark—cold and dark.”

He paused, swaying drunkenly, his face convulsed with fear and horror.

“So—so—cold and dark—” he panted, and then he sighed and closed his eyes as he stumbled forward upon his face.

Old Telesse was at his side in a moment and bent his ear to the lips of the dying man.

“Numa, Numa, you are dying,” he cried. “Have you anything for me to tell them at Landry?”

Very slowly Numa opened his eyes and smiled again—the old, careless smile that his questioner knew so well.

“Tell—them—that—that—bad—as—I—have—been—I—died—as—I—have—lived—for—I—paid—my—debts—my—debts,” he whispered and was gone.

* * * * *

The stars shone down upon the little village of Landry and strove to calm it with their tiny, twinkling lights, for it had had an exciting day, and excitement was a thing to which it was wholly unused.

Late that evening, even as the bells of the Angelus rang out upon the quiet air, two men had moored a pirogue upon the banks of the Bayou Portage and had taken from it the body of a third one, wrapped tightly

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in a swath of coarse, woolen blankets. Up the wide street they carried their ghastly burden to a hut upon the edge of the town, while the people followed them in a wondering throng, listening in breathless silence to the story that they told.

Then had come the old Doctor Lemaire and the coroner's jury, with its verdict of self-defense, at which the people had raised a loud cheer before they returned to their homes, walking along in little groups, talking excitedly with endless gestures of the affair that had broken the usual quiet of their village.

And now the night had lowered its dark curtain upon the little drama of love and life and death, while the actors rested, for they had played their parts and they were tired.

In his cabin at Belrive the old man slept with Le Bossu, while at the big house Aline lay in restless, torment fighting bravely for the love and life that she fain would win.

And in his ruined cabin on the edge of the town Numa slept the sleep of death—lying stark and still in the pale light of the holy candles.

Deserted and alone he lay, save for the presence of a single woman—a tall, a beautiful woman, whose proud head was bent low with sorrow, whose lips ever moved in prayer and tender supplication.

All through the long night she kept her solitary vigil, her hands softly caressing the dead, handsome face, and then, as the sky grew gray with the coming morning, the door of the cabin opened slowly and a man stood before her.

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For a moment he hesitated, gazing at her in apprehensive silence, and then he called to her angrily.

“What are you doing here alone—alone with him, Jeanne?” he cried.

The woman raised her head wearily, and in her haggard face he read her unspoken answer—read it and knew, and turned away without a word.

Very slowly the woman pointed toward the open door.

“Go! Go! Jean Marie, you fool,” she sobbed. “Go and leave me with my love,” and the man passed out into the newborn day, striving through his shallow egotism to drive away the memory of the dupe that he had been.

CHAPTER XXX

CHRISTMAS CHEER

IT was Christmas at Belrive and the big house was in the state of cheerful confusion that always characterized that day. Even the weather seemed to have fallen into the holiday spirit, for the sun shone warm and bright in a cloudless sky, and the wind, though fresh and cool, had lost its blustering coldness.

All through the morning the negroes had trooped from the quarters in a long, straggling line, laughing, shouting, and filling the air with their endless cries of "Crismus Gif"; to stop finally at the porch of the big house in a state of blissful anticipation. And here, Carey, with the assistance of Marjorie, handed out to them their presents, with many a laugh and joke and word of good cheer. Here the grinning negroes received their gifts—clothes, tobacco and blankets for the old—scarfs and ribbons, and gaudy trinkets for the young—fruit and nuts and candy for the children that fought and scuffled noisily for the possession of their treasures.

In the big kitchen Aunt Felonise stormed about among her throng of assistants, preparing the Christmas dinner, while in the back lot Uncle Bill made

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preparations for a grand barbecue that was to be given for the field hands.

It was a time for joyousness and merriment, a time when every face wore a smile of contentment, and the happiest, the merriest, the most contented of them all, was Monsieur Varain.

All through the dark days when Aline was battling for her life, he had stayed at Belrive, watching, nursing, praying, his sad face sadder still, his gray head bent with grief and sorrow.

And then had come the time when the grim angel that had hovered about Belrive had folded its wings and had stolen away, and Monsieur Varain's face had become brighter and the days had passed for him more happily.

He had become a great favorite of Aunt Betty's, and many and lively were the arguments that he had with the little old lady—arguments that ever ended in her favor, with the mention of her dead husband, for Monsieur Varain was a model of politeness. At Mouton, the work in his big store went on under the supervision of the faithful Felix, whose wonderfully worded reports were among the few things that amused his employer during the period of Aline's sickness.

And now Monsieur Varain was spending his Christmas at Belrive—the first happy Christmas that he had spent in many a year. All the morning long he had bustled about the house in a state of the wildest excitement, running upon the porch to throw bits of silver to the smiling negroes, going out with Aunt Betty on tours of inspection to the kitchen, making endless trips

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to the big front parlor to see that a certain armchair, that was placed before the fire, was warm and soft with cushions. Here he would stand in blissful expectation, patting the pillows, consulting his great gold watch and moving the chair from side to side to get the proper effect of the fire, for old Doctor Lemaire had said that at twelve o'clock that day Aline could come downstairs for the first time, and Monsieur Varain must see that everything was made comfortable for her reception.

And there was another at Belrive who awaited the coming of the girl eagerly and happily. In the days of her sickness Carey had seen but little of Aline, and in that little he had spoken no word of his love, for the old doctor had said that there must be nothing to excite her. But now she was brighter and stronger and almost well, and he knew that on this day (this, the happiest of all Christmases for him) he could speak to her and tell her of that which he longed to say.

It had not been an easy task to explain to Aline her changed condition and the new life that was before her, and the kind words and endless patience of Aunt Betty (who had been chosen for the purpose) created a bond of love between her and the motherless girl that time only served to strengthen. A labor of love, Aunt Betty called it, and in it she was ably assisted by Miss Lawrence, who had hurried to Belrive at the sudden news that her cousin had been found.

Many and pleasant were the hours that she spent with Aline during her convalescence, telling her of the wonders of Lawrence Hall, recounting the stories that

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were still told there of her dead father, while the girl listened to her in silent wonder, scarce believing that it could all be true. And in these hours the two cousins came to love one another with the strong, lasting affection that was the heritage of the Lawrence blood.

Of her mother Aline had as yet heard but little, for Monsieur Varain's visits had been short and there had been but little talking, by the old doctor's command. But on her pillow ever lay a photograph—an old, faded photograph of a quiet, sweet-faced girl that smiled at her and brought her peace and quiet in the days of her suffering.

“It is your mother,” Monsieur Varain had said to her softly as he laid it beside her, and at the same time he had given her the ring that in the days gone by she had sacrificed so bravely.

And so she had passed the time of her sickness in an atmosphere of peace and loving kindness, a peace and kindness that she had never known, growing stronger every day both in health and in the affections of those who lived about her.

It had been arranged, as a compliment to Aunt Betty, that she alone should attend Aline in her descent to the parlor, and when, at twelve o'clock, she helped her charge down the broad stairway her kind old face bore a look of triumphant happiness that was reminiscent of a dozen spring pilgrimages all rolled into one.

“Miss Aline Lawrence's compliments, and a merry Christmas to you all,” she shouted gayly from the head of the stairs, and then in a moment she had delivered

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her smiling charge to the excited little crowd that was waiting in the hall to receive her.

Away to the parlor and to the big armchair they bore her triumphantly, and then, when she was enthroned in state before the fire, they clustered about her with words of love and kindness, until the girl's pale cheeks were flushed with happiness. But in the moment of her happiness she did not forget the ones that had loved her in the days gone by.

"Where are my Uncle Telesse and little Jean Le Bossu?" she asked after a time.

Aunt Betty smiled at her thoughtfulness.

"They will come this evening, my dear," answered she. "We are going to have a little reception, followed by dinner, as we always have every Christmas, and the old man and Le Bossu will be here a little before the guests arrive."

The girl's eyes shone happily.

"Ah! I shall be so glad, so glad to see them again," said she.

And so they sat and talked merrily before the fire until the tinkle of a bell warned them that it was time for lunch, and then they all arose to go, leaving Aline in the care of Aunt Betty. Carey was the last to start from the room, and as he reached the door Aunt Betty tiptoed after him and laid a detaining hand upon his shoulder. There was a suspicious moisture in her eyes as she whispered to him and she patted his cheek fondly for a moment with one of her wrinkled hands.

"If you have anything to say to her, my dear, I think that she would like to hear it now," said she,

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and slipping from the room she closed the door quietly behind her.

For a moment Carey stood and looked at the girl as she lay back in her chair, waiting for the return of Aunt Betty. Her face, though white and pale from her long sickness, had lost none of its beauty, and as she sat smiling in the firelight, her eyes shining, Carey thought that she had never seemed as sweet and as beautiful before.

Very quietly he crossed the room and knelt beside her chair.

“Aline, Aline,” he whispered, “I have come again to tell you that I love you. Many things have happened since I spoke to you at the little cabin in the fields. You were poor then, and I was rich and your master. Now you are rich, very rich, and the conditions are changed. In the life that is now before you, you will have your choice of many men—better men than I—but none will love you more. Your answer in the cabin was ‘yes.’ What is it now, Aline?”

He bowed his head and waited for his answer.

The girl smiled, and in her eyes was the happiness of a lifetime.

“My heart has not changed with my fortunes, *M’sieu*,” answered she. “It seems that I have loved you always. I loved the little boy that fought for me in the road that day, so long ago, when Numa strove to kiss me, for it was you, *M’sieu*, even though it slipped so quickly from your memory.

“I was a lonely child and I did not forget so easily. And then I saw you on the Bayou des Arbres, and I

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knew in a moment who you were, for it was my heart that told me. And when I came to Belrive you rescued me again from Numa when he sought to kiss me in the moonlight.

“It was then, *M'sieu*, that my love came to me in a great flood that lay heavily upon my heart, lay so heavily, and yet—and yet—gave to me such a strange feeling of happiness. I fought it, *M'sieu—Mon Dieu*, how I fought it, all alone, through the long nights in the little cabin, and yet it grew and grew as the days passed on, until I thought that I would die with my shame and sorrow, for I did not think that you, *M'sieu* Gordon, could ever come to care for me.

“It was then that I wished to return to the woods, the kind woods that I knew would soothe and comfort me, and then came Numa with his tale from Landry, and my heart was broken. And you came, *M'sieu*, and I was happy, and then came the shot and all was black and whirling, but as I lay in your arms my love grew and grew, until——”

She paused and looked at him with eyes that shone happily through their mist of love. Very slowly her arm crept about him and her head bent down toward his own.

“Until sometimes I think that I must have two hearts, I love you so, *M'sieu*,” she whispered softly.

For a moment Carey held her in his arms, and then he laid her back among the cushions and looked at her rebukingly.

“You must not call me *M'sieu* any more,” said he. “It is Carey now—your Carey.”

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But the girl shook her head and smiled.

“You will always be *M’sieu* to me,” she answered, “my *M’sieu*, as you have always been.” And as Carey took her in his arms again she softly whispered, “My *M’sieu*.”

* * * * *

Late in the afternoon, yet some time before the guests began to arrive, the old man and Le Bossu came to the big house, dressed in their best and eager to see Aline once more. Carey met them upon the porch and led them into the parlor, where the girl received them with a cry of joy, kissing them tenderly. And here Carey left them alone with Aline, to tell her all that had happened since her sickness, in the woods and at the little cabin in the field that had been her home.

When he returned toward nightfall to tell them that the guests were beginning to arrive, he found the little man curled up upon the hearth rug, telling a story of the woods—one of the stories that he loved so much to tell—while the girl lay back in her chair, softly stroking the gray head of the old man who sat beside her. It made a pretty picture, the three of them sitting in the firelight, and Carey was loath to disturb it, but the little man caught sight of him and scrambled to his feet with a word of warning. The old man rose also, and the two of them stood for a moment in awkward silence, awed at the handsomely furnished room, at the voices and laughter that came from the hall, at the quiet dignity of the big house, for the charm of their simple talk was broken, and they were afraid.

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Carey came over to them and laid his hands upon their shoulders kindly.

“I do not know how to thank you two for all that you have done for Aline,” said he huskily. “As long as there is a Belrive you shall have a home and the choice of all the cabins is yours. You shall work only when you wish, and Aline will look after you, as you looked after her in the days of her poverty, will you not, Aline?”

There were tears in the girl's eyes when she answered him, and she beckoned for the old man and Le Bossu to come to her.

“You will see me every day,” said she, “and I shall live only to make you happy. You will live in our old cabin, will you not, Uncle Telesse?”

But the old man shook his head.

“We have spoken of this thing, Jean and I, and we are going back to the woods,” answered he. “It would not be the same at the cabin without you, Aline, and you know that I only came to Belrive that you might go to school. We will come to see you often, Jean and I, and in the days to come perhaps Le Bossu will tell to your children the stories that in the forest you loved so much to hear. We have lived all our lives in the woods, and it is there that we would die. *M'sieu* Gordon is kind, very kind, and I thank him, but we will go to the woods—to our old home.”

Aline smiled. “Yes, you are right, Uncle Telesse,” said she. “It is only in the woods that you will be happy, and I will come to see you often, for I love them even as do you and Jean.”

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She looked after them with fond eyes as Carey slipped them through the folding doors into the dining room, and then the guests came in from the hall in a laughing, talking throng. In they came, headed by Aunt Betty, the jolliest of them all—the family from Sunnyside, Monsieur Landry, Mr. Parker, the old doctor, and Father Bertrand—all of them with a word of greeting and good cheer for the girl that sat in the big armchair before the fire.

And when they had all of them spoken to Aline Tom Bayne slipped over to her side and whispered in her ear. The girl smiled, and looked at him reassuringly.

“She is with my cousin, Julia Lawrence, and you must tell Julia that I wish to see her at once,” said she. “You will find them in the dining-room.”

Tom Bayne quickly gave her a look of the deepest gratitude.

“I’ll do it,” he whispered defiantly. “I’ll do it to-night or die.” And turning away he hurried from the room, almost overturning Monsieur Landry, who had just succeeded in cornering Aunt Betty.

Monsieur Landry gazed after the departing figure in ruffled astonishment.

“Monsieur Bayne is in a hurry all of a sudden,” said he.

The muffled slam of a door came from the dining room, and Aunt Betty laughed, for her quick ears had caught the sound.

“Perhaps if you were on his errand you would be in a hurry also,” replied she.

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“And what may his errand be?” asked Monsieur Landry curiously.

Aunt Betty laughed again and pointed to Mr. Parker, who was making his way toward them.

“Perhaps our friend here can tell you,” she answered. “He has been on a similar errand for some time.”

Mr. Parker joined them, his red face beaming.

“I suppose that Mr. Landry has told you that our candidate was elected by an overwhelming majority, and that Paul Hebert is again the sheriff at Mouton?” said he.

Aunt Betty nodded.

“Monsieur Landry has made his report, and it has been a most satisfactory one,” she replied. “We would now like to hear from you. I am waiting for the news from Mouton, Mr. Parker.”

Mr. Parker’s red face became suddenly grave.

“I am afraid that my report is not as satisfactory a one as Mr. Landry’s,” said he. “She is going to marry a drummer from New Orleans, Miss Betty, and she told me that she had been in love with him all the time.”

He paused and his face took on a look of comical despair.

Aunt Betty looked at him quizzically for a moment, and then she suddenly nodded her head, as though she had made up her mind.

“I am not going to say that I have made a mistake, Mr. Parker,” said she, “for it is always a woman’s privilege to change her mind. So therefore without any

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preliminaries I am going to tell you that I don't think that the Lord ever intended you to marry, after all."

Mr. Parker's face brightened instantly.

"By Gad! Miss Betty, you never said a truer thing in your life," he cried, "for if He had intended me for matrimony I would have been married long ago."

"Of course you would," answered Aunt Betty, "and now if you will excuse me I will go out and see how dinner is coming on."

It was a noteworthy fact that Aunt Betty, who moved about very quietly, made a great deal of unnecessary noise as she went down the hall, and when, after rattling the doorknob, she went into the dining-room, she found Tom Bayne and Marjorie sitting very far apart at the long table in a state of blissful confusion.

Tom was very flushed and proud as he led Marjorie over to her, and he had to clear his throat violently once or twice before he could speak.

"I have been to the seashore, Aunt Betty," said he, "and Margey says that I can stay and——"

"And dinner has been ready for some time, only Tom wouldn't let them come in to announce it," Marjorie finished for him, blushing furiously.

Aunt Betty's eyes were dim with tears and her voice actually trembled when she answered them.

"I ought to give you both a good scolding," said she, "but instead I am going to give you each a kiss, and then I am going to throw open the doors and call them in to dinner before I become an utter idiot with all this happiness and cry like an old fool."

And then she kissed them both, and the guests filed

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in to dinner, leaving Aline alone at the fire, for she was weary after her long day.

And so she sat in the firelight, thinking of the happiness that was to come, and presently she fell asleep with a smile upon her lips, for she was very tired. And as she slept the door opened softly and the old man slipped into the room, followed by Le Bossu.

For a moment they gazed at her with loving eyes, and then they crept out again as softly as they had come.

Never a word did they speak until they were outside in the dark, and then the little man broke the silence with a sigh of wonder.

"And to think that she was a great lady, and we never knew, Telesse," said he. "We should be happy at the happiness that has come to her."

The old man nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, we should be happy, Jean," he replied. "I am happy, and yet——"

There was a catch in his voice and he paused for a moment to look at the big house before him—the big house with its many lights and its sounds of happy voices and laughter.

For a long time he gazed at it in silence, and then he turned with a little sob and laid his hand upon Le Bossu's shoulder.

"Come," said he, "let us go back to the woods, Jean, you and I."

THE END

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