

Of whom was she ever heard to say an unkind word?

"I could have wished that all this had not happened. But your meeting was fortuitous and—who knows?—perhaps it was; providential. As we grow in years we feel that the feuds of our younger days ought to die out. Our children should not inherit our animosities. They might even repair them sometimes. I will not say that you must not see M. Paladine. I would not count his company, but neither would I shun it. You say he seems fond of you. I don't wonder at that. He was formerly an intimate friend of your father and your poor mother—alas! if she lived, I think would speak to you as I do. Then there is another thing. M. Paladine has a daughter."

My mother looked at me when she said this, and she must have noticed my agitation.

"Ory is an angel, Carey. I have not seen her these several years, but I have watched over her, nevertheless. How could I do otherwise? She is my god-child."

"Your god-child?" I exclaimed, instinctively feeling the immense importance of this fact to me.

"My god-child. Yes. And I don't know how it is, but Ory has been in my mind often and often within the past few weeks. The thought even struck me that if you, Carey, could make her acquaintance, the bringing together of you two might, perhaps, heal much of the old mischief which has so long divided our families. How I would like to hold that dear girl on my heart and speak to her of her mother once more. Like you, Carey, she never knew her mother."

The speaker was very much affected. She paused and reflected for a long time, then suddenly resumed:

"Yes, my son. I do believe there is a providence in this. I go further than I did just now. You have my full permission to visit at The Quarries, and if you there meet Ory, as I hope you may, cultivate her acquaintance. Nothing but good can come of it."

What more could I demand? It was far beyond what I had expected. Instead of the condemnation, or, at least, the disapproval which I had anticipated, I was encouraged, may I bidden to proceed on my course. I was not tempted to press my mother with further questions concerning the Paladines. Her manner all along had not invited them, and I had a vague fear that such inquisitiveness might spoil the effect of the point which I had gained. Besides, mysteries of this kind are best allowed to evolve gradually, according as events present themselves, one after one.

That same evening I took the direction of The Quarries, notwithstanding the warning which I had received from Ory.

XI.

IN THE DEEP WOOD.

Before knowing it I found myself at the negro quarters. This consisted of a square, bounded on the four sides by white cabins. In the centre was an open space, set with trees and affording a yard for the families, as well as a play-ground for the children. Here on holidays, or on Sabbath afternoons, the blacks being gathered in their showiest attire, indulged in their various noisy games. There, too, their feet clattered in the dance to the sound of the merriest music. Beyond the breakdown, in which they are immovable, I have known few negroes who excel in graceful dancing, but in every plantation there are girls who have voices of splendid ring and rhythm, and there is at least one fiddler, self-taught, who is almost a perfect master of his instrument. With such resources, it is no wonder that balls are among the chief of plantation amusements.

In the middle of the small side of the parallelogram was the house of the oldest couple, the parents and grandparents of nearly all the slaves. They there have all their children under their eye, although the children themselves pay small heed to the tutelage. Among negroes there is no patriarchy. Old age is tolerated, but not surrounded with the attentions of filial respect.

Behind each cabin was a small kitchen garden; in front and facing the common yard, a clean-swept, little plot, shaded in most cases by persimmon and paw-paw trees.

The Paladine negroes were a happy set. The proof was the tidiness of their habitations and the good order that reigned among them. From my position, where I could see all without being myself observed, I noticed the old folks smoking together in groups; the young women going in and out on household work; the children playing together at the cabin doors. There was the usual hum that floats around homes at evening, but no wild noises, no shrieks, no laughter. My esteem for M. Paladine increased a hundred fold at this view of his peaceful slaves.

I saw few young men in the little village. The big-hipped fellows waddled about, seemingly oblivious of their sweethearts. I made no account of this, for it was a work-day, and probably the boys were not yet in from work.

Skirting the cabins from a distance, I advanced deeper into the wood. Twilight was fading fast, and I had not wandered far when I was wrapped in profound darkness. There was one greyish glimmer in a distant clearing, but around me the trees disappeared one by one, being replaced by massive columns of gloom. I stopped to enjoy the solitude. It suits one's

mood sometimes to yield entirely to physical influences; to feel hemmed in and gently overborne by the great forces of nature. At such moments the brown sky lowers on you; the warm, tufted grass buoys you up; the trees slant over you; the air punts and thickens; the rippling of the neighboring river sounds like the thud of small waves creeping up to your feet, and you, gradually narrowing within yourself, experience at every point of your being the subtle thrills of a delicious something for which I know no name but rejuvenescence. Alas! these sensations are only fleeting. A moment after and the sky soars up; the trees straighten their fronts; the wind sings in the leaves; the water gurgles back into its channel and you stand once more in the isolation of your natural littleness, painfully conscious of the narrow space you occupy in the universe.

Returning to myself again, I was considering where I should go next, when my ear was struck by a singular sound. I could not be mistaken. It was the sad, strange music of the tam-tam. Now low, then swelling on the night wind, it came to me like a dread boding of ill. I listened with acute attention. The sound was stationary and proceeded from the interior of the woods to my right. I immediately went forward in that direction, impelled by curiosity and a singular force of misgiving. As I approached I distinguished the sounds of voices in the intervals of the drum-beats. I knew them at once to be negro voices. They were attempts at whispers, but the negro, especially the male, owing to the thickness of his lips, cannot whisper, and his lowest tones are necessarily articulated with a certain rough distinctness.

"Why didn't they all come?" said one voice.

"It will be too late," said a second.

And the tam-tam sounded another call.

"Put it off," exclaimed a voice.

"No. It must be to-night," answered another.

The tam-tam sounded again.

Approaching nearer and nearer, I found myself on the edge of a deep natural hollow. From its depth the sounds came to me hoarser and clearer, reverberated by the sloping sides.

I threw myself behind a tree and looked down.

XII.

A VOUDOU CONCLAVE.

The hollow was alive with dark forms. One black object, set beside another only a shadow black than itself, presents this singular effect, that it becomes almost luminous by the juxtaposition. Thus the dark figures in the hollow, being darker than their surroundings, showed almost light and could be easily distinguished as they moved. There were some twenty negroes assembled before me.

"The last round," said a voice in a tone of authority.

The tam-tam rattled. This time, the clang of that unearthly instrument being so near me, I gave a start, and my whole body trembled. I heard the rustling of the grass at different points and several dark figures glided rapidly into the hollow.

At first there was a confusion of voices, apparently discussing something. I understood nothing, but I observed that one voice predominated. Doubtless it was that of the master. Then, at a signal, torches were lighted, which being set in sockets prepared for them, cast a ghastly glare upon the scene. The negroes fell back to the sides of the hollow, but not fast enough to escape my observation. Their faces were streaked with red bars. They wore black shirts, low in the neck and short-sleeved; black trousers, too, fitting tight at the ankle. They were barefooted and bareheaded. In the extreme background, under a jutting rock, which served as a canopy, stood a splendid fellow, disguised like the rest, but holding in his right hand a rod, around which a flexible object was loosely entwined. This object at once brought to mind the caduceus of Hermes in the mythological prints. Looking around the crouching figures of his comrades, the master—for I judged this individual to be such—raised his brows three times, making all the ugly lines on his face move together and flash in the torch-light. Then in a deep chest voice he muttered some form of prayer or incantation, of which I could make nothing, but which seemed to impress the audience deeply, for at intervals they all joined in a low, rumbling chorus which to me sounded like a savage growl.

When this was concluded two fellows ran out, each with an armful of split wood, and of these they made a heap in the centre of the open area. After their disappearance, the master, stepping forward, poured the contents of three different bottles on the pile. He then returned to his place and waved his wand. I heard the hiss of a rocket, though I saw nothing. The next moment a small ball of fire, after describing a parabolic curve, fell upon the heap of wood and ignited it. The flames were not violent, but rather burned low and smouldering. Then the whole band of negroes, forming into a ring, began walking around the pyre with the lock-step. This part of the ceremony interested me very much. When the first round was completed, somebody threw a paper into the flames, which rose fitfully in yellow shaves, emitting an odor of sulphur. At the second round a few grains of powder must have been cast, as I recognized the smell, and a few pieces of wood

were scattered about, with a whirr. At the third round, a libation of some or other aromatic oil was made, for the air was filled with perfume, while little blue flames played over the surface of the fire. As these things were being done, I caught the following words, muttered by several voices:

"And I saw a beast rising from the sea."
"having ten horns and seven heads."
"and on each of his horns ten crowns."
"and on his heads the name of blasphemy."

"And the beast that I saw was like a pard."
"and his feet like those of a bear."
"and his mouth was as the mouth of a lion."
"and the dragon showed him his might."
"and his throne."
"and his great power."

Here was a puzzle. What did these fellows know about the Apocalypse? If the words had been spoken by the chief, I should have wondered less, but repeated as they were by several of the band, a meaning must be attached to them, and these negroes must have been taught that meaning, along with the correct rendering of the passage.

I was not relieved from my perplexity by what followed.

The procession being stopped, the men stood in a circle around the fire. Then the master raised his wand above his head seven times, and seven times the whole party bowed profoundly. After this the master held his wand horizontally over the dying flames. He had scarcely done so, when the thing that was wound around it wriggled and squirmed till it unfastened itself, all but the head. Then there were loud exclamations of joy. But above these cries I heard the hisses and the well-known terrible noise of the deadliest of our serpents. It was a rattlesnake. I shuddered. I felt like running away. Truly these were devils, not men. And what would become of me if I were caught spying their orgies? But, notwithstanding my terror, I stopped to see the end.

The master withdrew his wand from above the fire, where he had evidently placed it, not to scorch the serpent but to win him into activity, and after caressing the reptile with his hand, gently replaced him in his original spiral condition. After this the wand passed slowly from hand to hand, each negro taking it reverently and without the slightest trace of fear, and gazing attentively into the eyes of the snake. When this horrible portion of the dumb-show was over, the master, displaying his wand again, said these words:

"All men, little and great, rich and poor, free and slave—remember the words, Voudou brothers—"

"FREE AND SLAVE!"

All assented with a loud exclamation.

"Free and slave must have a mark on their right hand!"

Here every one raised his right arm high above his head, then dropped it violently on his thigh.

"And on their forehead. So that no one can be allowed to buy or sell who has not the mark or the name of the beast or the number of his name." Mind, he cannot buy or sell, that is, he cannot go into any contract. Marriage is a contract. He cannot marry. He, of all others, cannot marry. You understand me?

"We understand you."

"And you will work with me?"

"We will."

"The bite of the dragon on every traitor!"

"Amen!"

A loud crackling noise was heard outside the hollow. All the negroes turned about. The chief looked up in my direction.

It was Nain.

XIII.

THE TERRIBLE FLOGGING.

"Let the sentinels be on the look out," he cried in an angry voice. "Woe to any prowler around this hollow."

I took this as addressed to me, though, of course, I was not seen. To make myself more secure I crouched among the abundant shoots around my tree. Come what might, I was thoroughly resolved on seeing the whole thing out, especially now that I had reason to suspect that my case was brought up before the council ofimps.

An outrunner returned to the hollow with the announcement that nothing was stirring about, and that the sentinels were all at their posts.

Then the chief resumed:

"This is the nineteenth of July, our yearly festival. It recalls the fall of woman through the serpent. Since that event man has feared the serpent. Who would not fear him?"

Here the snake on the wand rattled.

"But we, O Voudous, we have learned to worship him, and our worship, though tempered by fear, is strong and salutary. In fact, it comes to this—we serve him and he serves us. That is only fair. I don't know that he often needs us, but we sometimes need him. We need him now. Do you understand me?"

"We understand you."

"It is well. Now, something else. You know that it is already several years since we have been allowed to meet in this hollow. Indeed, it was reserved for us."

All agreed to this.

"Being in private grounds, our meetings have always remained secret, because never disturbed."

"That is true."

"And we owe this to my old master?"

"We do."

"He has been our friend."

"Yes."

"It is thanks to him if we can meet here again to-night."

"Vive M. Paladine!"

"But we can meet here no more."

"Ah! ah!"

"My old master is forced to forbid us."

"Why? why?"

"Ah! why? That is just the question."

"Forced? By whom?"

"What! Are you blind? Are you deaf? Are you crazy? Have you no eyes to see, no ears to hear, no sense to understand that the great day of vengeance has come at last? Have you forgotten your gu-gu?"

"Oh! our queen! Gai-so! Our beauty!"

"Four years since the crime was committed."

"Four years!"

"And she and we have suffered in silence."

All bowed their heads and groaned.

"But my old master is not to blame. It is his own daughter, my young mistress, who has urged our removal, and he could not refuse her."

These words were received in silence.

"No blame, mark me, to my young mistress either. She acted so not because she hates us, but because she fears for him."

And as he said this, why did the fellow look up toward me? I was horror-struck. The half moon, just breaking from a bank of clouds, lit up his hideous face which beamed with a reflection of demoniacal intelligence and ferocity. He was the chosen personation of some fell act of vengeance. I was the predestined victim. He had all the influences of superstition to steel his mind, sanctify his purpose and direct the keenness of his aim. I had to defend me, only my sense of innocence, a little stock of self-possession, and a stern determination to fight out to the last. And—I had almost forgotten it—had I not Ory's amulet! This was of itself enough to reassure me, and, indeed, I did feel wonderfully reassured.

There was a storm brewing in the sky. Grey clouds drove by in masses, tumbling into all kinds of shapes and revealing a series of strange gleams and flashes. A cold wind from the south swept the tree-tops, making a wild moan as it struck against the side of the air-current that floated on the Mississippi. It was just the night for a catastrophe.

"To-morrow evening," said the chief, "if we meet at all, it will be in the third quarry, under the cavern, facing the river."

He had scarcely said this when a terrible commotion arose in the hollow. A violent gust of wind blew out all the torches. The negroes ran backward and forward. Some rushed up the sides of the hollow, looked about them a moment, then rushed back to confer with their chief. There were loud talking, occasional bursts of laughter, angry words and threats.

If these devils had taken to quarrelling among themselves and devoured each other, I should not have been surprised much, but delighted exceedingly. Thus this drama would have turned to a laughable comedy, after all. But no; the powerful voice of Nain thundered over the din; and his cry of "Silence!" reduced the hollow to the stillness of the grave.

I arose from my covert and walked a few steps away from the tree.

"The tempest is about to rage," said the Voudou chief. "It is the echo of our own wrath. Let the wind blow, the thunderbolt fall, the rain pour in torrents. The trees of the forest will stand, but one must fall. Listen! There is a crash in the sky yonder. It comes, and woe—"

A great clap of thunder drowned his voice; a few large drops fell gently on the leaves.

But louder, and more terrible than the roar of the elements, came a new cry from the hollow. "The snake! The snake!"

The negroes all fell forward in a heap; then as suddenly turned and fled backward, exclaiming:

"The snake! The snake!"

"Yes, he is gone! Broken from the wand. Where is he?" shouted Nain.

"Where is he? Where is he?" echoed a score of voices.

"Listen!" cried Nain.

The rattle of the serpent was distinctly heard in the silence.

"There he is. There he goes."

"Where?"

"Up that side of the hollow."

And the whole of the crew scampered up the side opposite to me.

"This way," cried Nain.

But still they fled in terror, heedless of his call.

"Fools, traitors, cowards," yelled the infuriated chief, "I will run after and capture him alone."

So saying he turned toward my side of the hollow.

I held my breath. It would be madness to remain where I was. I might face the negro, but I could not dare to confront the goaded reptile. Mine was the foremost tree on the edge of the hollow and he would make direct for that to secure a retreat from his pursuer. I turned to fly.

Who can explain man's instantaneous revolutions of purpose in the very teeth of deadly danger? How often are our best acts of heroism the offspring of sudden caprice, unwarranted by any law, human or divine; nay, condemned even by the elementary instincts of self-preservation! Cold, calculating courage is rare. Pride is the origin of spasmodic bravery. I