

THE TRADIN' BOAT.

An Old Plantation Story.

By M. E. Davis, Author of "In War Times At La Rose Blanche."

Uncle Marcellus Brandon sat in his big arm chair on one side of the lofty doorway that led into the hall from the veranda, and Tante swung herself softly to and fro in her low rocker on the other.

Uncle Marcellus was a Virginia Brandon. In the dashing and gallant days of his early manhood he had adventured—with a gigantic black body-servant at his elbow and the proceeds of an unusually fine tobacco crop in his pocket—down to New Orleans for the avowed purpose of dancing at one of the then famous cordon bleu balls.

Passing down Rue Bourbon on the way to his first revel, however, he encountered the dark and lustrous eyes of Mademoiselle Elise Joubert. Her pretty head was enveloped in fleecy locks, her white gown was garlanded with roses, her softly rounded cheeks had the velvety whiteness of a magnolia leaf.

The cordon bleu with its dream of voluptuous octoroon sirens vanished instantly from his mental vision. He abandoned like one under a spell his mocking companions, and elbowed a passage, with a ferociousness quite unnecessary, through the goodnatured chattering crowd lounging about the controls.

The curtain was already up when he entered the fine old salle, and a soft hiss pursued him as he marched with an unconsciously eager and determined step along the narrow aisles. But he heeded this no more than he heeded the faint ripple of amusement that stirred across the highbrow assembly when he stood stock still before the loge griller where she sat, and stared at her with all his heart in his eyes.

The wooing was hasty and impetuous though the wooer knew not one word of French, and la belle Louisianaise had at her command but the merest scrap of (convent) English.

When duly informed of his demand for her hand by her mother—to whom, much to his disgust, Marcellus Brandon found himself obliged first to submit it—Mademoiselle Elise consented meekly and with down-dropped eyelids to be transported to Wheatfield, the Brandon estate, Albemarle county, Virginia; and with eyes uprolled vowed sweetly that she would at the instant make herself teach *cette belle langue Anglaise*.

But that was when she was Mademoiselle Joubert. When she became Mrs Marcellus Brandon, she placidly but firmly refused to do either. Uncle Marcellus was fain to transfer himself and his hundred-and-odd "hands" from Wheatfield, Albemarle county, Virginia, to St. Denys, Rapides Parish, Louisiana, which ample plantation was a part of his wife's dot, and to begin life-long struggle with French verbs.

His forehead, knotted by years of this combat, gradually smoothed Marcellus and Joseph-Marie, his twin sons, grew to manhood. French came to them with their mother's milk, as Pere Joubert proudly observed, but by the time they were fairly in trousers they learned to twist their soft tongues to English whenever they addressed their father. In the meantime Uncle Marcellus used often to be seen hanging over the garden gate, his face aglow with pleasure as he listened to the familiar Joema River wmsical of Unk' Billy, an old Brandon retainer. And then there was Bedford, his own solemn old body-servant.

But all that was in the halcyon days "befo' de wah." Unk' Billy and Bedford had been gathered to the dust these many years; twins twins were long gone out into the world; and Uncle Marcellus, who was growing old, and had been "Uncle" Marcellus to half the parish for two generations at least, had resigned himself to an unbroken *te a te* with Mrs Marcellus, who had become Tante alike to relatives and friends.

Therefore it was worth something to see the smile on his round red face nowadays, when Cecile Joubert, Tante's orphaned niece, who had come to live at St. Denys, entered the breakfast room with a kiss and *bonjour* for Tante, and—oh, the dear old English with the quaint little flavor of accent upon it, *good mornin'*, and a kiss for Uncle Marcellus.

It was Cecile who came along the hall now and stood in the doorway between them. She had, it appeared, brought a shawl for Tante for the evening was drawing on, and she had fetched Uncle Marcellus his pipe. When she had lighted a taper for the one and wrapped the shawl about the other she came down the steps and paced back and forth along the shelled walks of her rose garden, humming a gay little chanconette and glancing now and again toward the gate and up the lane that led to La Ferme

sux Ifs, whose distant chimneys showed slender and dark against the face of a great yellow moon slowly rising into view.

Uncle Marcellus remarked to Tante in his painfully acquired and laborious French that Cecile seemed to grow prettier every day. Tante nodded a pleased assent.

Now, truly, Uncle Marcellus had never in all his life loved any woman but Tante. Her eyes, which remained the same large soft and shining wells of light that had lured him into the Theatre d'Orleans fifty years ago (though her form had broadened to shapelessness and a pronounced moustache shaded her upper lip), had been the only eyes in the whole world for him. Yet somehow, as he stood looking at Cecile, with her tender blue eyes and her rose-tinted cheeks, and her fair wavy hair, his heart stirred strangely within him, and he was minded of the slim little fourth or fifth cousin who came down to the gate to bid him good bye the day he went away on that first *coxtailing* journey to New Orleans, and who, when he looked back, was gazing so wistfully after him. She had the same name, too, though at Wheatfield they called her Cicely and sometimes Cis. And she had been dead these forty years and more, dear, dear!

The old man coughed and Tante got up and went over and stood beside him patting him on the back with affectionate solicitude. Just then the clatter of horses' hoofs sounded in the lane, and presently the gate opened and shut.

"Tis but Octave," said Tante, resenting herself, and she smiled significantly. She spoke as always, in her soft syllabled native tongue. "It is thy wish," she went on after a short pause, "that the children shall settle this marriage for themselves, and it is perhaps best for them. Thou and I were not permitted this curious American custom. But then, we had no need of it, eh Marcellus?" No combination of letters can hope to convey an idea of the music of Tante's rare utterance of her husband's name.

Uncle Marcellus smiled back at her through the gathering dusk. He had already forgotten little cousin Cicely Brandon. Meantime, Tante's favorite scheme was not prospering out in the rose garden, although aided and whetted by Uncle Marcellus' odd American notions of liberty. The "children had taken a turn or two about the violet-bordered walks, and then Octave had drawn his companion aside to a seat under the old magnolia-tree, whose great white bells were filling all the dewy air with their rich and pungent perfume. "Cecile," he had said, laying his hand upon hers, where it rested upon the back of the rustic bench. "I have come—again—for my answer."

"I am sorry, Octave," Cecile had replied gently, "but it is always the same." "And always the same reason?" Octave had demanded in a slightly bantering tone. "Yes," she was exclaiming with scorn at the very moment when kindly, shrewd old Tante was congratulating herself that La Ferme aux Ifs (for was not Octave Gaston the sole and only heir of the good bachelor uncle Joseph Marie Gaston?) and Berd du Bois. Cecile's almost princely inheritance were at last about to be reunited. "Yes! always the same reason. I will not marry any man who does nothing with himself all day long and every day but lounge about rose-gardens."

"Garden," corrected Octave, "the St. Denys rose-garden. Be at least just, Cecile." "And sing, though you sing well, Octave, I admit that—" "I only warble accompaniments to Cecile Joubert's songs," murmured Octave humbly. "And fish and smoke cigarettes, and ride about the country with a pack of hounds at his horse's heels!" The old times have passed Octave," she went on earnestly and a trifle dramatically, "a man has no right to be idle like that; no right! He should be standing shoulder to shoulder with the world's workers. He should—" "But Cecile," remonstrated Octave lightly and apparently unimpressed by this very magnificent theory, with which it is true, he was already tolerably familiar, "the good uncle Joseph-Marie—" "Oh, the good uncle," she interrupted scornfully. "I'd rather be—Michel Bares on the Tradin' boat if I were a man, than to be dependant on an uncle, or a father—or a wife!"

A flush rose to the young man's dark cheek and he sprang hastily to his feet. "Oh, Octave," she cried in dismay. She had for a moment forgotten the personal nature of the discussion: as for her own vast fortune, she had a habit of not remembering that at all. "Please forgive me, I did not intend to be so rude. But at the American school where I have been, you know, they have such different ideas from—" "Oh, yes, I know," he growled with a savage imprecation under his breath addressed to American schools, in general, and this particular pension where

Cecile had imbibed her democratic, not to say, communistic opinions.

"Never mind, Cecile," he added, with a sudden return to his ordinary light and airy tone, "I have my answer, true; but we are still friends?"

"Why, of course," she assented surprised, and it must be admitted, secretly a little wounded by this ready acquiescence in her decision. Hitherto he had pleaded his suit with passionate warmth, and after each final and emphatic no, he had gone off declaring gaily that he would return again—and again—and again, until he should at last have conquered. Ah well, he had come—and had at last learned wisdom, so much the better for him. She thought as she sat on the steps in the moonlight and listened to his light chat, now in one tongue, now in another, with Uncle Marcellus and Tante. Tante rocking softly to and fro in her low chair was happily as yet unaware that Ferme aux Ifs and Bord du Bois divided more than half a century ago by the perverseness of a foolish young woman, were likely by the perverseness of another to remain asunder.

The next morning M. Paul Joubert's huge old family carriage came lumbering up the lane and stopped with a great flourish at the front steps. Out bounded cousins Loure and Jeanne, bag, gage and bonnet. "For a whole week, Cecile!" they cried in the midst of the joyous clatter that welcomed them. "And oh, do hurry up with the reseauxes for Tante's spice-jars, and 'get dressed. The Tradin' Boat is at the landing."

An hour or so later the three girls, followed by Valentine, Cecile's high-turbaned, mahogany-colored bonnet, came fluttering into Tante's morning room. Their cool-looking white gowns were belted with dainty ribbons about their slim young waists; wide straw hats shaded their fresh young faces.

What did Tante want from the Tradin' Boat? and what could they bring Uncle Marcellus? they demanded with many airy gestures and bird-like caresses.

Uncle Marcellus would like some Perique tobacco. Tante's list was a long one and included spices and pepper and cotton thread, and a paper of tacks; some jeans for Anepique's twin pickaninnies; a garden hoe and a watering pot.

It was a good mile and more down to the river, but a soft breeze came in from the moss-hung swamp at the back of the plantation, and the way lay along the wide pleasant lane that ran between St. Denys and Ferme aux Ifs. The cherokee rose hedges on either side were all white with long slim buds and big petaloid blossoms, and the dewy grass fringing the road was odoriferous with the tinty purple and yellow balls of the sensitive plant.

"Already!" exclaimed Jeanne, when they came to the first low vine hung cabin of the straggling little village under the high levee. Here they encountered an acquaintance. He took off his slouch hat at sight of them and stopped, grinning foolishly. "Michael Bares," demanded Cecile, severely, "what are you doing on shore?"

"Michel Bares, a slight, dark and rather good looking young fellow, muttered something in the soft Cajan patois about having had a *fresson*, and his *naman* was going to make him a *liane* of geranium leaves.

"I do not believe a word you say, Michel," interrupted Cecile, "that is what you said the last time you stopped off and got drunk and beat your wife, and Captain Tarver had to come himself he was t'ed h'an wanted to res' a while."

"You are not telling me the truth, Michel," said his mistress inexorably. "And mind, I shall certainly tell Father Kenyon if you behave as you did the last time."

Michel took his scolding in very good part, and looked after them with a cunning smile as they walked on toward the landing.

The river was low and they had to pick their way carefully down the steep side of the levee. A noisy crowd, mostly of negroes, stood aside to let them pass, and returned their greeting with loud but respectful salutations.

A wide gang plank led from the slippery bluff of the Tradin' Boat. The Tradin' Boat with a small side-wheel steamboat with a single deck, at the front end of which was constructed a cabin with a flat roof. This was surmounted by a tiny pilot-house, and served as the floating "store." The snug space behind the cabin was occupied by a rusty engine and a couple of dilapidated pumps. The rear deck contained a smoke-stained tent, behind whose scanty flaps a bed, a cooking stove and a deal table piled with dishes, were more or less visible.

Above the wide doorway which gave entrance into the store, a freshly painted sign bore on its expansive surface in large letters the legend

JACKSON TARVER, DEALER IN DRY GOODS, HARDWARE AND GENERAL MERCHANDISE.

Within, a counter ran along one side; the wall behind it was lined with shelves

containing Captain Tarver's miscellaneous assortment of calicoes, and cheap wooleens, candles, candies, spices, medicines and stationery. On the other side were ranged boxes and barrels, jars, buckets, wash-boards, a plough or two, a second hand hand sewing-machine, and other nondescript articles. Over-head, from the squatty ceiling depended hams, and pieces of bacon, bunches of trace-chains, whips, cow-bells and yokes; and here and there hung a ready-made dress and a ruffled gingham sun-bonnet.

The dingy little place was thronged with buyers, all waiting their time to be served, for Captain Tarver's new clerk was busily engaged attending to the wants of old Betty-Rose, one of the St. Denys negroes.

When Cecile and her cousins entered, he was reaching up to one of the highest shelves for a piece of red calico, and he could not see his face. When he turned, however, a torrent of surprised exclamations burst from Jeanne and Laure. Michel Bares' successor was Octave Gaston. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and his dark curls were tossed in unwonted confusion about his white forehead, but he looked undeniably dignified and handsome in his new role. He shook hands composedly across the counter with them all.

"Yes," he said, with easy grace, in answer to Laure's amazed questioning, "I have taken Michel Bares' place. How many yards did you say, Aunt Betty-Rose?"

"Lawed-a-mussy, neb' min' me, Marse Octave!" said Aunt Betty-Rose, hurriedly, backing away from the counter. "Jes' wait on Miss Cecile. Well, den, if yer don' want nuttin', Miss Cecile honey, do I is p'owful shame ter had Marse Octave waitin' on er ole nigger like ez ef he wuz po' white trash—eight yards ez dat to ky-red, Marse Octave."

"Michel Bares' place," continued Octave, placidly, measuring of the gaudy stuff with deft and graceful fingers; "true, it is not a very lucrative position—what else, Aunt Betty-Rose? Oh, apples,"—he dived under the counter and re-appeared with a scoop-full of dried apples, which he placed upon the fly-specked scales—"you see, Laura, I have grown tired of being idle. I have made up my mind to stand alone (he glanced furtively at Cecile's compressed lips and angry eyes and stumbled a little in his speech)—I mean I am going to try, and make my own living."

"I took the first thing that offered," he went on gravely, "really a fortunate thing for me—Michel's *fresson*. Bacon, Aunt Betty-Rose!—how much?"

He came around the counter and dexterously unhooked a piece of bacon from the ceiling, "five pounds, eh? That was better than being idle"—he was weighing the greasy stuff now and wrapping it in a piece of brown paper.

Cecile up to this moment had not spoken. She had been standing apart, now pale with scorn, now red with some feeling she could not define, her blazing eyes following Octave's movements. Suddenly her face softened; a half-pleading, half imperious light came into her eyes; she took a step forward, and her lips opened as if to speak. Just then, however, a little door in the rear of the cabin opened and a girl came in. She was about Cecile's own age; she had a pretty round face dusted with brown freckles and lighted by a pair of wide, open grey eyes. A mass of yellow curls nestled against her neck and crowned her forehead, the sleeves of her blue cotton gown were rolled up to the elbow, displaying a pair of white well-rounded arms. She came forward smiling and smoothing her check apron with plump, floury hands.

"Mister Gaston," she said in a soft drawing voice, "Captain Tarver, he says fer yer ter come in ter the tent fer dinner, 'I'll 'ten the sto' tell you're done eatin'."

"Dinner?" said Octave, staring at her a moment in bewilderment, while a vision rose before him of the round table at Ferme aux Ifs, with its array of crystal and silver; under Joseph-Marie at one end sipping his claret and denouncing the new-fangled boiling-kettles; himself at the other, and the open window, with the sunset streaming in; and away over the tops of the trees the steep roof of St. Denys, where Cecile—

"Dinner? Oh, certainly," he cried, coming suddenly to himself. And he smiled down into the pretty face lifted to his, "as soon as I shall have served these ladies—"

But the ladies were gone. Cecile was flying across the gangway and up the steep levee, with an angry spot on either cheek, and a dangerous fire in her blue eyes.

Michel Bares, who stood in the narrow pathway at the top of the levee, beat a rapid retreat at sight of her, dodging in to his little cabin, where he betook himself to bed and shook with a real *fresson* until she was well along the rose-bordered lane.

But Cecile had not even seen him. She sped on blind and speechless, followed by her protesting, wondering cousins and the grumbling old bonnet.

"What in the world does it mean, Cecile?" cried Laure, at last catching up with her and laying a hand on her arm. "And isn't it too funny!"

"I don't know what it means," replied Cecile hotly, "and I think it is perfectly disgusting."

It was hard enough to bear the persistent questions and the amazed comment of Tante and Uncle Marcellus; and the knowing silence of Laure and Jeanne. But in the evening when Mr Joseph Marie Gaston, the small, dark, shriveled, choleric old Frenchman, and life-long friend and neighbor, came over to scold and gesticulate and groan; and to launch scarcely veiled reproaches at himself, poor Cecile was angry indeed, and very wretched.

"The Tradin'-Boat has gone on to the ext landing, six or seven miles down the river, and Octave has gone with it, Sir! I commanded, I even begged him to come home, but he swore he would not. And who is going to keep my accounts and look after the place," wailed the good uncle. "There never was such a head as Octave's for business. These three years he has managed everything. And now that these new fangled boilers

But nothing of this last complaint reached Cecile's ears. She had stolen silently up to her own room at the mention of the departure of the Tradin' Boat. She did not care—of course she did not care—where he went or what he did: she said to herself fiercely; why, indeed, should she be held responsible for the foolish escapades of Octave Gaston? Perhaps, after all—and here a little chilly sensation crept over her as a vision of a pretty plump girl in a blue calico gown arose unbidden to her mind and she remembered with a start, the smile in Octave's eyes when he looked down on that fair freckled face! At this point, like many another heroine before her, she sat down on the edge of her bed and cried; and then stood up wrathfully brushing the tears from her eyes.

She tossed feverishly from side to side in her white little bed for a long time and thought she would never get to sleep. But sleep is very friendly to all young creatures, and long before midnight the soft fringed lids had closed over the slightly reddened eyes, and she was dreaming that Octave was wrapping a bit of bacon in that long coveted white China-crape shawl in Tante's big armchair.

Did anything happen? She found herself standing in the middle of the room shaking from head to foot. The white moonlight, streamed in through the window across her little bare feet and the wind fluttered the folds of her snowy night-dress. What was it? Her heart was beating still and in the honey suckle vines outside the window, a mocking bird was thrilling softly.

After a time she crept back to bed, with her rosary on her wrist, and lay there, still trembling, and counting her beads. A long time after, she could never tell how long—there was a sudden tumult out in the lane, a rush up the avenue, a banging of doors, hurried steps about the halls, voices in excited interrogations and exclamations. She sprang up again, as Laure burst into the room followed by Jeanne, who shrieked, "Cecile, Cecile, the Tradin'-Boat has blown up and Octave is killed!"

"Oh, Jeanne, how thoughtless of you!" cried Laure, reproachfully, as they bent together to lift a little white senseless form from the floor. For Cecile had fainted. But it was only for a moment, and she presently begged them to leave her. She would rather be alone, she said.

She listened quietly when another messenger came in to tell how Octave had been seen perfectly safe, or at all events alive after the explosion, and how he had afterwards lost his life endeavoring to rescue a young woman who was employed on the boat. From her window she saw Uncle Marcellus, in the soft mellow moonlight, swing himself into the saddle, with many puffs and groans—for it had been twenty years since he had mounted a horse—and ride away. A little later she felt, rather than heard, Mr Joseph Marie gallop down the lane from Ferme aux Ifs. And then the hours were silently away; the yellow moonlight faded; the gray dawn came creeping in. Will she ever forget, I wonder, how she felt as she stood before her mirror in the wan uncertain morning fastening one of Laure's black dresses about her throat, for she hated the sight of black, poor child, and had none in her wardrobe; and smoothing straight the rebellious little curls that wanted to frolic, as usual on her forehead. It was a white drawn face which looked backed at her out of the mirror, a face from which all the beauty and brightness had suddenly fled.

And then she went slowly down the wide stairway, and across the verandah, and down to the rose-garden gate, where all the household were anxiously awaiting Uncle Marcellus return. They took her silently among them as she approached. Even Tante, who yearned so over her, found in words to offer to her strange dry-eyed sorrows.

All at once there was a noise, and a dust, and a skurry in the lane, and there was Uncle Marcellus dismounting from his horse with wonderful spryness, and turning his cheerful red face towards them and shouting:—

"It's all a lie! He's no more dead than I am! The boat was blown up, my love," he added in French to Tante, who could not help showing, however, that she had perfectly understood his initial remark; "the boat was blown up, but Octave was not hurt by the explosion, or by his dive in the river after the girl."

There was no time for further explanation, for here was Octave himself galloping up to the gate and flinging himself from his horse. He wore Michel Bares' Sunday suit of blue flannel, and his wide cajan hat, and he looked remarkably bright and handsome as he came smiling toward the excited group. And then—

A limp, black-clad figure lay helpless and sobbing in his arms! Tante's fine tact was proverbial. But on this occasion no tact was needed to sweep all the spectators, black and white, into the house or behind it. Even the wide-eyed, copper colored pickaninny twins, Joseph-Marie and Marcellus, so named in honor of the twin sons of the house, scuttled slyly after their mother and disappeared without even so much as a backward glance. "So that by the time Octave had half-led, half-carried Cecile to the bench under the magnolia, and thrown himself on his knees before her, holding her hands in his, the rose garden over which the first low level rays of the morning sun were beginning to stretch, was as still and deserted as a lover's tryst.

"For me! This for me! Oh, my dear, my dear!" he cried, with a sob in his voice, lifting a fold of her black dress and kissing it reverently. "Oh, I thought—" she began and stopped choked with tears. "But imagine, my love," he said presently, when they had grown calmer and he sat beside her with his arm about her still trembling form, "there was really no danger. I went up in the air a little while it is true, and came down in the water; and then I saw her close by struggling, poor child—"

"She drew away away ever so slightly, but he went on. "Old Jackson Tarver's young wife, you know, you saw her yesterday on the Tradin' Boat, didn't you? and so I brought her ashore with me, neither of us the worse for a little wetting. How those blundering idiots could have brought up such a piece of news I can't conceive. But then," he added with a smile, "I, at least, ought not to complain."

"Do you know, Cecile," he went on more gravely, "that I am horribly afraid that it is I who am responsible for the explosion! I was very tired after measuring calico and weighing sugar and bacon all day—"

"Poor boy," she murmured sympathetically. "And when I sat down to smoke and to dream of Somebody's rose-garden and Somebody, perhaps even, then, walking there, I lighted my cigarette and tossed the match over among the kegs and boxes; and the next thing I knew the roof was open and was going skyward."

"Oh, Octave, Octave!" she nestled against him, shivering again at the mere thought of his past danger.

"Uncle Joseph-Marie is down at the landing now setting up with Jackson Tarver, who will no doubt in the end gain by the damage done the Tradin' Boat—and, by Jove, I had quite forgot the thirty dollars I owe Michel Bares for lending me his place for a month! But I am going to be more careful next time, Cecile. I mean to go away and find something to do—now that I know that you love me—something in real earnest."

She clung to him hysterically. "Never," she cried, "you are never to leave me again, Octave. Oh, how can you talk so cruelly? Is not my fortune enough for us. And even if that should fail, is there not always the good uncle, Joseph-Marie?"

Go as You Please.

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Difference in Mrs Blake her little boy puts his foot in his mouth. He is taken away. "Gracious, mine for a few blister him, mother can't."

A few days Mrs Blake says who puts his foot in his mouth. "My stars a boy was mine I would blister do to keep my mystery to me short-sighted, her son, 'put throw it aroun something. S speak to you I you have brok this minute. I speak to yo nothing thing, nor Never bring you a th a blessed thing here this minute Stephen! No man comes I away."

"I used a g cine for kids years, was got till I tried B. I gained in weight I can highly r Bitters to be testifies John N. B.

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"As a cu I highly re tract of Wi used it with often been it." Willis

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