

## *After the Winter*

TRÉZINIE, the blacksmith's daughter, stepped out upon the gallery just as M'sieur Michel passed by. He did not notice the girl but walked straight on down the village street.

His seven hounds skulked, as usual, about him. At his side hung his powder-horn, and on his shoulder a gunny-bag slackly filled with game that he carried to the store. A broad felt hat shaded his bearded face and in his hand he carelessly swung his old-fashioned rifle. It was doubtless the same with which he had slain so many people, Trézinie shudderingly reflected. For Cami, the cobbler's son—who must have known—had often related to her how this man had killed two Choctaws, as many Texans, a free mulatto and numberless blacks, in that vague locality known as “the hills.”

Older people who knew better took little trouble to correct this ghastly record that a younger generation had scored against him. They themselves had come to half-believe that M'sieur Michel might be capable of anything, living as he had, for so many years, apart from humanity, alone with his hounds in a kennel of a cabin on the hill. The time seemed to most of them fainter than a memory when, a lusty young fellow of twenty-five, he had cultivated his strip of land across the lane from Les Chêniers; when home and toil and wife and child were so many benedictions that he humbly thanked heaven for having given him.

But in the early '60's he went with his friend Duplan and the rest of the “Louisiana Tigers.” He came back with some of them. He came to find—well, death may lurk in a peaceful valley lying in wait to ensnare the toddling feet of little ones. Then, there are women—there are wives with thoughts that roam and grow wanton with roaming; women whose pulses are stirred by strange voices and eyes that woo; women who forget the claims of yesterday, the hopes of to-morrow, in the impetuous clutch of to-day.

But that was no reason, some people thought, why he should have cursed men who found their blessings where they had left them—cursed God, who had abandoned him.

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Persons who met him upon the road had long ago stopped greeting him. What was the use? He never answered them; he spoke to no one; he never so much as looked into men's faces. When he bartered his game and fish at the village store for powder and shot and such scant food as he needed, he did so with few words and less courtesy. Yet feeble as it was, this was the only link that held him to his fellow-beings.

Strange to say, the sight of M'sieur Michel, though more forbidding than ever that delightful spring afternoon, was so suggestive to Trézinie as to be almost an inspiration.

It was Easter eve and the early part of April. The whole earth seemed teeming with new, green, vigorous life everywhere—except the arid spot that immediately surrounded Trézinie. It was no use; she had tried. Nothing would grow among those cinders that filled the yard; in that atmosphere of smoke and flame that was constantly belching from the forge where her father worked at his trade. There were wagon wheels, bolts and bars of iron, plowshares and all manner of unpleasant-looking things littering the bleak, black yard; nothing green anywhere except a few weeds that would force themselves into fence corners. And Trézinie knew that flowers belong to Easter time, just as dyed eggs do. She had plenty of eggs; no one had more or prettier ones; she was not going to grumble about that. But she did feel distressed because she had not a flower to help deck the altar on Easter morning. And every one else seemed to have them in such abundance! There was 'Dame Suzanne among her roses across the way. She must have clipped a hundred since noon. An hour ago Trézinie had seen the carriage from Les Chêniers pass by on its way to church with Mamzelle Euphrasie's pretty head looking like a picture enframed with the Easter lilies that filled the vehicle.

For the twentieth time Trézinie walked out upon the gallery. She saw M'sieur Michel and thought of the pine hill. When she thought of the hill she thought of the flowers that grew there—free as sunshine. The girl gave a joyous spring that changed to a farandole as her feet twinkled across the rough, loose boards of the gallery.

"Hé, Cami!" she cried, clapping her hands together.

Cami rose from the bench where he sat pegging away at the clumsy sole of a shoe, and came lazily to the fence that divided his abode from Trézinie's.

"Well, w'at?" he inquired with heavy amiability. She leaned far over the railing to better communicate with him.

"You'll go with me yonda on the hill to pick flowers fo' Easter, Cami? I'm goin' to take La Fringante along, too, to he'p with the baskets. W'at you say?"

"No!" was the stolid reply. "I'm boun' to finish them shoe', if it is fo' a nigga."

"Not now," she returned impatiently; "to-morrow mo'nin' at sun-up. An' I tell you, Cami, my flowers'll beat all! Look yonda at 'Dame Suzanne pickin' her roses a'ready. An' Mamzelle Euphraisie she's car'ied her lilies an' gone, her. You tell me all that's goin' be fresh to-moro'!"

"Jus' like you say," agreed the boy, turning to resume his work. "But you want to mine out fo' the ole possum up in the wood. Let M'sieu Michel set eyes on you!" and he raised his arms as if aiming with a gun. "Pim, pam, poum! No mo' Trézinie, no mo' Cami, no mo' La Fringante—all stretch'!"

The possible risk which Cami so vividly foreshadowed but added a zest to Trézinie's projected excursion.

## II.

It was hardly sun-up on the following morning when the three children—Trézinie, Cami and the little negress, La Fringante—were filling big, flat Indian baskets from the abundance of brilliant flowers that studded the hill.

In their eagerness they had ascended the slope and penetrated deep into the forest without thought of M'sieur Michel or of his abode. Suddenly, in the dense wood, they came upon his hut—low, forbidding, seeming to scowl rebuke upon them for their intrusion.

La Fringante dropped her basket, and, with a cry, fled. Cami looked as if he wanted to do the same. But Trézinie, after the first tremor, saw that the ogre himself was away. The wooden shutter of the one window was closed. The door, so low that even a small man must have stooped to enter it, was secured with a chain. Absolute silence reigned, except for

the whirr of wings in the air, the fitful notes of a bird in the treetop.

"Can't you see it's nobody there!" cried Trézinie impatiently.

La Fringante, distracted between curiosity and terror, had crept cautiously back again. Then they all peeped through the wide chinks between the logs of which the cabin was built.

M'sieur Michel had evidently begun the construction of his house by felling a huge tree, whose remaining stump stood in the centre of the hut, and served him as a table. This primitive table was worn smooth by twenty-five years of use. Upon it were such humble utensils as the man required. Everything within the hovel, the sleeping bunk, the one seat, were as rude as a savage would have fashioned them.

The stolid Cami could have stayed for hours with his eyes fastened to the aperture, morbidly seeking some dead, mute sign of that awful pastime with which he believed M'sieur Michel was accustomed to beguile his solitude. But Trézinie was wholly possessed by the thought of her Easter offerings. She wanted flowers and flowers, fresh with the earth and crisp with dew.

When the three youngsters scampered down the hill again there was not a purple verbena left about M'sieur Michel's hut; not a May apple blossom, not a stalk of crimson phlox—hardly a violet.

He was something of a savage, feeling that the solitude belonged to him. Of late there had been forming within his soul a sentiment toward man, keener than indifference, bitter as hate. He was coming to dread even that brief intercourse with others into which his traffic forced him.

So when M'sieur Michel returned to his hut, and with his quick, accustomed eye saw that his woods had been despoiled, rage seized him. It was not that he loved the flowers that were gone more than he loved the stars, or the wind that trailed across the hill, but they belonged to and were a part of that life which he had made for himself, and which he wanted to live alone and unmolested.

Did not those flowers help him to keep his record of time that was passing? They had no right to vanish until the hot May days were upon him. How else should he know? Why

had these people, with whom he had nothing in common, intruded upon his privacy and violated it? What would they not rob him of next?

He knew well enough it was Easter; he had heard and seen signs yesterday in the store that told him so. And he guessed that his woods had been rifled to add to the mummery of the day.

M'sieur Michel sat himself moodily down beside his table—centuries old—and brooded. He did not even notice his hounds that were pleading to be fed. As he revolved in his mind the event of the morning—innocent as it was in itself—it grew in importance and assumed a significance not at first apparent. He could not remain passive under pressure of its disturbance. He rose to his feet, every impulse aggressive, urging him to activity. He would go down among those people all gathered together, blacks and whites, and face them for once and all. He did not know what he would say to them, but it would be defiance—something to voice the hate that oppressed him.

The way down the hill, then across a piece of flat, swampy woodland and through the lane to the village was so familiar that it required no attention from him to follow it. His thoughts were left free to revel in the humor that had driven him from his kennel.

As he walked down the village street he saw plainly that the place was deserted save for the appearance of an occasional negress, who seemed occupied with preparing the midday meal. But about the church scores of horses were fastened; and M'sieur Michel could see that the edifice was thronged to the very threshold.

He did not once hesitate, but obeying the force that impelled him to face the people wherever they might be, he was soon standing with the crowd within the entrance of the church. His broad, robust shoulders had forced space for himself, and his leonine head stood higher than any there.

“Take off yo' hat!”

It was an indignant mulatto who addressed him. M'sieur Michel instinctively did as he was bidden. He saw confusedly that there was a mass of humanity close to him, whose contact and atmosphere affected him strangely. He saw his wild-

flowers, too. He saw them plainly, in bunches and festoons, among the Easter lilies and roses and geraniums. He was going to speak out, now; he had the right to and he would, just as soon as that clamor overhead would cease.

“Bonté divine! M’sieur Michel!” whispered ’Dame Suzanne tragically to her neighbor. Trézinie heard. Cami saw. They exchanged an electric glance, and tremblingly bowed their heads low.

M’sieur Michel looked wrathfully down at the puny mulatto who had ordered him to remove his hat. Why had he obeyed? That initial act of compliance had somehow weakened his will, his resolution. But he would regain firmness just as soon as that clamor above gave him chance to speak.

It was the organ filling the small edifice with volumes of sound. It was the voices of men and women mingling in the “Gloria in excelsis Deo!”

The words bore no meaning for him apart from the old familiar strain which he had known as a child and chanted himself in that same organ-loft years ago. How it went on and on! Would it never cease! It was like a menace; like a voice reaching out from the dead past to taunt him.

“Gloria in excelsis Deo!” over and over! How the deep basso rolled it out! How the tenor and alto caught it up and passed it on to be lifted by the high, flute-like ring of the soprano, till all mingled again in the wild pæan, “Gloria in excelsis!”

How insistent was the refrain! and where, what, was the mysterious, hidden quality in it; the power which was overcoming M’sieur Michel, stirring within him a turmoil that bewildered him?

There was no use in trying to speak, or in wanting to. His throat could not have the uttered a sound. He wanted to escape, that was all. “Bonæ voluntatis,”—he bent his head as if before a beating storm. “Gloria! Gloria! Gloria!” He must fly; he must save himself, regain his hill where sights and odors and sounds and saints or devils would cease to molest him. “In excelsis Deo!” He retreated, forcing his way backward to the door. He dragged his hat down over his eyes and staggered away down the road. But the refrain pursued him—“Pax! pax! pax!”—fretting him like a lash. He did not slacken

his pace till the tones grew fainter than an echo, floating, dying away in an "in excelsis!" When he could hear it no longer he stopped and breathed a sigh of rest and relief.

### III.

All day long M'sieur Michel stayed about his hut engaged in some familiar employment that he hoped might efface the unaccountable impressions of the morning. But his restlessness was unbounded. A longing had sprung up within him as sharp as pain and not to be appeased. At once, on this bright, warm Easter morning the voices that till now had filled his solitude became meaningless. He stayed mute and uncomprehending before them. Their significance had vanished before the driving want for human sympathy and companionship that had reawakened in his soul.

When night came on he walked through the woods down the slant of the hill again.

"It mus' be all fill' up with weeds," muttered M'sieur Michel to himself as he went. "Ah, Bon Dieu! with trees, Michel, with trees—in twenty-five years, man."

He had not taken the road to the village, but was pursuing a different one in which his feet had not walked for many days. It led him along the river bank for a distance. The narrow stream, stirred by the restless breeze, gleamed in the moonlight that was flooding the land.

As he went on and on, the scent of the new-plowed earth that had been from the first keenly perceptible, began to intoxicate him. He wanted to kneel and bury his face in it. He wanted to dig into it; turn it over. He wanted to scatter the seed again as he had done long ago, and watch the new, green life spring up as if at his bidding.

When he turned away from the river, and had walked a piece down the lane that divided Joe Duplan's plantation from that bit of land that had once been his, he wiped his eyes to drive away the mist that was making him see things as they surely could not be.

He had wanted to plant a hedge that time before he went away, but he had not done so. Yet there was the hedge before him, just as he had meant it to be, and filling the night with

fragrance. A broad, low gate divided its length, and over this he leaned and looked before him in amazement. There were no weeds as he had fancied; no trees except the scattered live oaks that he remembered.

Could that row of hardy fig trees, old, squat and gnarled, be the twigs that he himself had set one day into the ground? One raw December day when there was a fine, cold mist falling. The chill of it breathed again upon him; the memory was so real. The land did not look as if it ever had been plowed for a field. It was a smooth, green meadow, with cattle huddled upon the cool sward, or moving with slow, stately tread as they nibbled the tender shoots.

There was the house unchanged, gleaming white in the moon, seeming to invite him beneath its calm shelter. He wondered who dwelt within it now. Whoever it was he would not have them find him, like a prowler, there at the gate. But he would come again and again like this at nighttime, to gaze and refresh his spirit.

A hand had been laid upon M'sieur Michel's shoulder and some one called his name. Startled, he turned to see who accosted him.

"Duplan!"

The two men who had not exchanged speech for so many years stood facing each other for a long moment in silence.

"I knew you would come back some day, Michel. It was a long time to wait, but you have come home at last."

M'sieur Michel cowered instinctively and lifted his hands with expressive deprecatory gesture. "No, no; it's no place for me, Joe; no place!"

"Isn't a man's home a place for him, Michel?" It seemed less a question than an assertion, charged with gentle authority.

"Twenty-five years, Duplan; twenty-five years! It's no use; it's too late."

"You see, I have used it," went on the planter, quietly, ignoring M'sieur Michel's protestations. "Those are my cattle grazing off there. The house has served me many a time to lodge guests or workmen, for whom I had no room at Les Chêniers. I have not exhausted the soil with any crops. I had not the right to do that. Yet am I in your debt, Michel, and ready to settle en bon ami."

The planter had opened the gate and entered the inclosure, leading M'sieur Michel with him. Together they walked toward the house.

Language did not come readily to either—one so unaccustomed to hold intercourse with men; both so stirred with memories that would have rendered any speech painful. When they had stayed long in a silence which was eloquent of tenderness, Joe Duplan spoke:

“You know how I tried to see you, Michel, to speak with you, and you never would.”

M'sieur Michel answered with but a gesture that seemed a supplication.

“Let the past all go, Michel. Begin your new life as if the twenty-five years that are gone had been a long night, from which you have only awakened. Come to me in the morning,” he added with quick resolution, “for a horse and a plow.” He had taken the key of the house from his pocket and placed it in M'sieur Michel's hand.

“A horse?” M'sieur Michel repeated uncertainly; “a plow! Oh, it's too late, Duplan; too late.”

“It isn't too late. The land has rested all these years, man; it's fresh, I tell you; and rich as gold. Your crop will be the finest in the land.” He held out his hand and M'sieur Michel pressed it without a word in reply, save a muttered “Mon ami.”

Then he stood there watching the planter disappear behind the high, clipped hedge.

He held out his arms. He could not have told if it was toward the retreating figure, or in welcome to an infinite peace that seemed to descend upon him and envelop him.

All the land was radiant except the hill far off that was in black shadow against the sky.