

THE INHERITANCE OF JEAN TROUVE

By NEVIL HENSHAW Author of "Aline of the Grand Woods," etc. BOOK TWO.—BAYOU PORTAGE CHAPTER II.

I WRITE TO MADAME THERESE "It was not until I was wholly well again that the matter of my departure was definitely considered. True, in the first dreary days of my illness I had tried Le Bossu's patience solely with my demands to be retrained at once to Madame Therese, but the little man's answer had been always the same.

"We will arrange that later, little Jean," he had replied. "First you must become brown and strong so that city-folk will know the virtues of our coast. Leave all to me. At least you know that I am to be trusted."

Thus I finally took Le Bossu at his word, and in the strange and busy life of the camp Madame Therese and the rue Bourbon began to fade into the background of my thoughts. That I was to return to them at some future time sufficed me, and secure in the knowledge, I made the most of the new and glorious friendship of Toinette. In these days we were together always, through the short busy hours of the morning, the longer, more leisurely ones of the afternoon, the drowsy quiet period between supper and bedtime when Papa Ton dozed before the fire, and Le Bossu, his eyes upon the embers, wove some fancy of the marsh.

It was upon one of these latter occasions, some two months after my arrival at Bayou Portage, that the little man in place of his customary talk abruptly took up the matter of my future.

"Bien," said he. "You are what you should be, little Jean, except, perhaps, for the brown. I would have you a little darker so that your white city-folk might see where the good clean sunshine had bitten deep below your skin. But you will do. And now for the day of your return."

He paused to look at me inquiringly, while Papa Ton, aroused by the question, gave a sleepy grunt of concern.

"Dieu, Bossu, I had forgotten all about the matter," he growled. "I had begun to feel that he would be with us always. It will not be the same when he has gone."

Toinette said nothing, but from her place upon the floor beside me she felt about until she had found my hand.

As for myself, I knew not what to reply, my mind being thrown into chaos by the gravity of this problem. Had Le Bossu told me that he and Papa Ton had decided that I must remain with them, that I must give up all thoughts of Madame Therese, the matter would have been different. Then I should most certainly have demanded to be sent back immediately, and, failing in this, should have laid my plans for a second escape.

Now, however, with the way to the past lying open before me, I found a strange reluctance in setting my face toward it. Already I had become very fond of the hut, the camp, the wide flat sweep of the surrounding marsh. Through them I had found a joy of life that I knew could never be mine in the rue Bourbon.

I thought of Madame Therese's great echoing rooms, of the heat, the dust, and the close stifling odors of the city. No more would I wake tingling dawn to see the morning miste unroll before me, the clean blue arch of the morning sky. No more would I brace myself against the fresh salt wind of the dusk, as I watched the last red stains of the sunset fade out beyond the rim of the marsh. I must forget the wild tang of game, the clean bite of the driftwood smoke, the swift, dreamless hours of sleep between the blankets.

These things I considered quickly and with a vague regret, but I sensed the utter, greater loss that was before me. Perhaps upon returning to the city I might still find many things that would recompense me for the life that I had left at Bayou Portage, but who was there or what was there that would fill the void left by the memory of Toinette?

pair? You are good companions, you two, and I am glad. I have even kept you beyond your time, that the friendship might grow. But one can not be selfish forever. There is your Madame Therese to think of. She has been very good to you, and since your uncle has denied you, it is she who should have the first claim. Now we have all come to love you, little Jean, and it would be a wrench to have you leave us, yet you must consider your Madame."

"Yes," I agreed. "That is true. I suppose that I do belong to Madame Therese now, and I love her dearly. But I would like to stay a while. It will be hard to go back after the marsh."

"Listen, Bossu, you and Papa Ton," said Toinette. "Perhaps you are right about the claim of this Madame Therese, but little Jean must not go until after the fishing is over. I, myself, have done something for him, and it is my due. I have worked hard for you both through the trapping and, as you know, the journey below is my one holiday. It would be cruel now to ask that I make it alone."

"Yes," I agreed hastily. "Toinette is right. We have talked all along about the time that we will have upon the bay, and you can not disappoint her. I know that it is my duty to return, and I also can not expect to have you keep me always. When the fishing is over you will find me quite content to go."

Papa Ton accepted this plan with the vague nod of one whose wits have become hopelessly entangled. Le Bossu, conscientious as always, tempered his approval with a final condition.

"Very well," said he. "It is what I would wish myself and, whenever it is possible, our little Toinette must be obeyed. But first Madame Therese must know of your plan, and must give it her sanction. When she hears that you are well and contented, I am sure that she will be willing to have you remain. At all events we must place the matter in her hands. You can write?"

"Of course," said I, surprised at this question.

"And you have Madame's address?"

"In my pocket upon a slip of paper. It is the last thing that she gave me."

"Then we will begin at once," said Le Bossu. "A moment until I have collected the implements."

Bernard dropped the lid of the chest against the window-sill and knelt down to examine its contents. The papers he sought were not there: only a variety of things carefully folded and packed away. With deft fingers he unfolded and replaced each object in its silken or linen wrapper. There was a richly embroidered sword scabbard, a child's cap, jacket and dress of needlepoint, a velvet waistcoat cut to the fashion of Louis Quatorze days, a pair of brocade slippers. Finally he came to the last and, unfolding the linen square in which it was placed, the young man's face paled and flushed and paled again.

It was a boy's suit of white satin, beautifully tailored and stitched, with lace ruffles hanging from neck and sleeves, and silver and nacre buttons.

Bernard knelt there looking at it. It had been his First Communion suit, and well he remembered the fuss and stir there had been about it. For the five adoring sisters who brought up the little orphan had decided it should be made in the chateau by the village tailor, so that they could assist with advice, even with a little stitching of their own. But this proposition, overheard by the two elder brothers, gay gallants at home for a few days from the court of Louis the Sixteenth, had been decisively ruled out. On such an occasion, and since there would be a family gathering and a certain amount of ceremony, Bernard must look his best. Therefore, no home-made dainties. Let his measurements be accurately given, and they would see to it that Paris should provide the best and latest mode in boy fashion and material.

In private, the sisters had agitatedly debated this proposal. Not that they were averse to seeing their darling decked out in attire that would set off his handsome looks, but knowing the ways of young men they were aware that the tailor who would supply this finery had little chance of being paid for a considerable period and, to their simple minds, decoration for debt seemed incompatible with the sacred event. Nor would it be possible to wound their brothers' pride by offering to pay for the clothes themselves. It was Alys who suddenly had the inspiration that was enthusiastically received by her sisters. To repay the tailor who doubtless would have so long to wait for his money, why not settle, in a manner of speaking, a spiritual pension upon him, say a Pater and Ave each, to be continued through the rest of his life. This was agreed to, and that tailor, had he known it, made the best bargain of his life, the day he agreed to put scissors and needle to Bernard's First Communion suit.

But, surely, there was something else. Yes, it was there in the corner. He lifted out a small box and, opened it, and it lay before him: the silver rose. Somewhat tarnished perhaps, but beautiful still, with the little diamond dewdrops glittering at its heart. The making of that, too, he well remembered. Debarred from stitching at his suit, his sisters had nevertheless decided that Bernard should wear some specimen of their handiwork on the great day. It had been from time immemorial a custom, bound up with romance of family tradition, that on all ceremonial occasions, a christening, betrothal, wedding, the chief participant should wear at shoulder or breast a silver rose. Such a bloom was even laid beneath pale hands on the still breast of death. Bernard's rose, then, the sisters would make, to each sister a petal and each petal of the finest silver thread and intricate work. When it was finished, a lovely thing of needlepoint and knotted stitch and picot web and padded leaf, Bernard carried it off to show his friend the village Priest, who taught him. The simple old man had wondered and admired it; then he took Bernard into the church and blessed the rose and placed it on the Lady Altar. "To add fragrance," he said quaintly. "Bernard," he added, as he gave it back to the boy. "Will you promise me something? Whenever you wear this rose will you say: 'Rosa Mystica, era pro me?'"

Bernard had promised, but he only wore it once, and that was on his First Communion day. Then suit and rose had been packed away, and when a few months later he tried to wear it again the sleeves had receded an inch or so from his wrists, and the waistcoat would not meet across his chest.

That was twelve years ago. Since then the two dear brothers had died, and of the sisters three were married and two were nuns. And the little boy? Oh, the little boy—Bernard stood up and looked out through the window where he could see the river flowing grey and green beneath the bridge. The little boy grew up and went to Paris, and because he had a great name and great possessions he soon found a place at court. And in Paris he learnt much and unlearned more. The pity was that what he unlearned were sweet things such as a boy would be taught by pure-minded women and a saintly priest. And the things he had learnt were ugly, such as the priest and women would call sin. Only at first, it was so easy to drift into evil; for a time he had even liked it. But now he hated it, only it meant making such an effort to break away from it. But why think of it at all?

He stooped to lower the lid of the chest, but when he went to replace the rose he hesitated. That was an idea; he would have it copied and set one night at the palace. It would be an innovation, perhaps a fashion, serve at least for comment and discussion, something that would create a new topic in those long evenings when the air outside was heavy with muttering and inside with whispers of emigres and insurrections.

On his return to Paris Bernard took the rose to a convent where he sought his lares. Here the Reverend Mother was an old friend of his, who, like all truly wise women, had a special tenderness for a handsome face. The more so for his, since there he had seen old eyes detected signs that should not have marred that young beauty and which would need the perseverance and charity of many prayers to efface. Besides, he was such a delightful person with charming, deferential manner, and he pestered by his purchases on the spot, which was more than some of her most pious clients did. Moreover, he frequently added some little offering for the community, a box of choice comfits or a bouquet of costly flowers. These she invariably arranged herself for the chapel altar, while she whispered cajolingly: "Because of your dear mother, my dear Bernard, in answer to his inquiry, you said, 'Why certainly the rose for me,' copied, only since they were just finishing a large consignment of lace for England, he might have to wait a fortnight or three weeks, but surely not longer."

It was that same night at the court that Bernard first met Madame de Montferan and her young niece Marie. With him it was a notable case of love at the first glance. He saw Marie daily, for her aunt had come up from Montferan to attach herself to the service of the Queen, deserted by so many who had slipped away silently from the menace of the Revolution.

And day by day, as Bernard's love for the girl grew, as he realized the ability of her character, her purity and gentle valor, as in an innocent wordless way she made him understand that she valued and returned his love, he asked himself, in anguish of mind, what explanation he could devise to blot out from his life the memory of those years that the locusts had eaten.

One night there was an entertainment at the Palace, a simple affair, for the times were straitened, arranged to divert the little royal brother and sister, born to such heritage of peril and suffering. Nevertheless, it was welcome enough to their elders, those who, faithful to the royal family, still frequented the court, as a passing distraction from the contemplation of the ever-increasing menace to person and property. Bernard had deemed it a fitting occasion to wear the silver rose, which a few days previously had been sent to him, perfectly copied, even to the glittering diamond at its heart. As he anticipated, it proved a charming topic for admiration, rallery or comment. Even the Queen had noticed it. "By reason of what whim do you wear this, Monsieur?" she asked lightly, touching the petals. And Bernard, somewhat to his own surprise, had answered: "Less by reason of a whim than of a memory, your Majesty." "It must be a very lovely one," she had commented, as she passed on.

Since their roads lay the same way Bernard had arranged when the evening was over to take his friends home in his coach. They had, however, gone but a short distance when the horses were pulled up to avoid driving into a little band of people hastening in the opposite direction. One, an elderly man, hesitated, and then ran back to the horses' heads, and presently one of Bernard's footmen came to the window.

"This man says, your Honor, that it is not safe to go farther by these streets; there is a riot afoot and the people are very excited." The man jerked his head. "It is true," he said. "There is a mob gathering for attack in that quarter. You would be wise to take your ladies home by another way." "Whose house do they intend attacking now?" asked Bernard. "It is a

convent," said the man, "the one by the bridge where they make the Queen's lace," and he ran off.

Bernard got out of the coach to speak to his servants, and presently the anxious women joined him. He drew them into the shadow of the wall and, taking his old friend's hand, he looked at her with a kind of wistful apology. "I must leave you here," he said. "You will be safe with my servants; they have promised and I can trust them. But those poor ones in the convent, they may have no one and perhaps one could help. The thought had suddenly come to his mind that this night might be for him the first vigil of fairer days. He put his arm round Marie and drew her silently to him, but she needed no speech to understand the meaning like many of which she was conscious. The unspoken tenderness, Bernard reached but to the level he came silver rose, and she kissed it with God knows how much passion of sorrow and fear. For something told her that here lay for her the swift end of all things. And the next moment he was gone.

Bernard ran by a network of quiet streets till he came to a small square in front of which the gardens of the house of which the convent was opened. Here he was confronted by a high wall and a locked postern gate. He took off his hat, threw one end round a spike at the top of the wall, knotted the ends together, and so, using the loop as a foothold, slung and hoisted himself to the top of the wall, and in like manner down on the other side. Cautiously he made his way in the dark up the garden, until he came to some steps leading to a balcony on which long windows opened. Here all was still and shuttered, but as he stood hesitating, wondering how to make himself heard, the window opened and a nun, hooded and cloaked, stood on the threshold.

Quickly, before she could find voice for her emotion, Bernard explained his presence and desire to help. Still voiceless, and apparently still bewildered, she motioned him to enter, and led the way into the great vestibule.

Here the uproar that penetrated from the street was deafening. Furious yells, the clatter of missiles thrown over the wall, hammering at the outer gates, and above all the unceasing and absurd clanging at the convent bell, as though the nuns would be likely to open at the invitation of that riotous crew. And in the middle of it all, on the black and white tiled floor, knelt the Reverend Mother, calmly packing convent treasures in a bag.

She started up when she saw Bernard. "Monsieur, how did you get in? And what are you doing here?" she said. "What is it all about?" he asked. She shrugged her shoulders. "They vow we are harboring proscribed. We have done so, they left six weeks ago or more."

"Have you sent for the militia?" he asked. "A messenger has been gone some time. We fear he is intercepted by the mob." "Is it safe for you to remain?" "No," she said. "We must leave. Last week the Bishop heard a rumor that this might come about and he arranged for us to go to a place quite near. We shall be safe there, to wait till this has blown over or till we can get into the country. Most of the community have gone on already." But I met someone just now," said Bernard. "That was Sister Bonaventures. She and one or two others are delayed, helping Sister Pridmore. She is most bewildered and we have had such difficulty persuading her to get up. She protests she has lived here all her life and will die here, and says she has always wanted to be a martyr. And she is making such trouble over putting on walking shoes. She says they hurt her feet."

"Well," said Bernard, "you must leave." "Oh, as for me, I am staying," said the Reverend Mother simply. "She is why?" he queried aghast. "There is the Blessed Sacrament. Early in the evening the chaplain was sent to a dying person. And something must have happened for he has not returned. And I do not even know where he has hidden the tabernacle key. So I must stay." "But what could you do?" asked Bernard. "I could at least stay with Sister Pridmore and she would be provided for now that I am here," he reassured her. "Now you must go."

She hesitated, then took his hand and looked at him with brimming eyes. "My son, God has chosen you to defend His house. You must not forget to thank Him. And there is something" (she fumbled in a capacious pocket) "there is a devotion, perhaps you have heard of it; there was a holy nun at Paray (my sister who is there sent to me); they say the King's sister always wears one. She produced a slip of linen on which was crudely painted a flaming heart crowned with thorns and surmounted by a cross. 'See, I will fasten it there, behind your flower.' As Bernard watched her fixing it, he saw a tear drop on to a silver petal; it shimmered and quivered, and then rolled lightly into the heart of the rose. A moment later he was alone. There was now no time to be lost. Already scouts from the mob had climbed the wall and were clattering and shouting in the courtyard. There was a mighty press that would have served admirably to defend the door, but it needed the strength of three to move it and he had to content himself with a chest dragged across. On the wall hung

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