

Presented to the Queen



Claude M. Girardeau in the Catholic World

On the banks of the bayou stood the cabin of mud-chinked logs, with a mud chimney at one end and a paneled window on each side of its open door. From the casements wooden shutters hung lopsided on rusty hinges; it was only a question of time and tempestuous winds when they would fall upon the gourd-vines beneath.

Naked, the cabin would have been a miserable sight, but in the land of the sun Nature is a prodigal mother, covering even her step-children with gay garments of green moss and aspiring creepers that offer to the joyous winds their silken trumpets of rainbow hue. Majestic oaks with a swaying drapery of mystery gray towered behind the tiny dwelling, contrasting their permanence with its pitiful decay. Above it hung, in magnificent condensation, the vanished leaves and alabaster blossoms of the magnolia, glorious empress of the summer woods, fit to adorn a regal park or the mirador of a poet's villa.

In a japonica but a few feet from the door a mocking-bird, attracted by the profusion of rosy flowers, perched and sang rapturously, filling the air with his melodious clamor.

A young girl just within the cabin got up from her chair, exclaiming in a poignant voice:

"Oh, that bird!"

"No, Marie," came pleadingly from the bed in the corner, "do not drive him away. I will not hear him sing to-morrow."

"Mother!" cried the girl sharply, then sank upon her knees at the bedside and clasped in her brown hand the pale one of the dying woman. In the other, toilworn and clammy, the beads slipped like a measure of heart-beats. Three children on the doorstep immediately turned inquisitive little heads. The eldest, a boy of ten, crept to the foot of the couch.

"Mutterchen!" he murmured, and the tears rushed to his eyes.

The dying woman looked from one to the other:

"My poor little ones! You will be good to them, Mariechen?"

"Oh mother—thou knowest!"

"Do not leave us! Do not leave us!" mourned Rudolf at her feet. He squeezed himself between the wall and the bed and lay down beside her, snuggling his face against her arm, wetting her sleeve with his tears. The other small creatures came into the room also. The youngest, a baby of three, puckered her cherry lips and set up a pitiful whimper.

"Nein, nein, Lottchen! Cry not," said Marie softly, picking her up. Her blonde moon-face was stained with blackberry juice, betraying her disobedience, and her sturdy white legs, sadly scratched, showed through the rents in her coarse homespun frock. "Do not whip me," she pleaded in baby German, helplessly, widening her lovely eyes of forget-me-not blue. "Nein, liebchen," whispered Marie, kissing her apricot cheek, "sit there, sweet," and put her on the bed beside the mother, who held her tenderly, kissing her soft neck and dimpled shoulders. The other girl, Odile, slipped under Marie's arm with jealous eyes, and from the shadow of the fireplace a tall, handsome lad of fifteen stole to her side. They knelt with heads huddled together, and the mother's soft black eyes lingered from one to the other. She stretched out her hand; it wandered from Lottchen's golden curls to Marie's black ones, from Odile's flaxen plaits to Hermann's short brown bristles.

"My children, my children!" she said faintly; then more clearly: "You will be always good children? You will mind the father? You will keep the house clean, my Marie? Odile you will knit the stockings, and Lottchen will pick up the chips for Marie, and Hermann will help the father in the field, for the sun is hot and the ploughing is hard. My little Rudolf will milk the Kuechen and see that the ducks and chickens are fed, and—" her voice ebbed away.

"Yes, yes," they sobbed.

She slipped the beads between her delicate fingers and began to whisper the rosary, the children responding. The doorway darkened as the husband and father entered—a patient creature with stooping shoulders and myopic eyes. He went to the foot of the bed and leaned heavily upon it.

"Oh, my Eliska," he murmured, "thou art very ill to-day, then?"

"Yes, Rudolf—I think it is time to send for the priest. Things look strange to me—even my children! And your voice sounds far away."

"Yes, it is time," he answered, and went out with dragging feet. Herman kissed his mother again and again, and stole away. The old plough-mule was at the door with a miserable blanket strapped over a raveled blanket.

"You must go to the Fathers at Palmetto," said Rudolf, "and beg

one of them to come quick. Tell them your mother is dying. I have never seen her look like this. Ask for Father Vogel."

Hermann rode away, holding the sobs in his aching throat. He usually like the journey to Palmetto, under the interlaced boughs of the tall trees that made a green roof for the road, and he always kept a lookout for a fern or a flower for his mother. But now he was too occupied with the idea of her going away from them to think of anything else. She had never been one of those loud-voiced, bustling, scolding woman like some he had seen and heard. She was always smiling and merry of speech, and even if she had to punish, it was with a light hand, and she would cry as much as the naughty child. So it was seldom that she had to ply either hand or switch. For the rest she was a slender little figure with abundant hair like the silk of young corn, eyes like blots of ink, and a clear singing voice. People always observed her curiously in return for the timid, deer-like regard of her soft eyes, as if there was something uncommon about her. There was; but not as they thought.

The father of the family, Rudolf Raubauer, had drifted to the South after emigration to the North, where he had been on the verge of starvation. His father and grandfather had been geokeepers in a nobleman's preserves near Kalisz, and a Rudolf married Eliska Timanoff, the daughter of one of the Count's Polish serving-women. People touched their foreheads significantly whenever they saw the girl, for her ethereal beauty was of a type decidedly more aristocratic than is to be expected among women of her class. Certain things were whispered behind her back, and fingers were pointed at various portraits in the splendid gallery of the castle in confirmation. But Eliska's mother was herself beautiful and married respectably, and the girl grew up in the lodge-keeper's cottage, became a wife when she was but fifteen, and when her eldest children were eight and six years old emigrated to America. The Raubauers knew nothing of life outside the forests of the Polish frontier, and glad the wife was when they left the crowded squalid quarter of the cold northern city for the bright, open clearing banks of the bayou.

The Southern woods were fairy-land to her, with the spiky palmettos, the lustrous magnolias, the swollen cypresses and spreading live-oaks. How beautiful to her was the sluggish bayou reflecting in its deep bosom the golden constellations of the summer skies, and cradling in its shallows the splendid water-lily above whose ivory shallops fluttered the blue sails of the Flower of France!

The heron, the flamingo, the snowy crane, mallards with peacock necks, and hundreds of wild fowl unknown to her built nests—as she did—in the swamp and reared their young in peace. When the full moon hung its glorious glassy orb in the profound skies the mocking-birds sang all night long, perched in ecstasy upon the dazzling pyramids of the daggered yucca. Yet, at times when Eliska awoke in the midsummer brilliance at dead of night, her heart would stand still at the sound of the rapturous trilling of the Southern nightingale. Again she saw the vast expanse of snow beneath the northern light, the black and solemn firs against the mountain side, and heard the fairy sound of distant sleigh-bells, or the long cry of the wolf from the dismal wood.

Very often the heating, incessant sunlight sickened and blinded her. When Lottchen was born she had a hard fight for life, and after that her step became less and less elastic; there was an oppression at her heart. At times she could breathe with difficulty. Often Marie would find her half-sleeping, half-fainting in her chair, the darning-needle in her fingers, or the pan of peas or potatoes in her lap. She had to give up digging in the garden, but the flowers grew bravely as if to reward her past attentions. A thick bush of white roses made a great bouquet on one side the doorstep, a red rose on the other. They were the Polish colors, so Eliska—after plaiting her abundant hair—would stick a flower from each bush over her ear, and pin others on the bosom of her cotton gown.

Remembering this, Marie gathered a quantity of them and scattered them over the coarse but clean coverings of the death-bed. Her mother held out eager hands for them, inhaling gratefully their pure delicious fragrance. The little shrine, just where her eyes could rest most easily, was bright with the flowers, hiding the cheap cups and taper-stands before the crucifix that Hermann had deftly carved for her.

"Marie," said the dying woman presently—"look in the old trunk—in the bottom of it—and bring me—" her eyes and languid hand completed the sentence. She

was almost too tired to look at the garments Marie brought her. The young girl looked at them covetously. She was thinking of Arsene de l'He Dormante and her promise to marry him. The mother read her eyes and murmured:

"Mariechen—would you wear—as a bride—things that were woven and made—for death-clothes? If so—I will give them to you."

"No, no!" cried Marie, shrinking away. "But they are beautiful, mother."

"Not beautiful enough," whispered the mother, "Do I not remember how the countess dressed to go to court? Oh, if I could dress like that! All silk—with a veil like mist—white feathers in my hair—satin on my feet—pearls like moons and diamonds like suns!"

"Mother!" cried Marie in alarm. "I am not dreaming, my child. Am I not to be presented to a Queen?—the Queen of Heaven! Oh, Marie, how glorious it will be!" Then, as a sudden thought occurred: "But what shall I say? What shall I say?"

"Say—mother?"

"Why, yes," continued Eliska, sitting up in bed, her face bright with anxiety. "One must not be dumb like a fish—or a peasant—when a Queen speaks. Oh, if I could only remember what the countess said when she went to court! Can you not think, Marie?"

"How can I, mother?"

"Perhaps your father will remember." She fell back on her pillows, while Marie whispered to Rudolf, who sat on the door-steps, holding his head miserably in his hands.

"Poor thing her mind wanders," he said. Then went in and sat beside the sleeping woman until the priest came in.

Father Vogel, besides his duties as a priest, taught a class of most unruly boys in the college in the town, of which establishment he was also housekeeper; so a horse-back ride in the heat of the day was not soothing either to mind or body. The animal he bestrode was never intended by nature to wear a saddle, and Father Vogel groaned despite himself when he dismounted at the cabin-door, being a merciful man and regretting the necessity for the application of the hickory to urge his unwilling beast from a stiff and solemn walk into a perpendicular, tongue-biting trot or a gallop that loosed every joint in its socket. A sympathetic traveler could have easily forgiven him for seeing nothing but the poverty of the place; the rotting casements and threshold, the bare floor, the children in faded clothes, greasy from dinner, uncared for in the stress of grief.

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The heat made him perspire profusely, to his great discomfort and mental disquiet. He mopped his dripping head and hands, and sat for a few moments on the rude bench in the shade of the magnolia while Marie offered him a glass of lukewarm bayou water, which he poured over his wrists, an unpremeditated libation to the earth. When he went into the cabin he was surprised by the white death-bed which love had spread with roses.

Eliska's simple confession was soon made. No gravid, life-weight was here to be disposed of. A little, pitiful, month-old list of home-longings, of pardonable scoldings, of tiny vexations, of mild envyings of the fortunate earth, of a regretted shrinking from her voluble neighbors, the l'He Dormantes; a mother's natural jealousy of her daughter's betrothed. Then the priest beckoned and the family knelt in a decorous row, the father at the head, his rosary in his hard hands.

After receiving the last Sacraments the dying woman turned her white face to the wall; the priest bent an ear to her breathing—she was still alive. How bright and hot the sunlight was! How intense the odor of the flowers! How shrill the filing of cicadas! Sounds were borne from a great distance in the quivering air—the screech of a saw-mill a mile away, the rhythmic plash of the oars in the bayou, the intermittent tap-tapping of a hammer in some distant clearing.

As Father Vogel was leaving the room, thinking that the sick woman might sleep for hours and perchance wake to renewed life, she turned her face and called imperatively:

"Father, father!" and he hastened to her. She was sitting up, her eyes brilliant. "Oh, father—I almost forgot. What shall I say when I meet the Queen of Heaven? What do the ladies say when they are presented at court?"

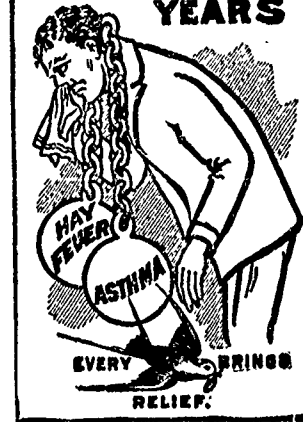
The priest was astonished; he knew nothing of Eliska's history, but her question made him look at her attentively. He noticed the unusual refinement of her features, the careful arrangement of her beautiful hair, the delicacy of her transparent hands, the sweetness of her voice.

"See, father," she continued, "I have kept the best I had to wear. I embroidered these. I made the lace. Once I made some like them for the wife of a grand duke. She wore them when she went to court. But I cannot remember what she said when she was presented to the queen. What will the Queen of Heaven think of me if I stand tongue-tied and stupid before her? What shall I say?"

The poor priest was himself at a loss. At first, like Rudolf, he thought her delirious. Then, remembering the ineradicable vanity of the sex, he considered this exhibition of it on the grave's edge something extremely reprehensible, and—in connection with Eliska's appearance—denoting unusual frivolity. He stood silent and accusing, groping for words that would not wound too much, yet determined that he dying should not expect to enter Paradise or Purgatory as a princess. He him-

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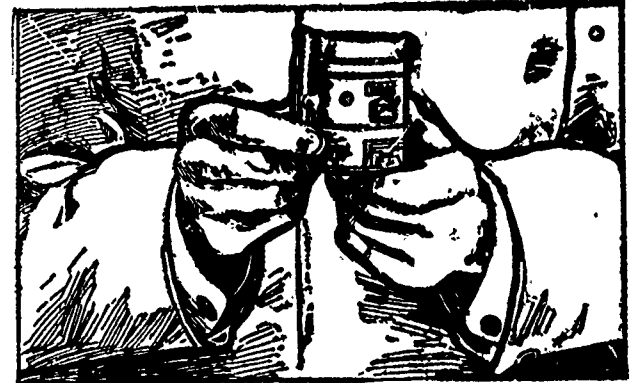
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