The Overseer

By Albert E. Cowdrey

A historian by trade, Albert Cowdrey often writes stories with some historical perspective to them—readers might, for instance, recall his story "The Revivalist" from our March 2006 issue. His new story is a dark tale of life in the Deep South during the Nineteenth Century. Life was anything but easy in those days....

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Though appropriately rundown, Nicholas Lerner's big house on Exposition Boulevard in uptown New Orleans was not haunted. The same could not be said of its owner.

That spring morning in 1903 the old man was getting ready for the day. Or rather, Morse was making him ready.

"So, Mr. Nick," murmured the valet, applying shaving soap to his employer's face with an ivory-handled brush, "are you writing a book?"

Damn him, thought Lerner. *He knows I detest conversation with a razor at my throat.*

"My memoirs," he muttered. "A few jottings only. Waiting to die is such a bore, I write to pass the time."

Was that the real reason he'd become a late-blooming scribbler—mere boredom? Most of his life had been devoted to hiding the truth, not revealing it. And yet now....

"I think you must be writing secrets," smiled Morse, piloting the blade beneath his left ear. "The way you lock your papers in the safe at night."

"I lock them up," Lerner snapped, getting soap in his mouth, "because they are *private*."

And had better remain so, he thought wryly. The other memorabilia in his small safe—an ancient, rusted Colt revolver; a bill from a Natchez midwife; a forty-year-old spelling book; a faded telegram saying

RELIABLE MAN WILL MEET YOU RR LANDING STOP—would mean nothing to any living person.

Then why should he write the story out, give evidence against himself? It seemed to make no sense. And yet, having started, somehow he couldn't stop.

Humming an old ballad called "Among My Souvenirs," he pondered the problem but reached no conclusion. He closed his eyes and dozed, only to wake suddenly when Morse asked, "Who is Monsieur Felix?"

Lerner heard his own voice quaver as he replied, "Someone I ... knew, long ago. Where did you hear of him?"

"Last night, after you took your medicine, you spoke his name over and over in your sleep."

"Then I must have seen him in a dream."

Shrewd comment. Morse knew that the opium he obtained for the old man caused intense dreams, and would ask no more questions.

Without further comment he burnished his employer's face with a hot towel, combed his hair, and neatly pinned up his empty left sleeve. He removed the sheet that protected Lerner's costly, old-fashioned Prince Albert suit from spatter, and bore all the shaving gear through the door to the adjoining den and out into the hall. Remotely, Lerner heard Morse's voice—now raised imperiously—issuing orders to the housemaid and the cook.

Good boy! thought Lerner, checking his image in a long, dusky pier glass. *Make 'em jump!*

He was rubbing his smooth upper lip to make sure no bristles had been left, when suddenly he leaned forward, staring. Then, with startling energy, his one big hand whirled his chair around.

Of course nobody was standing behind him. A trick of his old eyes and the brown shadows of his bed chamber with its single door, its barred and ever-darkened window. Or maybe a result of talking about Monsieur Felix, whom he would always associate with mirrors, fog, winter darkness, summertime mirages—with anything, bright or dark, that deceived the eye.

“Ah, you devil,” he muttered, “I’ll exorcise you with my pen. Then burn both you and the damned manuscript!”

Maybe that was the point of his scribbling—to rid himself of the creature once and for all. Smiling grimly, he trundled into his den.

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Like its owner, his safe was an antique, the combination lock encircled with worn red letters instead of numbers. He dialed a five-letter word—*perdu,* meaning lost, a word with many meanings as applied to its contents. He jerked open the heavy door, drew out a pack of cream-laid writing paper and carried it to his old writing desk, a burled walnut monster honeycombed with secret compartments.

On the wall above, his dead wife smiled from a pastel portrait. Elmira as she’d been when young—conventionally pretty, not knowing yet that her short life would be devoted mainly to bearing stillborn children. On her lap she held their first boy, the only one born alive, but who, less than a month after the artist finished the picture, had suffocated in his crib, in the mysterious way of small children.

Bereft, surrounded by servants who did everything for her, idle, dissatisfied, Elmira had died a little too. Her husband had granted her everything she wanted except entry into his head and heart.

“Why don’t you trust me?” she’d asked him a thousand times, and he’d always answered, “My dear, I trust you as I do no other human being.”

She’d never quite found the handle of that reply. Morse’s father and mother would have understood the irony—the fact that he really trusted no one—but of course they were dead too.

They saw into my soul, Lerner thought, *but it didn’t save them, either one.*

He shrugged, dismissing Elmira and all the other ghosts. Time to introduce the Overseer into his story. But first he wanted to sharpen his unreliable memory by rereading what he’d written so far. He drew the papers closer to his nose and flicked on a new lamp with a glaring Edison bulb that had recently replaced the old, dim, comfortable gaslight. Squinting balefully at his own spidery, old-fashioned handwriting, he began to read.

* * * *

CHAPTER THE FIRST

Wherein I Gain, Then Lose, My Personal Eden

As I look back upon the scenes of a stormy life, filled with strange adventures and haunted by a stranger spirit, I am astonished to reflect how humble, peaceable and commonplace were my origins.

My ancestors were poor German peasants, who in 1720 fled the incessant wars of Europe and found refuge on Louisiana's Côte des Allemands, or German coast, near the village of Nouvelle Orléans. Their descendants migrated northward to the Red River country, still farming the land but, like the good Americans they had become, acquiring slaves to assist their labors.

Here in 1843 I was born into the lost world that people of our new-minted Twentieth Century call the Old South. The term annoys me, for to us who lived then 'twas neither old nor new, but simply the world—our world. I first saw light on a plantation called Mon Repos, a few miles from the village of Red River Landing, and there spent my boyhood with Papa and Cousin Rose. Our servants were three adult slaves and a son born to one of them, whom Papa had named Royal, according to the crude humor of those times, which delighted in giving pompous names to Negroes.

Our lives resembled not at all the silly phantasies I read nowadays of opulent masters and smiling servants. Our plantation was but a large ramshackle farm, its only adornment a long alley of noble oaks that Papa had saved when felling the forest. Our lives were simple and hard; many a day at planting or harvest-time Papa worked in the fields beside the hands, his sweat like theirs running down and moistening the earth.

In our house Cousin Rose counted for little, for she was but a poor relation whose parents had died in the same outbreak of Yellow-Jack that claimed my mother. Ever pale and fragile as a porcelain cup, she spent most days in her bedroom, more like a ghost than a girl. The slave boy Royal, on the other hand, counted for much—at least in my life.

How I envied him! He never had to study, and went barefoot nine months of the year. I was beaten often by the schoolmaster, but Royal escaped with a scolding even when he was caught stealing flowers from the garden, or roaming the house above stairs, where only the family and the housemaid were allowed to go. Indeed, Papa so favored him that I came to understand

(though nothing was ever said) that he was my half-brother.

Spirits, too, inhabited our little world. All who dwelt in that benighted region believed in divining rods and seer stones, in ghosts and curses, in prophetick dreams, buried treasure, and magical cures. Royal and I were credulous boys, like those Mark Twain so well describes in Tom Sawyer, *and we met often in the bushes near the servants' graveyard at midnight to whisper home-made incantations, half fearing and half hoping to raise a "sperrit" that might shew us the way to an hoard of gold—though none ever appeared.*

In these expeditions Royal was always bolder than I, as he was also in our daylight adventures. He dove from higher branches of the oak overleaning our swimming-hole than I dared to; he was a better shot than I, often bearing the long-rifle when, as older boys, we fire-hunted for deer. Ah, even now I can see and smell those autumn nights! The flickering of the fire-pan; the frosty crimson and gold leaves crackling under our feet; the sudden green shine of a deer's eyes, the loud shot, the sharp sulphurous smell of burnt powder, and the dogs leaping into the darkness to bring down the wounded animal!

Are we not all killers at heart? Scenes of death having about them a kind of ecstasy, however we deny it, greater even than the scenes of love.

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Preceded by a clink of china, Morse spun the door handle and backed into the den, hefting a tray with a dish under a silver cover, a folded napkin, and a goblet of red wine.

"When," demanded Lerner testily, "will you learn to knock, my boy?"

"Mr. Nick, I ain't got enough hands to carry the tray, open the door and knock, too."

A doubtful excuse, thought Lerner; a table stood in the hallway convenient to the door, where Morse could have rested the tray. Frowning, he turned his pages face down on the desk.

Morse set his lunch on a side table, moved the wheelchair, shook out the stiff linen napkin and tied it around Lerner's neck.

“Should I cut the meat for you, Mr. Nick?”

“Yes, yes. Then leave me alone. And don’t come back until I ring.”

“You’ll be wanting your medicine at the usual time?”

“Yes, yes. But wait for my ring.”

In leaving, Morse took a long look at the half-open safe, a fact that did not escape the old man. Lerner ate lunch slowly, pondering. His dependence on Morse reminded him all too clearly of how his father had become the servant of his own servant after Monsieur Felix entered Mon Repos. That had been the beginning of many things, all of them bad.

I will not suffer that to happen again, he thought.

Lerner had an old man’s appetite, ravenous at the beginning but quickly appeased. Without finishing his lunch, he hastily swallowed the wine at a gulp, wheeled back to his desk, took up his manuscript and again began to read.

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The Eden of my childhood did not last long. In the Fifties the world’s demand for cotton soared, and Papa began to dream of growing rich.

He was not alone. The steamboats that huffed and puffed up and down the Mississippi began delivering carven furniture, pier-glasses, and Paris fashions to our community of backwoodsmen. Ladies—it seemed overnight—graduated from sun-bonnets to hoopskirts, and the men were as bad or worse, with their sudden need for blooded horses and silk cravats and silver-mounted pistols and long Cuban segars.

In this flush atmosphere, Papa borrowed from the banks and cotton factors and bought new acres, though land had become very dear. He made trips to New Orleans to barter for workers in the slave markets at Maspero’s Exchange and the St. Charles Hotel, and he rebuilt our comfortable log house as a mansion with six white columns, which—like our prosperity—were hollow and meant only for shew. But he remained a farmer, not a businessman; he overspent for

everything, and could not make the new hands work, for he was too soft to wield the whip as a slave-driver must. Soon he was in debt and facing ruin, and so in 1855, during one of his trips to the city, he hired an Overseer to do the driving for him.

'Tis hard for me to remember Felix Marron as a man of flesh. I see him in my mind's eye as the sort of shadow that looms up in a morning fog, briefly takes human form, then fades again into a luminous dazzle.

Yet when first we met, he seemed merely freakish. Royal and I were returning from a fishing jaunt when we espied him talking to Papa, and we stared and giggled like the bumpkins we were. I suppose he was then about forty, but seemed ageless, as if he never had been born—a strange creature, very tall and sinewy, his long bony face a kind of living Mardi Gras mask with grotesquely prominent nose and chin. Though 'twas August, he wore an old musty black suit, and I remember that despite the stifling Delta heat, his gray face shewed not a drop of sweat.

*When Papa introduced us, he ignored Royal but swept off his stovepipe hat to me, loosing a cloud of scent from his pomade, and in a penetrating stage whisper exclaimed, "*Bonjour, bonjour, '*ow be you, young sir?" Shifting an old carpetbag to his left hand, he clasped my right in his cool bony grip, causing a braided whip he carried over that arm to swing and dance. Then Papa led him away to view the quarters, and Royal and I laughed out loud—thereby proving that neither of us was gifted with prophecy.*

*Papa hired Monsieur Felix (as he preferred to be called) upon the understanding that he would have a free hand to extract profit from our people and our acres. At first the bargain seemed to be a good one, for the Overseer was restless and tireless, keeping on the move (as the slaves said) from can't-see in the morning to can't-see at dusk. He had a strange way of walking, lunging ahead with long silent strides that ate up the ground, and appearing suddenly and without warning where he was not expected. And woe to any slave he found idling! Not one escaped flogging under his regime, not even Royal, whose days of idleness and indulgence came to an abrupt end. Soon he learned to dread the hoarse whisper, "*Aha, tu p'tit diable," *the Overseer's sole warning before the lash fell.*

At first Papa resisted this abuse of his darker son. But the Overseer argued that to favor one slave was to corrupt all by setting them a bad example; further, that Royal (then twelve years of age) was no longer a child, and must be broken in to the duties of his station in life. Finally, that unless he could impose discipline on all our hands, Monsieur Felix would leave Papa's employ, and seek a position on a plantation that was properly run. So Papa yielded, and by so doing began to lose mastery over his own house.

I watched Royal's first beating with fascination and horror. My own floggings at the schoolmaster's hands were but the gentle flutter of a palmetto fan compared to the savage blows

administered by Monsieur Felix. Had I been the victim, I would have raised the whole country with my howls; but Royal remained obstinately silent, which the Overseer rightly saw as a kind of resistance, and added six more to the six blows first proposed, and then six again, leaving Royal scarce able to walk for three or four days.

Thus began several years of tyranny. Even when he grew older and stronger, Royal could not strike back—for a slave to assault a white man, whatever the provocation, meant death—nor could he flee, for the patterollers (as we called the cruel men of the slave patrols) scoured the neighborhood. And so he bore his whippings as the others did, and let his hatred grow. In my innocence I loathed the Overseer, for I was too young to understand that he flogged our people not out of cruelty, nor indeed of any feeling at all, but as an herdsman prods his ox or a plowman lashes his mule—to wring work from them, and wealth from his acres.

In that he succeeded. With the crops heavy—with the hands hard at work—with prices rising, and dollars rolling in, Papa felt himself no longer the descendent of Westphalian peasants, but rather a great planter and a member of the ruling class. He bought leather-bound books by the linear foot, and installed them in his den, though he did not attempt to read them; he drank from crystal goblets, though his tipple was corn whiskey drawn from his own still. He paid Monsieur Felix well, and built him a substantial house midway between Mon Repos and the slave quarters, which was where the Overseer himself stood, in the southern scheme of things. Papa thought he would be content to live there and receive wages that grew from year to year, and mayhap marry in time some poor-white slattern of the neighborhood. But in this he misjudged the Overseer's ambition.

Applying still more pomade to his lank black hair, he took to invading our house, supposedly to talk business with Papa, but in reality to ogle my cousin Rose—then fifteen and almost of marriageable age. Though I was but a great clumsy overgrown boy with long skinny shanks and feet like keelboats, I well understood that the Overseer designed to marry into our family as the first step toward gaining control of Mon Repos. In a rage, I summoned up my smattering of French and called him cochon *to his face, for his English was so poor I feared he might misunderstand if I called him swine. I ordered him never again to set foot in the house, at which he laughed in his strange soundless way. He would have loved to give me a taste of his whip, but the caste system protected me, for only the schoolmaster was allowed to beat the heir of Mon Repos.*

To get rid of me, Monsieur Felix told Papa I deserved to finish my education in the North, saying how 'twould honor our family if I won a degree from a famous school. With money weighing down his pockets, Papa agreed, and in the summer of 1860 I was compelled to say goodbye to everyone and everything I knew, and set out for the land of the Puritans, as I imagined it. I wished to take Royal to Yale College as my valet, but Monsieur Felix warned Papa that he would run away, once in the free states. So he was doomed to stay behind, whilst I boarded a Cincinnati-bound steamer at Red River Landing for the first leg of my journey.

I was seventeen years of age, as fresh and proud as a new ear of corn, and as green. Wearing

varnished boots and carrying my shiny first top hat, I stood upon the hurricane deck, gazing down at ragged and dusty Royal, who had come with the family to say farewell. We who had been playmates now were clearly master and slave. Yet we shared a secret plan, devised during many a night-time meeting at the graveyard. If, as I anticipated, Monsieur Felix laid hands upon Rose, Royal was to kill him, and give himself up to the sheriff without resistance. I would return post-haste and testify that he had merely obeyed my orders, as a slave should, to protect my cousin's honor. As his reward, when I inherited him I would set him free. Upon this understanding, I left my rifle in a place only Royal knew—wrapped in oily rags, and tied atop a rafter in the cabin of the slave quarters where he slept.

I raised my hand to him as one conspirator to another, and he nodded in reply, his face smooth and immobile as a mask of bronze. Rose wept, Papa honked into his handkerchief, and Monsieur Felix vouchsafed a thin arid smile, like an arroyo dividing his blade of a nose from his large blue chin. Then the whistle blew, the bell chimed, the gangplank lifted, and the muddy bank—like my youth—began drifting away from me.

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Siesta time had come. Lerner returned the manuscript to the safe, closed the heavy door and spun the dial. He picked up a little silver bell, rang it briskly, and within ten minutes Morse appeared like a household genie. He removed the lunchtime clutter, spread and adjusted the old man's lap robe, put a pillow behind his head, and vanished again, quietly closing the door.

Since the back injury that had left him unable to walk, Lerner had needed such coddling to shield him against severe pains that otherwise spread up and down his spine. Yet he understood that his immobility was killing him. He could almost feel the systems of his body rusting in place, shutting down slowly. *How tiresome it is,* he thought, *to die by inches,* and with an effort of will concentrated his mind upon his story. He'd come to the end of what he'd already written; tomorrow he must carry the tale forward, weaving fragments of memory into a narrative.

He dozed until five-thirty, waking when Morse turned on the electric chandelier and set down his dinner tray with a folded evening newspaper beside the plate. Lerner ate while perusing the unexciting developments of the day—the end of the Philippine Insurrection, the galumphing of that damned cowboy in the White House. Then the long ritual of putting him to bed began. Morse worked with the deft expertness of a hospital nurse, and by seven-thirty the old man was resting in bed, propped up on a hillock of cushions and covered with spotless linen. He sniffed the penetrating, somehow frigid smell of grain spirits left by the alcohol rub Morse had given him, then folded his hands and smiled, awaiting the high point of his day.

"Come, come, Morse," he whispered.

The indefatigable one returned with a gleaming salver on which rested a sticky pellet of opium wrapped in rice paper, a crystal flask of amber bourbon, a shot glass, and a silver coffee spoon. Deftly he prepared the laudanum, dissolving the opium in the whiskey with ritualized movements, like a priest mixing water and wine.

"I need to go and buy more of your medicine, Mr. Nick," he murmured, presenting the drink.

"Why not buy it from a drugstore?" Lerner demanded. "Those neighborhoods by the docks are dangerous."

"Mr. Nick, I can do that, but it'll cost twice as much. The import tax alone is six dollars a pound, and I can buy decent opium from a Chinaman for five."

Grumbling, the old man extracted a few bills from a drawer in his marble-topped night table and handed them over. Then in three long sips he drank the draught that ended pain and summoned sleep.

His throat burned, he felt a sharp pain in his gut, then a banked fire that burned low, warming and soothing him. A delicious languor began to spread through his old body. He felt his weight lessen, then almost evaporate. He felt dry and light, like a balsa-wood doll floating high on still water.

"Ah," he whispered. "So good, so good."

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Morse lingered, watching him, rearranging his bedclothes to make him even more comfortable and secure. When he felt sure that Lerner was asleep, he leaned close to his ear and whispered, "Father? I need to know the word that opens the safe. Tell me the word, Father. Father? What word opens the safe?"

Lerner grunted but slept on.

"Shit," grumbled Morse. "Old bastard, he don't relax even when he's snoring. I bet he keeps a bag of gold in that iron box of his."

From the cache of bills in the night table he took a tenner, added it to the five, thrust both into his pocket, and soon afterward left the house. He slipped away into the lengthening blue shadows, his mind perhaps on pleasure, or merely on escaping for a few hours the dull round of servitude to a dying man that defined his daytime life.

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Lerner woke early, tasting ashes. Dun shadows filled the bedroom, but a thin white scar of daylight already ran between the red-plush window drapes, casting the shadows of iron security bars. He seized the silver bell and rang it loudly.

"Morse—" he began as the door opened. But instead of Morse, the yellow face of the housemaid—Cleo, was that her name?—intruded, anxious beneath a spotted kerchief.

"Oh, Mr. Nick," she burst out, "don't nobody know where Mr. Morse is at. I been up to his room to look, and his baid ain't been slep' in."

Lerner stared at her. If she'd told him the sun had failed to rise in the east, he could hardly have been more astonished.

With Cleo's help he wrestled himself painfully into the wheelchair, but there his abilities ended. A one-armed man with a spinal injury was close to helpless. A manservant had to be borrowed from next door to prepare him for the day. Lerner found the process distasteful; he hated to have a stranger see him unclothed or touch him; the fact that the man obviously disliked the work made it no easier to bear. In shaving him, the fellow nicked his face repeatedly, until Lerner sent him away with a miserly tip and a muttered curse. A barber had to be brought from a nearby shop, and he charged a whole dollar for the visit!

By then Cleo had brought him breakfast, and it was all wrong for a variety of reasons. Yet he failed to complain about the chilly toast, hard egg, and unsugared coffee. As he entered the den a good hour late and dragged out his manuscript, he was worrying over something much more serious: the possibility that Morse might *never* return.

As he'd warned last night, rough characters swarmed on the docks; the knife, the revolver, and the slung-shot were common weapons of choice; the Mississippi with its murky water, vast size, and hidden undertows was perfect for disposing of superfluous bodies—as Lerner knew well from certain

experiences of his own.

"And without Morse, how would I *live*?" Lerner demanded aloud, and there was nobody to answer him.

From a desk drawer he took out a new gold-banded reservoir pen, uncapped it with fingers and teeth, filled it from his inkwell by pressing down an ivory piston, and tried to fix his mind on his story. From time to time as he wrote, he raised his head and listened. Despite the thick walls of the house, some street sounds intruded—the horn of a motor-car brayed; a seller of vegetables chanted "Ah got ni-ess al-li-gay-tuh pay-uhs"—and the house itself was never totally quiet, doors opening and closing for no good reason, a woman's starched dress (Cleo's?) rustling past in the hall.

And yet, despite his distraction, the new chapter began taking form. His thoughts might be elsewhere, but his hand traveled over the paper in a sort of automatic writing, like a spirit's message upon a sealed slate.

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CHAPTER THE SECOND

Wherein I Encounter War, and a Spirit

Need I say that eighteen-sixty was a poor year for a southern lad to get an education? That winter a storm of rebellion swept the cotton states, and in the spring of '61 the country went to war.

For a time I dawdled, hoping that peace might break out. But after the affray at Fort Sumter, with the whole country responding to the call of the trumpet and the drum, I saw that I must go home. I took a train to Cincinnati, where the steam-packets were still running, war or no war; and after a week spent churning down the Ohio to the Mississippi, and down the Mississippi to the Red, stepped ashore at the same spot I had left a year earlier.

Already the Landing seemed to belong to another and darker age. The village was strangely silent; I learned that my schoolfellows had vanished into the Army, and two were already dead of camp diseases in Virginia. Mon Repos had never deserved its name less. Though I arrived at noon, I found Papa already drunk, and noted with disgust how he wobbled when he walked, like a goose hit with a rock. Royal and the Overseer both had disappeared, and when I asked Papa what had happened to them, he only mumbled and shook his head.

'Twas Rose—all atremble—who told me the story. Monsieur Felix had proposed marriage to her,

and, when she declined, threatened to compromise her honor so that she would have to marry him, willing or not. This she took to be a threat of rape, and many a tear-stained letter had she written, praying me to return and save her. But because of the war, I received none of them. Then the war itself intervened. The men of the slave patrols joined the army and went east, and as soon as they were gone, Royal took down my rifle from its hiding place, shot Monsieur Felix neatly through the eye and ran away, leaving the corpse lying spread out like a hog ready for flaying on the gallery of the nice house Papa had built for him.

At first I felt only pleasure in hearing this tale, and laughed gaily at the thought of being (as I imagined) rid of the Overseer forever. But after I spent a day tramping over our acres, I began to suspect that in reality his death had ruined us all. The crops of corn and cotton stood heavy but weed-choked and in need of hoeing; the hands idled about the quarters, and when I ordered them to work they went but slowly, with deep mutterings that boded no good.

Brooding over these developments, I turned my steps homeward, passing close by the Overseer's house on the way. I found it a scene of ruin, grown up with vines like a castle in a fairy tale, with cicadas droning in the trees and hot sunlight vibrating upon a weedy mound of earth where he lay buried. A pine board carven only with his name and the date of his death served as his headstone.

I was gazing upon this melancholy scene when something moved upon the vine-shrouded gallery of the house. I shaded my eyes against the fierce light, and espied through drifting red spots Monsieur Felix standing in the spot where he had died. His pale face seemed to float amid a dark wreath of cat's-claw, his left eye nothing but an oozing pit, his right gleaming like a splinter of glass. His blue jaw moved and his penetrating whisper etched itself upon my eardrums, saying, Tu, mon p'tit, serais mon vengeur.

I stepped back—stumbled over the grave marker—staggered, blinked away drops of stinging sweat, and an instant later found myself entering our house, with no sense of time elapsed nor memory of anything I might have seen along the way. Rose was fetching something for Papa, and she stopped and gazed at me, astonished. She brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes and said, " Nick, are you well?"

I answered without knowing what I said.

That night I drank with Papa, paying no attention as his slurring voice complained endlessly of his troubles, but instead thinking of the words of the Phantasm. I could make no sense of them: for what could be greater nonsense than that I (of all people) should become the avenger of my hated enemy, Monsieur Felix?

I went to bed more than half drunk, and slept like the water-logged trees that river pilots call

dead-men. When I wakened at first light, the house seemed uncommonly silent. For half an hour I lay at ease, waiting for the usual noises to begin, the murmur of voices, the rattle of pots in the kitchen, the creak of the pump handle. A summer wind passed across the world with a great sigh, and a light rain began to fall. Still I heard nothing from downstairs, as if the house had died overnight. Then my door opened and Rose slipped in, looking especially thin and pale in her cotton nightdress.

"Nick," she whispered, "where are all the servants?"

I jumped out of bed, threw on some clothes and ran outside. The brief shower having passed, I walked through the slave quarters, finding the cabins all empty, with doors hanging open on leathern hinges, and in the little fireplaces ashes that were still warm. The paddocks were empty, the farm animals all gone, driven into the woods and marshes by the departing slaves. I understood then that the slaves felt no loyalty toward Papa, who had never protected them from Monsieur Felix, whilst the Overseer's death had freed them from the fear that alone had made Mon Repos run.

I stood gazing at the overgrown fields, where little pines had already begun to spring up, whilst afar off, a church bell started to toll in dreary monotone—the notice of a funeral, whose I don't know: perhaps the funeral of our world.

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So much Lerner had written, and was staring at an unappetizing lunch that Cleo had brought, when the door to his den opened suddenly and Morse stumbled in.

His hands were tremulous, his face yellow, his shoes muddy, his clothes mussed and odorous. In a hoarse voice he began to complain about the darkness of the house. In fact, it was no darker than usual; but as Lerner perceived, the pupils of his eyes had shrunk to pin-points that shut out the light.

If anybody knew opium's aftermath, that man was Lerner. Speaking firmly, he ordered Morse to go to bed and, when he sobered up, to return and explain his conduct. He slouched away, looking like some wretched Lascar who sleeps off his drug debauch under the wharves, while the old man, muttering a curse, returned grimly to telling his tale.

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Well do I remember those late-summer days in ‘61 when, like a child, I imagined that the worst had already happened.

I knew that we must abandon Mon Repos, hoping to return in better days, should better days ever come. And yet for weeks Papa refused even to consider flight. Finally, in a rage I threatened to take Rose away with me, and leave him to manage alone. At last he yielded and we became refugees, an early rivulet of the great tide that would flow southward in years to come.

At Red River Landing we bought our way aboard a fishing yawl, for Papa had become very close with a dollar, and refused to buy us passage on a steamboat.

Mostly our fellow-passengers were ordinary country folk, but one caught my eye—a very tall, thin man dressed in black, who sat at the prow, stiff and unmoving like the dragon’s-head of a Viking ship. ‘Twas evening, and he was hard to focus on against the blaze of the setting sun. I looked away, blinked and looked back: a hefty woman was seating herself in a flurry of skirts; perhaps he was behind her, perhaps not. Intending to make sure whether he was what I feared, I rose to my feet. But the boat was now so crowded and the freeboard so small that the captain shouted at me to sit, or I should swamp her.

Night shut down, the sails were raised, and we began a ghostly voyage down a moon-haunted river, in company perhaps with a Phantom. Does this not sound like a poem by Coleridge, or a tale by Poe? Yet I remember chiefly the discomfort of the wretched craft. I dozed and waked a dozen times; a woman nursed a baby that cried often; some fellow who had managed to fall asleep snorted like a donkey-engine. Once a steamboat blazing with lights pounded by in midstream, and the waves so rocked our burdened craft that we shipped water, and had to bail with cupped hands.

Come morning, we landed at New Orleans, all of us stiff and soaked and blear-eyed. The levee swarmed with shouting laborers; barrels and bales and cannons and gun-carriages were heaped up everywhere, guarded by new-minted soldiers in fancy uniforms. I sought the man in black, but he seemed to have vanished in the confusion. We engaged a porter with a barrow, and traipsed behind him through the Old Quarter, which was saturated with the smell of roasting coffee and noisy as a parrot cage.

In time we reached a house on Rue des Bons Enfants, or Goodchildren Street, belonging to some of our cousins, and they bade us welcome, having plenty of room to spare. Their warmth was not entirely a matter of family feeling. We again had money, for the city banks were still open, and Papa insisted on paying all our expenses—as foolish in generosity as he had been in miserliness. From the same sense of pride, when I was commissioned a lieutenant in the Confederate Army, he bought me a fine gray uniform that did not survive my first and only battle.

That fall and winter of '61 I divided my time between Goodchildren Street and a training camp amongst the farmlands of Metairie, where I drilled men who knew as much about marching as I did, which was nothing. Passing through town one evening, I fell captive to the charms of a fair privateer, and caught the clap. 'Twas a light case that I got over in a week, but it occasioned much merriment in camp, where my fellow officers pounded me on the back and chortled, "Now Nick, when you have killed your first Yankee, you will be a real man at last!"

Whilst I was yet ill and feverish, I again saw the Phantom. Three or four nights in succession he rose in my dreams, fixing his one eye horridly upon me. One bright winter day I saw him gazing at me from the shade of an oak-grove hung with streamers of gray moss. Though daunted by the sight, I hastened toward him, but found nothing there. The figure had been only a compound of light and shadow—or at any rate, so I explained it to myself. Then I grew well again, and dismissed the Phantom as the trick of a sickly mind.

In plain fact I had no time for ghosts. The war was speeding up; we began to break camp and load our equipment. A thrill of excitement touched with fear ran through every man of us, for we knew that the day was nearing when at last we would see the Elephant, meaning combat. The order came in the first days of April, 1862, when the fields were covered with white and red clover. My company boarded a train to Jackson, and marched into Tennessee, where twenty-four thousand men were soon to be laid low in the great battle at Shiloh Church.

On the first day of the fight, I led a scouting party that blundered into an enemy picket. The Yankee sentry (a boy whose white, scared face will forever remain in my memory) instantly threw down his musket and fled; the weapon was on half-cock and discharged by itself, the ball smashing my elbow. Whilst the battle raged, the surgeons chloroformed me and cut off all but about eight inches of my left arm. I was laid in a wagon amongst other mutilated bodies and hauled away to the rail-head, screaming at every lurch and bounce.

So began and ended my acquaintanceship with war: but not with the Spectre, who soon seized upon my state of weakness to manifest himself again.

By the time I reached New Orleans, the stump of my arm had become infected (or mortified*, as we said then), smelling foully and oozing unpleasant matter. Nursed by Rose, I lived through feverish days and haunted nights. Again Monsieur Felix ruled the dark hours, smiling horridly from amid great fields of corpses, where not one was whole—some torsos without arms or legs, some bodies without heads, some heads without bodies that glared from white eyes the size of walnuts.*

Then my mind cleared, and I became able to understand the scarcely less frightening news that Rose brought me. I heard of the federal fleet appearing off the Passes, and of hard fighting at the

downriver forts; of warships riding high on the flood-swollen Mississippi, with guns pointing down at the city's rooftops; of rioting mobs on the levee, burning warehouses and looting banks; of blue-backs filing ashore and deploying a battery of bronze cannon in front of the plush St. Charles Hotel, where Papa used to stay when he was bargaining for slaves.

At home on Goodchildren Street our cousins began to cast bitter looks upon us. Papa had run out of cash, and because the war had severed the connection between city and farm, food had become very dear and hard to come by. Our hosts begrudged us every mouthful we ate, as if we were taking it directly off their plates—as in fact we were. Indeed, we were no longer a promising or even a respectable crew. Papa was customarily drunk, and even when sober, more scatter-brained than ever; Rose was obliged to work as a house servant, but a frail one who never did anything right. As for me, the cousins thought that if I recovered, 'twould be only as a poor cripple who would continue to eat but bring in nothing.

So they moved me out of my comfortable bed-chamber, and put me upstairs in a store-room that held a clutter of retired furniture, broken crockery, and dusky mirrors. 'Twas stifling hot under the eaves, and no place for an injured man; but they thought it good enough for me, hoping perhaps that I might die and relieve them of a burden.

One summer morning I woke from a restless sleep. The arm I had lost was aching as no arm of flesh and blood could, every hair upon it like a burning wire. And yet, as the bright hot morning light grew, my eyes shewed me nothing, not even a ghost, lying on the ragged counterpane beside me. Rose slept nearby on a battered chaise, with a fine dew of perspiration upon her pale face, and though the pain of my phantom arm was such that I wished to moan or cry out, I remained silent for fear of waking her.

Restlessly my eyes wandered to an old dim mirror with an irregular dark shadow in the middle of the glass. As I gazed, the shadow began to take shape, like the sort of black paper silhouette that in those days decorated every parlor in the land. 'Twas Monsieur Felix—no, I could not have been mistaken! No man save he ever had such a face. As I watched in fascination, he began to turn slowly toward me, his features emerging like the image on a tintype in its acid bath, until his full face hovered in the glass, picked out in shades of glistening black and bone white.

Unable to bear the empty socket and gleaming eye fixed upon me, I stumbled from bed, my limbs rubbery as those of a new-whelped pup, and in one fierce motion turned the mirror and slammed it against the plaster. The glass shattered and Rose started up and cried out, "Oh Nick, you should be resting, not walking!"

"So should he who roused me," I answered, and her eyes widened in fear, for she thought that suffering had caused me to go mad.

* * * *

The first sign that the household on Exposition Boulevard was wobbling back toward normal came when supper appeared at the proper hour.

Cleo carried the tray instead of Morse, but the meal was tasty and hot, with terrapin stew, warm bread, and a glass of elderly pale sherry. Lerner dumped half the sherry into the stew, swallowed the rest, and made a better meal than he'd expected.

After dinner Morse appeared, clean and silent, and went to work at the most intimate duties of a body-servant: setting Lerner upon the commode-chair, giving him an alcohol rub, putting his nightshirt on him and settling him in bed. Watching Morse prepare the laudanum, the old man found himself admiring the performance. Instead of making weak apologies, Morse was seeking to demonstrate how much Lerner needed him—and in that he succeeded, the clever fellow.

After drinking the potion, Lerner ordered him to sit down on the foot of the bed, and said quietly: "You know, my boy, this drug should be taken only to subdue pain and give rest, not for a doubtful pleasure that ends in a horrid slavery."

"I'm in pain all the time, Mr. Nick," he muttered, looking at the floor. "This stuff gives you ease, so I thought it might do the like for me."

"You're in pain? Are you ill, Morse?"

"No. Yes. My anger eats at me."

"Anger at what?" asked Lerner in surprise, for he'd always thought Morse very comfortably off, for a colored man.

"At *this*," he said, holding up his left hand with the dark back turned toward Lerner, then turning it over to show the white palm. "Wondering why I could not be like *this*. I have long known you are my father. If I were white, you would have loved and acknowledged me, and I would be a man among men."

For a moment Lerner was too astonished to speak. Unsteadily he asked, “Who told you that I am your father?”

“My mother.”

It was on the tip of Lerner’s tongue to say, *But you never knew your mother.* Instead he bit his tongue and said slowly, weighing the words, “I’m glad you’ve spoken out, my boy. Trust me, and I shall yet do you justice.”

He sent Morse away, all his secrets intact. But when he was alone, lying in the dark on clean linen, Lerner found sleep difficult to come by. Maybe the laudanum was losing its effect. Or maybe he was finding it hard to grasp the fact that a Morse existed of whom he knew nothing.

What did the fellow do when he wasn’t being the perfect servant? Did he read books? Practice voodoo? Engage in orgies with Cleo and the cook, improbable as that seemed? And how could he dare to live some other life, when he depended on Lerner for food, shelter, pocket money, everything? Wasn’t that a kind of treason?

In time Lerner fell asleep, the puzzles of reality yielding to gorgeous visions of things that never had existed at all. And as he snored, the next day’s installment of his memoir composed itself, someplace deep beneath the level of his dreaming.

* * * *

CHAPTER THE THIRD

Wherein the Demon Saves and Enslaves Me

On that day, the day I saw him in the mirror, I dressed and went forth with sleeve pinned up, in search of work.

I found none. The city had always lived by grace of the river, but now ‘twas blocked by warring armies. Everything had ground to a halt; the once-busy levee lay empty, save for a few Union warships and a graveyard of decaying hulks, and no work was to be had by anyone, much less a cripple.

After a week of useless tramping about, I turned the mirror in my garret around, for desperation had conquered fear, and I was ready to receive counsel from whatever source. Alas, the shattered glass shewed only fragments of my own gaunt and yellowed image, which I thought grimly appropriate. Gazing at that shattered countenance, I brought to mind a verse or incantation that Royal and I used to chant in the graveyard at midnight: Come ye, take me, lead me on/ Shew me gold, and then begone! *Very deliberately, I said it seven times, which was the magic number: but answer there was none.*

Yet that very afternoon, I saw—upon Levee Street, about half a square distant, amid waves of heat rising from the cobblestones—a thin, black-dressed figure loping with unmistakable gait through the trembling mirages. And as the strings of an harp will pick up and faintly repeat distant sounds, although no fingers have touched them, my heart-strings thrilled to a sense of hope and fear.

I hastened after him; he turned the corner of Gallatin Street, as did I a moment later: he had vanished, but in his place an amazing sight met my eyes. A file of colored men wearing blue uniforms were practicing the manual of arms. Royal was drilling them, and his strong nature had already asserted itself, for he wore upon each sleeve three broad gold stripes in the shape of spear-heads pointing down.

When the "Stand at ease" was given, I approached and spoke to him. He threw back his head, and laughed so loud that his men stared. We shook hands and spoke briefly of old times; he queried me about my missing arm, and briefly told me how he had enlisted in one of the new colored regiments. I admitted to needing food, whilst he revealed an ambition to sign the name he had chosen for himself—Royal Sargent—to the muster-roll, in place of an X. We struck a bargain: he promised to get me army rations, if in return I would make him literate.

That same evening he came to the house on Goodchildren Street, but was not invited in. The cousins pointed out that teaching him to read and write was forbidden under the state's Code Noir*; the fact that the black code was already dead they ignored, having no patience with mere reality. So Royal and I sat down on an iron bench in the patio, and for the first of many times bent our heads over a reading-book that some charitable society at the North had sent his regiment. When he went, he left behind army bacon and coffee and hardtack and cornmeal, which the cousins did not disdain to share that night at supper-time.*

When not working, he and I chatted about the past. I asked him how he felt after killing Monsieur Felix, and he answered solemnly, "I took my first breath when he took his last."

Hesitantly I asked if he thought the Overseer's spirit might walk, as those who die by violence are said to do. Royal laughed his loud laugh and said, "So many have died in the war, he'd be lost in the crowd!"

He inquired after Rose, and began to bring her small gifts, oranges and fruit pies and ices that he bought from the sutlers out of his pay of ten dollars a month. She received his gifts in the kitchen, the only room the cousins permitted him to enter. They stood by and glowered as she thanked him, saying how she rejoiced to see him a free man—at which they glowered more.

In this manner we all lived for a time, but had barely grown accustomed to regular eating, when without warning Royal's unit was sent down-river to garrison the forts at the Head of Passes. Then in quick succession fell two more blows: Papa died from a lethal mixture of whiskey and despair; and our cousins, in an excess of Confederate feeling, refused to take the oath of allegiance as ordered by the commanding general. Straightway they were branded Enemies of the United States and expelled from the city; soldiers seized their house as rebel property, and sold it at auction with all its contents.

Rose and I swore allegiance to the old flag, but it did us no good; we were driven into the street anyway, and a most difficult time began.

* * * *

Ah, how fortunate are those who have never learned the awful truth taught by hunger: that a man will do anything, *to live one single day more!*

I tried hauling rubbish, but 'twas a two-handed job; I did poorly at it, and was laid off. I was for a time doorman of a brothel frequented by Union officers. One of them, a Major Wharton, was sufficiently moved by the plight of a Yale man to recommend me to a sutler, who sold food openly and bad whiskey secretly to the troops. I began keeping his account books, whilst Rose plied a needle twelve hours a day, repairing blue uniforms in a sweat-shop run by the Quartermaster.

Yet for all our efforts, we existed rather than lived in three poor rooms near the levee, beset with bugs of many species, but all equally blood-thirsty. I sought everywhere for my private Spectre, but found him not; at times my bizarre longing to behold again such an one as he made me wonder whether madness might soon compound my other troubles. And then, one night in January, 1863—I remember the rapid, mushy impacts of sleet against the shutters—I heard a shot in the street outside, and feet scampering away.

I tumbled out of bed, lit a stump of candle and hastened to the room's one window. A fat civilian in flash attire (probably a gambler) lay on the paving-stones amongst glistening pebbles of ice. Superimposed upon this image, I saw my own reflection in the dirty window-pane, and something else besides—a tall, thin, black-dressed man standing just behind me.

I whirled around, almost dropping the candle, and of course no one was there. But as I stood trembling, suddenly my confusion vanished and I knew what I must do. I blew out the candle, ran outside in my nightshirt, bent over the dying man and began rifling his pockets. My fingers slipped into something that felt like warm wet liver—'twas his wound—then closed upon his fat leather purse. Back inside, I hid the money (good greenbacks, near an hundred dollars!) in a knot-hole in the floor, and moved my bedstead to cover the hiding place.

I washed my bloody hand and went back to bed. Sounds came and went outside—a mounted patrol clip-clopping past halted, there was talk, and later a wagon clattered up to remove the body. Meantime I lay in bed, scratching my bug-bites, and resolved that henceforth I should take what I needed from the world by force. And though I had been law-abiding all my life, I knew exactly how to go about it.

Next day I used twenty dollars of the gambler's money to acquire an army Colt revolver (the famous model 1860) in the thieves' market that flourished in the alleyways near the Hospital Street wharf. I taught myself to load the weapon one-handed, clamping the grip under my stump, and using my right hand to tamp in powder and balls and affix copper caps to the nibs. That same night I ventured into the narrow fog-bound streets to try my luck. Guided by the glow of wide-spaced lanterns, listening always for the tramp of the provost marshal's guard and the clatter and jingle of the mounted patrols, I robbed two drunks. Though neither yielded as rich a haul as the gambler, I garnered enough to hand Rose money that would see us through a few more days.

"Where did this come from, Nick?" she asked, and I answered, "I prayed to Saint Dismas," meaning the patron saint of thieves.

Night after night I worked to perfect my technique. My method was to come up behind my victims and strike them down, using the heavy pistol as a club; then clamp it under my stump and search their pockets. 'Twas not an easy life, for others of my own kind were in the streets; we snarled at each other like dogs eyeing the same scrap, and twice I had to drive off my fellow jackals with bullets.

Yet these scavengers also became my new acquaintances. I met them in the cheap brothels I began to patronize, and the wretched saloons called doggeries, where I warmed my belly against the night air with dime shots of bad whiskey. From the garish crowd of whores, pimps and rogues who shared my perils and my pleasures, I learned that I was a knuck *or a* sandbagger *when I struck my victims down; that when I searched their pockets I was* overhauling *them; that my pistol was a* barking iron*; that when I tracked my prey in silence I was* padding my hooves. *Yale had taught me none of these things.*

There was also a Creole argot, of which I understood a few words: the women called me bras-coupé, *after a famous one-armed bandit of an hundred years before, or* bête-marron, *meaning a tame beast gone wild. I was struck by that term, because it reminded me that the Overseer's half-forgotten surname had also been Marron—as if we had been brothers.*

And brothers we might have been, brothers in crime. I saw his shadow often in the streets, slipping past a lantern, or sliding along a wall half lit by a red-shaded coal-oil lamp in the window of a bagnio. I recognized him easily by his strange walk; I envied him his silence of movement, and soon learned to take him as my guide. He was clever at finding the staggering sots who remained my favorite prey, and the shadow of his long arm pointed them out to me. He also led me out of danger. One night, when the cavalry were so close behind me that I saw the sparks their horseshoes struck from the cobblestones, I spotted that angular dark form vanishing into an alleyway, followed it and found safety there.

Later—in that deceptive hour just before dawn, when the eyes cannot tell a cloud from a mountain—I saw him again, dimly through a bank of silver mist. With the mad aim of thanking him for my salvation, I shouted, "Monsieur Felix!" and sprang after him. The shadow turned, and like a razor seen edge-on, instantly disappeared. And later that day I started up in bed, awakened by my own screaming.

* * * *

Those who never have been haunted can scarcely believe the power of a Phantasm. Soon even the full blaze of noon could not drive him off. Upon a crowded street my eye would fall upon my shadow against a wall, yet 'twas not my shadow but his; and if the shadow raised its arm, I would find my own rising too, as if he mocked me, saying by a gesture: You see which of us is real, after all!

In my dreams he appeared in many forms: as himself, stalking about in his old black suit, the whip over his arm; as the host of a costume ball, where at midnight the dancers all dropped their masks, revealing the faces of wolves, foxes and rats; as an idol carven of wood, to which dim crowds were bowing, myself among them. Awaking sweat-soaked from such visions, I began to comprehend that the Overseer was no mere ghost—no mere echo or reflected image of one who had lived. By giving himself up wholly to the insatiable passion of revenge, Monsieur Felix had become something stranger than that, more powerful and more utterly lost. And it was to this demonic power that I bowed down, for I needed to draw upon it to save myself.

One night in such a dream the idol's stiff jaw moved, and the well-known voice whispered, Tu, mon p'tit, serais le roi du coton! *At which, upon waking, I could not but laugh. For how should a one-armed knuck become King of Cotton? And yet that very day upon the street a Yankee officer with eagles on his shoulder-straps and a great clanking saber banging at his knees, called out to*

me, "Old Eli!"

'Twas my benefactor Wharton, now promoted to colonel. He asked if, as a onetime planter, I knew quality in cotton, and when I said yes, he intimated that a friend of his wanted to deal in Confederate cotton smuggled across the lines.

So I acquired a new profession, more rewarding than the old, though not less dangerous. Using my knowledge and my weapon and the wood-craft I had learned as a boy, I guided the dealer—a gross creature named Klegg, with especially foul breath—into the rebel-held regions beyond Lake Pontchartrain. There he bought cotton very cheap, intending (as he told me) to transport it to the city, ship it out and sell it very dear at the North, where the factories were starving for the stuff.

My spectral ally guided us well. Twice I saw him standing stiff as a scare-crow in an overgrown field, pointing a long finger in the direction we must take. Returning from our jaunt, I was poling our heavily laden bateau along the sedgy margins of Lake Maurepas, when I saw him again, this time a deeper shadow in the blue dusk, pointing directly at Klegg, who was seated in the bow with his fat back turned to me. Taking the hint, I silently laid down the pole, drew the Colt from the waist-band of my trowsers, and shot the dealer between the shoulder-blades.

This was my first murder, and as the reeking powder-smoke dispersed I was all a-tremble, gazing at the deep round oozing hole in the man's spine, scarce able to believe what I had done. But then I felt a great surge of power, as if now I could do anything. With some effort, I heaved the carcass into a slough, watched a drowsy alligator wake long enough to play sexton, and then, taking up the pole again, went my silent way.

After selling the cotton, I sought out Colonel Wharton, reported the dealer killed by bandits, and bribed him to select me as manager of a west-bank plantation the government had seized from its rebel owner. With free Negroes as workers and government mules to pull the plows, I was soon making cotton for thirty cents a pound and selling it in New York for a dollar-twenty—all without incurring any danger whatsoever!

Thus I attained the dignity of a war-profiteer, and the golden sun of prosperity began to shine upon me and mine. I freed Rose from her wage-slavery; I freed myself forever from the life of a scavenger. I cut Colonel Wharton a share of my profits, and was rewarded when he brought me—now that I had money to invest—into many a profitable venture. I invited him to the plantation, and visited his home; I came to know his dull wren of a wife, with her deplorable hats and her nasal midwestern twang. For the first time I laid eyes upon his daughter Elmira—then little more than an auburn-haired girl, but already giving promise of voluptuous beauty to come.

At first my mutilation frightened her—she thought me some sort of monster, in which she was

more than half right—but in time my ready wit, and the small presents I brought her, made me a great favorite, the more so as she came to pity me. I smiled at her and listened to her chatter, and told her closely cropped versions of my sufferings, for which she pitied me the more.

Elmira, of course, was a project for the future; 'twas pleasant to think that again I had a future. By the winter of 1864 I was back in town for good, and living in fair comfort with Rose in a pleasant cottage in the Third District. And the following spring, peace returned at last.

* * * *

It had been a fine and busy day—wearying, but the kind of weariness that felt good. A whole new chapter completed, the household running like clockwork, everything normal again, just as it ought to be.

When evening shadows gathered, the old man lay at rest, lapped in clean linen, inhaling the smells of rubbing alcohol, bourbon, and the sour saplike odor of raw opium that lingered in the air. Before sleep took him, he again invited Morse to sit on the foot of the bed, and for a few minutes the two men spoke frankly—or at any rate, one of them did.

"I have no one to be my child save only you, Morse," Lerner told him, feeling a curious finicky unwillingness to call himself Morse's father in so many words.

Morse missed the distinction. "Yes. But because of my skin, you use me as a servant, not a son."

"When I die," said Lerner, "you will learn how much I view you as a son."

Morse gazed at him searchingly, as if to read his true thoughts. "Do you encourage me to have hopes, Father?" asked he, almost in a whisper.

"No," said Lerner. "I encourage you to have expectations."

Morse turned away, and a dry sob seemed to rack his chest. "I am sorry, Father, for the trouble I give you," he said humbly, then turned off the lights and left, closing the door to the den noiselessly behind him.

In the dark, Lerner lay back smiling, and played for a time with the thought of actually leaving Morse some substantial sum. How that would outrage the respectable white society of New Orleans! How it would kill them to see a Negro made richer than they could ever hope to be!

But was that really necessary? Lerner's will, after providing somewhat meagerly for his servants—Morse was down for a hundred dollars and his second-best suit—left most of his millions to found a library. A strange bequest for a man who'd seldom read a book since leaving Yale, but the point (as with the vaster gift made for the same purpose by Andrew Carnegie) was the fact that his name would be chiseled over the building's door.

Anyway, merely by giving Morse hope, which cost nothing, he'd safeguarded his own comfort. Truly, he thought, in walking with a demon one learns many things, including the fact that faith, hope, and love—those supposed virtues—may become chains with which to bind a spirit.

Still smiling, he fell asleep, and all the dark hours his next chapter wrote itself, ready to be transcribed in the morning by his hand.

* * * *

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

Wherein I Triumph During the Reconstruction

One April evening, as I sat in the little courtyard behind our house, sipping a glass of tolerable whiskey and watching sunset streamers unfurl across the sky, the gate hinges creaked and a well-attired colored man entered and extended his hand. So quietly did Royal reenter my life.

Smiling at the stranger who once had been my playmate in Eden, I invited him to sit down and called Rose to bring a clean glass. When she saw Royal, she fairly ran from the kitchen, blushing and smiling in her pleasure. Then she recovered her customary demure ways, and asked him how he did. He said well, and she placed her small hand for an instant in his large one, before returning with a light step to making supper. I poured Royal a whiskey, he offered me a segar, and for a time we sipped and smoked, whilst covertly observing each other to see what changes the years had made.

"Nick, I hear you've become a Union man," he said at length, his voice strong and firm with the habit of command.

“Yes,” I replied dryly. “‘Twas conversion by the sword.”

He laughed. “You were smart to make the change. Now me—I’ve been discharged from the army, and mean to enter politics as soon as my people get the vote. They’ll need leadership, and I can supply that.”

I said quietly, “Watch your back.”

He leaned forward and peered at my face. “Nick, I hope you ain’t like the Bourbons, who learned nothing and forgot nothing.”

“You’ve been reading history, I see.”

“Yes. And mean to make some.”

“Royal,” said I, “this city is full of people who have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. And most of them know how to shoot.”

Indeed, they were returning every month by the hundreds—beaten soldiers, political exiles—like red-hot pumice stones raining down in the aftermath of an eruption. I saw them every day about the streets, people with pinched faces and missing limbs, the most desperate bending over garbage heaps behind the great hotels.

Royal was unimpressed. “Well, we’ll have to work together to rebuild. I want to offer the former rebels the hand of friendship.”

I smiled a little, thinking what was likely to happen to a hand so extended. But I said diplomatically, “Away with the past! Let us live for the future!”

Rose called out that supper was ready, we emptied our glasses, and Royal departed. When I went inside, I saw that she had laid three places at the table. She said in a disappointed voice, “He didn’t stay to eat?”

“Why should he stay to eat?”

“Well, he was one of our people, after all.”

“No longer,” I answered, “now he belongs only to himself.”

I piled into my food, still smiling at Royal’s notion that Yank and Rebel could work together to rebuild our shattered world. Oh yes, my deals with Colonel Wharton shewed that Blue and Gray could be brought together by the color Green. But well I knew that the spectrum of the time contained also a deep crimson stripe—the color of rage, of unburied hate, of blood-vengeance.

As if to confirm my belief, a few days later a strange man with a scarred face limped through our gate at sunset, when as usual I was drinking alone. He introduced himself as Brigadier General Eleazar Hobbs, late of the Confederate Army.

I said quickly, “I am a poor man.”

“I haven’t come to ask for money,” he said with a grim smile. “I’ve heard that you too wore the gray.”

This I acknowledged, and he invited me to join a club he was forming to discuss the current state of affairs in the city, the state, and the South.

For the founder of a debating society, he asked some odd questions. Eyeing dubiously my pinned-up left sleeve, he wanted to know if I were able to handle a weapon. I still went armed, the city being so disturbed; I had long since retired the old 1860 model revolver as a memento of difficult but exciting times, and replaced it with a new-model Remington, a sweet weapon that fired up-to-date brass cartridges in place of loose powder and copper caps.

I drew this gun, cocked it, took aim at a broken flower-pot against the garden wall and blew it to pieces. Hobbs nodded thoughtfully, and for a time we chatted, his preferred topic being the intolerable arrogance of the liberated slaves. When I told him frankly that I had taken the Iron-Clad Oath and knew a number of blue-backs, he was not disturbed.

“We need a friend in the camp of the enemy,” he said, and I began to understand what he wanted of me. A new and secret war was beginning, and I was being invited to serve in it—as matters turned out, to serve on both sides!

I found it an odd sort of struggle. Brigadier Hobbs and his friends let strictly alone the blue-coated soldiers who once had been their enemies, for killing them would only bring down upon the South all the calamities of years past. Instead, they shot presumptuous blacks and Republicans of all hues. The Red River in particular proved to be well named, from the hundreds of bodies that floated down it.

'Twas my old neighborhood, its byways well known to me, and I had a ready-made reason to go there, for I was attempting to regain control of Mon Repos, or what was left of it. The house had been burnt by one army or the other, or by bandits—I never learned which—but the land, with its alley of great oaks, remained. That summer, on a trip upriver I tracked and killed a man I did not know, nor why he needed killing: my sole motive being to prove my bona fides *to General Hobbs.*

Need I say that Monsieur Felix accompanied me? I first saw him on the boat, seated near the stern-wheel with sparkles of light gleaming through his shadowy form as he gazed at the frothing tumult of the water. A day later, when I had slain my man in a little wood near the levee, and was turning away, I saw him again, standing amongst the cottonwood trees with arms folded—looking on with great interest, but making no sign, like a wise teacher who lets an apt pupil learn by doing.

The thought struck me then that I was different, not only from the man I had been, but also from the man I might have become without his guidance. I might have been a good man; I might have been a dead man. Most likely I would have been both—good and dead!

In any case, why dream of what had not happened? With my latest victim lying at my feet, my whole being hummed with tigerish joy, for again I had broken the bonds of conscience and felt free to do anything. So I nodded to Monsieur Felix in a comradely way, and passed on.

* * * *

All that busy morning, with the words flowing from his mind as smoothly as the ink from his reservoir pen, Lerner had nothing to complain of, except that Morse in performing his duties seemed a touch too familiar.

Give a nigger an inch, he thought, *and he'll take an ell.* At lunchtime he spoke firmly, saying that discretion was the first thing he would look for in any man who aspired to be his principal heir.

“In short,” said Morse, his voice as pettish as a spoiled child, “despite what you said last night, in the sight of the world I am to go on being your nigger-man.”

Hearing him use the same word, as if they shared a bond of mind as well as blood, gave Lerner an odd feeling. He answered almost defensively:

“I have never treated you so, but as a member of my household and as my right-hand man. Think about it, and see if I do not tell the truth.”

Whether convinced or not, Morse apologized again, and after serving the meal and cutting the meat for him, departed as silently as an Arabian Nights servitor. Smiling, Lerner refilled his pen, set to work, and the tale emerged without a single deletion or correction, like the automatic writing of a seer.

* * * *

Back in town, I began to find my true role in the Reconstruction. Not as a killer, of whom there were more than enough, but as a peacemaker—a reconciler of differences. Who could be a better go-between than I, who had lost a limb for the Cause, yet had sworn loyalty to the Union? I spoke to each side in their own language, and my tongue moved freely, as if hinged in the middle.

Without undue arrogance, I aver that within a few years I became an indispensable man. Most of my time was spent in the lobby of our statehouse—the pompous, gold-domed, elegantly decaying St. Louis Hotel—where blood enemies combined forces to build a new ruling class upon the ruins of the old.

Ah, I can see it now! The walls covered with stained and tattered silk; the floor scattered with spittoons, of which there never were enough, for the Turkey carpet was foul with spittle. I see servants hastening about with tall amber bottles and trays of crystal goblets that ping at the touch. I see the all-male crowd, smell the hazy bitter segar-smoke, hear the whispered conferences, feel between my fingers the stiff smooth rag paper as drafts of pending bills whisper and slide from hand to hand. And amongst the portly scoundrels with their embroidered vests and gleaming watch-chains, I perceive a rail-thin figure that flickers and comes and goes like a mirage, his one good eye gleaming like a splinter of glass.

One day when I was busy conniving, someone touched my shoulder. I turned to find Royal smiling at me. He was rising fast in the postwar chaos—a former slave who could read and write and knew how to exercise power. The tattered slave-boy had become a soldier, the soldier a state senator and a man to reckon with, through his influence over the Negro legislators.

"Nick," he said, "I might have known I should find you in a den of thieves."

"Come, Senator," I jested. "Governor Wharton would not like to hear a fellow Republican so describe his friends and supporters!"

He shook his head, smile broadening. "Nick, there is something uncanny about you. That a one-armed Rebel should emerge as the governor's—what's a polite word for it—"

"Legislative agent, shall we say?"

"Just so. The Master of the Lobby. You know, my constituents are all black folk, and from them I hear whispers that at night you transform into a Klansman—although that I refuse to believe!"

"I hope you disbelieve it, mon vieux, *for that is a vile slander put about by the envy and malice of my enemies."*

"I rejoice to hear it. Nick, I wonder ... can you tell me whether the Governor has decided to sign my bill?"

"The one to legalize marriage between blacks and whites? I think he will swallow it, but only if sweetened with a spoonful of sugar."

He made a face. "How much?"

We quickly struck a bargain. The governor wished the Legislature to charter a rather improbable railroad, whose stock promised a handsome return from foreign investors ignorant of the fact that it was to run through a fathomless swamp. Royal agreed to swing the necessary votes in the Senate, and I guaranteed him a certain quantity of the stock to pass around.

He said with relief, "Old Wharton is so greedy, I thought he would want a bag full of gold!"

"No, there's more money in railroads. However, his daughter, the lovely Elmira, is soon to enter

society, and a thousand dollars toward the cost of her ball and ball-gown would help to seal the bargain."

That was how things were done in Louisiana. But why do I say were? *And why do I imply that things were done differently in General Grant's Washington, or Boss Tweed's New York? Yet some differences between North and South did exist: as was proved by a Mardi Gras ball I gave early in March, 1870, and the crisis that followed, making and unmaking so many lives.*

* * * *

Although my house now stands deep within the city, in those times it stood upon the Uptown fringes of settlement. I designed it myself, a place of stained glass and gables and towers and spires, all painted garishly as an Amazon frog, in a deliberate affront to the classical taste of the age I grew up in.

Within, gaslight glittered upon glass and silver, upon long tables piled with steaming food, upon champagne that flowed in sparkling rivers. The noisy throng was a patchwork of colors and a Babel of languages—a muster-roll of all who were corrupt, entertaining, and important in our world. How different from this dismal Twentieth Century, when white and black are hardly permitted to breathe the same air!

I took pleasure in inviting men of all races and factions, and women of all professions, including the oldest. I hoped they might amuse me by striking a few sparks from one another—little dreaming upon what tinder those sparks would fall.

At the time I was still a bachelor; Rose was doing the honors as hostess, and Royal asked her to dance. My dismay was great when I saw Brigadier Hobbs staring at them: they were a handsome couple, carven as it were of teakwood and ivory. But in Hobbs's scarred face burned the eyes of a crouching wolf.

I can hear the music now—a waltz called (I think) Southern Roses *—and the stiff rustling of the women's gowns like the rush of wind through dry autumnal trees, and the scrape of dancing feet. When the guests were leaving, an hour or two before dawn, Royal pounced upon me. He was in a strange mood, exalted and more than a little drunk.*

"Didn't I tell you that reconciliation would come? May our connection grow ever closer!" he exclaimed, almost crushing my one remaining hand.

“May it be so!” I replied, striving to retrieve my fingers intact.

“‘Tis very late, Nick—or rather, very early—but I have a proposal to make. Could we speak privately for a moment?”

The word “proposal” passed me by entirely. I bowed him into my den—into this very room, where as a crippled old man I sit in a wheeled chair, writing. And here he rather grandly announced, in terms even then old-fashioned, that he desired to form “an honorable union” with Rose.

‘Twas the worst shock I’d had in years. Rapid visions flashed across my brain of how Brigadier Hobbs and his friends would react, should a member of their society allow such a marriage to take place.

“Brother,” I said, swallowing my feelings with difficulty, “I’m honored by your confidence. Of course, I must commune with my cousin. I fear that your proposal might place her in great peril.”

“She is resolved to face it with me.”

“That sentiment does her honor. But speak to her I must.”

“Of course,” said he, bowing like a dancing-master. “I shall return in—shall we say a week?—for your answer.”

No sooner had he left than I confronted Rose, who met me with a face both scared and determined. I dragged her into the den and shut the door to exclude the servants, who were busy gathering up the fragments of the feast.

“How dare you connive at this lunacy?” I demanded, grinding my teeth.

“I dare, because it is time for me to be born!” she declared. “Here I am, twenty-six years old—almost too old to marry. And what have I ever been but an orphan, a poor relation, a seamstress to the Yankee army, and a housekeeper to you? I have never had a life! And I am resolved to have one now, ere it is too late!”

“This affair must have a long background!” I raged. “Yet you never confided in me, though I stole and killed for you.”

“You stole and killed because you are a thief and a murderer!” she replied. “Royal is worth twenty of you. Did you know that long ago when we were children, he would risk a whipping to sneak upstairs and bring me flowers? That he would sit on the floor and tell me about his adventures, whilst you never talked to me at all, except to say good morning and good-bye?”

“What!” I thundered, “has it been going on that long?”

“He is a strong, wise man with a brilliant future. Have you forgotten that he killed that beastly Monsieur Felix to save me?”

It quite maddened me to hear that when I killed I was a murderer, but when Royal did the same he was a paladin.

“Royal shot the Overseer for his own revenge—you were incidental. You have always been incidental, Rose, a mere burden for others to carry, dead weight upon the road of life.”

“Cochon!” *she cried, and slapped me so hard my head rang. Then, weeping, she flung open the door and fled upstairs to her bedroom.*

I closed the door again, took a dusty bottle from the tantalus and poured a triple brandy. I had swallowed about half, when a movement in the corner of my eye caused me to turn.

I can see the room as it was then—indeed, as it still is, save for the electric lights: the heavy red draperies; the dark crouching furniture; the small iron safe; the broad burled walnut desk; and the wavering shadows cast over everything by a gasolier’s twelve flickering bluish points of flame. Against a wall covered with expensive French paper, something moved—a black shadow cast by nothing tangible.

“Well,” I demanded, “what the devil shall I do?”

A very apt way of speaking, all things considered. And in that instant I knew—knew how to handle the situation—as if I had spent years and years planning every detail.

I finished the drink, climbed the stairs and went to Rose's room, where she lay sobbing upon the bed. Sitting down beside her, I spoke in the quiet, calm voice of a man who has regained his sanity after an emotional storm.

I reminded her that we were linked by blood, that we had been children together, that we had shared many perils and helped each other to survive terrible times. I lamented that we had both said things we should not have said. I said that she ought to have prepared me for Royal's proposal, which had come as a great shock.

"I ask only that you take a little time to be sure, my dear. I have but recently cleared the taxes from Papa's old land near Red River, and must take a brief trip there to get a new survey made. If, when I return, you are still resolved to marry Royal, you shall find me a champion of your right to choose him, and his to choose you. And you shall have a dowry proportioned to my wealth and your deserts."

We wept together; I begged forgiveness a thousand times. She called me her dearest friend, her other self, the best and most understanding of men. I have never known why women believe the things men tell them—or vice versa.

In my bedroom I smoked a last segar, smiling without mirth as I saw with clear, unimpeded vision how the demon had saved and shaped my whole life to this very end. "Damn it all to hell," I exclaimed, "je m'en fiche! *I don't care!"*

But in that I lied. I cared, but knew that I could no longer change my course, which was fixed for all time. And perhaps beyond time as well.

* * * *

Next morning, without the slightest warning, after days of quiet, all the arrangements meant to secure Lerner's comfort broke down at once.

He woke from opulent dreams, as rich as those recorded in DeQuincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater.* Dreams of caravans pacing across deserts where the light was blindingly intense; of chiming camel-bells and wailing flutes; of dark-eyed houris glancing through silken veils that covered

swaying howdahs; of Mameluke guards with crooked swords and prancing horses; of lavish pavilions where dancing girls twirled on rose carpets to the twanging of dulcimers.

And, yes, Monsieur Felix had been there, smiling his razor-thin smile and rubbing his hands like a master of ceremonies whose every gesture seems to say, "What wonders our performers will show you tonight!"

Then Lerner woke, tasting ashes as usual, and saw Cleo's scared face and chignon peeping around the bedroom door like a polka-dotted messenger of doom. He didn't even have time to ask what had gone wrong when she blurted out, "Oh, Mr. Nick, Morse he been arrested, him!" And burst into tears.

The rest of the morning was spent unraveling what had happened the preceding night. It wasn't easy. Two years back, with great reluctance Lerner had allowed a telephone to be installed in his house. But Morse had done all the calling, and when the old man wheeled himself into the hall to use it, he discovered that the box had been placed too high on the wall for him to reach.

So his questions had to be passed through Cleo—who was hysterical—and after he sent her away, through the cook, a sullen woman with the improbable name of Euphrosyne, an import from South Carolina with a Gullah accent as dark and impenetrable as a flagstone. The information from the other end of the line (first from Lerner's lawyer, later from a police captain named Hennessy) had to come back by the same cross-African pathway.

But the old man was persistent, and knew how to offer Hennessy a bribe without actually using the word. So he learned that what the captain called "your pet nigger" was the talk of Storyville, where—it now appeared—he'd been a familiar figure for years, known for dispensing money (*whose* money?) with a free hand, and for his rough way with the women in the cribs and colored brothels. A piano player called Professor Jelly Roll had already produced a "jass" composition in his honor, called *Mr. Morse's Blues.*

Lerner knew nothing of so-called jass music, except that it was said to be noisy. But as the story unfolded, he began to feel that Morse from his very conception had been headed for this reckoning. Apparently he began his evening with a few pipes of opium at some den near the docks that he'd discovered while procuring the drug for Lerner. Heading home, he entered a street-car while still befuddled and, finding it crowded, sat down on a bench meant for whites. The conductor and motorman ordered him to vacate it and stand behind a yellow sign that courteously stated *This Section Is Reserved for Our Colored Patrons Only.* Morse refused, and courtesy perished as the two men hustled him off the car and flung him into a mud puddle.

Considerably disheveled, Morse repaired to a saloon that served Negroes whiskey through a back window. He swallowed a few quick shots of courage and proceeded to a bawdy-house to seek further comfort. His choice of establishment was either deliberate arrogance or a grave mistake. The Madame, a fearsome mulattress who called herself Countess Willie V. Piazza, had built a fine business by providing

handsome colored women to a clientele of white men only. She took one look at Morse—mahogany-hued, smelling of drink and much the worse for wear—and refused him admittance. When he forced his way inside anyway, she summoned the police, and Morse topped off a busy night by assaulting not one but two brawny Irishmen.

With Hennessy's assistance, Lerner's lawyer found Morse in a cell of Parish Prison, where the police had been amusing themselves by playing drum-rolls on his ribs with their billyclubs. Bribes were necessary merely to preserve his life; when he was dragged before a magistrate, the lawyer had to guarantee his bail. Prison remained a distinct possibility, only (the lawyer warned) to be averted by still more bribes. When Morse at length was returned home by cab, Lerner not only had to pay the hackman, he had to hire a doctor to tend Morse at two dollars a visit. By evening of a day of upheaval, Morse was lying in his room upstairs, the doctor had cleaned his wounds and strapped his ribs, and Lerner was in a greater rage than was safe for an elderly man.

Damn him! he thought. *Were he not a kinsman, I would let him sink or swim! Doesn't he know what can happen to a man of color in the grip of our police?*

Well, of course he knew. It was just that Morse, Lerner's pet from his birth, protected by the walls of this house, hadn't thought it could happen to him.

Next morning—sleepless, ill-shaven, nerves ragged for lack of his drug, back pains lancing him like sparks of pure white fire—the old man returned ashen-tongued and red-eyed to his task, under a compulsion made somehow worse by the events of yesterday.

* * * *

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

Wherein the Demon Proves the Real Winner

As a burning sun rose over the Father of Waters, I boarded a steam packet on the levee at Felicity Street. I had already visited a telegraph-office, and sent two local wires, one to Royal and one to Brigadier Hobbs.

Whilst the shore fell away, I stood gazing upon the broad churning wake of the stern-wheel, and the wide, ever-busy river beyond. I watched the crowded riverboats; the sleek steamers from overseas trailing plumes of ash from their smoke-stacks; the sailboats with little patched sails, and the scows with men hauling at the sweeps; the green banks and the low, irregular levees; a

party of church-goers clad in white gowns, being baptized in the shallows; and the floating and diving gulls that screamed in harsh voices.

Amidst all this busy life, I felt a strange loneliness, as if for all my wealth and influence I was but a gypsy and a wanderer upon the earth. My earlier homicides had been easy enough, for I had slain men who meant nothing to me. Perhaps I was not yet entirely what my master had designed me to be, for the thought that I must now play the role of Cain lay upon my heart like a stone. Somehow, through many years of dark deeds I had preserved the memory of my time of innocence, in which Royal played so large a part. Even if the tale told in the Bible be true,which I doubt, a vengeful God merely cast Adam out of Eden: he did not demand that he go back and befoul the very fountains of his former Paradise with blood.

Hoping to shake off my melancholy, I started to take a brisk turn about the deck, but stopped when I saw a well-known figure sitting at the bow, still as a carven figurehead. So the Overseer was coming along to see his revenge accomplished. I was not surprised—after all, the patient devil had waited nine years for it.

At Red River Landing, a tolerable inn survived, and I engaged a room. The town was muddy and straggling as in times gone by, but it boasted two or three steamboats tied up and unloading, with black laborers not unlike the slaves of yesteryear—indeed, they were *the slaves of yesteryear—chanting work songs as they trotted up and down the gangplanks, with heavy loads miraculously balanced on their heads.*

In my room, I laid my pistol upon the usual marble-top table, beside the usual chipped wash basin and flowered pitcher. Then I lay down to rest upon an ill-smelling featherbed, drawing a dusty musketo-net about me. My thoughts were sombre, but I did not have long to indulge them. Came a knock on the door, and the innkeeper—a huge man with smaller eyes in a larger face than I ever saw before—handed me two telegrams, and stood waiting whilst I read. I put the telegrams under my stump and began to fish in my waistcoat pocket for a coin.

"I'm not wanting a tip," he said in a low drawling grumble of a voice. "General Hobbs has contacted me. Where'd you lose the wing?"

"Shiloh. Better come into the room." He nodded and followed me.

"I was there too," he said. "I saw General Johnston killed. The minny-ball broke an artery in his leg; he turned white as cotton and bled to death in half a minute. Is this a matter of honor, or politics?"

"Both. You'll find that I know how to be grateful."

"I'm sure." Despite omitting the r, he made two syllables out of sure. *"You want the nigger to go slow, or fast?"*

"Fast."

"Night or day?"

"He's no fool. He won't go out at night. And you don't want him killed here."

"So it's daytime, then, which means masks and an ambush."

In whispers we completed our arrangements. After engaging his horse and buggy for the morrow, I explained that I had grown up nearby.

"I'm from Arkansaw, myself," he said. "You owned the nigger in the old days?"

"Yes."

"Ah," said he, sadly shaking his massive head. "They was happier then." He left the room with a surprisingly silent tread, for so big a man.

Everything was in readiness. I dined without appetite, slept poorly, but was waiting at the dock with the landlord's buggy when Royal strode ashore from the morning packet. As if impersonating himself, he was all strut and boldness, jaunty and dressed in flash attire—a claw-hammer coat and top hat—at which blacks and whites alike turned and stared. I hailed him, and he leaped into the buggy, which swayed under his weight, and gripped my hand.

"Nick," he exclaimed, "Never did I think we would meet here again, and for such a reason!"

I said, "Since you're a bird with two wings, perhaps you'll drive?"

He took the reins and snapped them with the casual ease of a country-bred man. The horse shook its mane and the buggy rolled with a jingle of little bells along the old familiar road that led to the ruins of Mon Repos. The day was fine, the ground dry and the spring weather cool and bright, with fair-weather clouds above, and great shadows flitting soundlessly over woods and meadows.

As we drove, I plunged into recollection, chattering nervously in a manner most unusual for me. Royal (a great talker) responded in kind, and soon we were pointing and exclaiming as if we were boys again. My school had been reduced to a few scattered bricks, and 'midst the ruins of the church I saw—fallen and rusting—the iron bell that once had tolled for the death of a world. We turned into a dim track, where tall grass brushed the underside of the carriage with the sound of rubbed velvet. Near the stark chimney that alone had survived the fall of Mon Repos, Royal tugged at the reins and we halted.

For a minute or so we sat silent. Then he said, "I was amazed at your telegram, Nick."

"I designed it to be amazing."

"Frankly, Rose and I were prepared to defy you, if need be. But how fine it is that you consent to our marriage—and that you intend this land to be Rose's marriage portion!"

"I could imagine nothing that would please either of you more than to own Mon Repos," I replied. "It's the logical dowry."

I watched covertly as Royal's natural wariness dissolved in the grip of irresistible emotion. "To own the land where I was once a slave!" he exclaimed, his voice choking midway in the sentence.

He gazed like one transfixed down the long alley of noble oaks, where gray streamers of moss floated on the breeze with the silent grace of shadows. I began to talk about the taxes, the difficulty of getting tenants to work the fields, and the need for a new survey, since most of the old landmarks had disappeared.

"Those were to have been my problems," I said. "Now I fear they will be yours. And you must be on your guard, my friend. The Klan's active hereabouts—you're safe enough in daytime, but a prominent colored man with a white wife should beware the night."

He grinned and raised the tail of his fawn-colored coat to shew a handsome silver-mounted pistol in a holster of tooled leather hanging from a wide cartridge-belt.

"I am prepared for anything," he said.

I shook my head at his fatal arrogance. How can a man be prepared for anything?

"Ah, look," I said, pointing, "do you remember that path? It led to our swimming-hole, did it not?"

He turned and craned, and as he did so a figure in robe and hood stepped from behind the chimney and raised a rifle. A shot exploded, and the round buzzed past me.

Frightened, the horse reared and whinnied. The buggy tilted; I grabbed at the reins and struggled one-handed to get the animal under control. Meantime, like a good soldier Royal leaped to the ground and rolled and fired.

His shot killed the idiot in spook attire, and the Klansman's hand, contracting in death, squeezed off a round that struck the horse in the brain. The animal crashed in the traces, the buggy overturned, and I was flung out and landed with a thump.

Well, the whole thing was a hopeless mess. I scrambled past a wildly spinning wheel, jumped to my feet, and found that I was alone amid the ruins of Mon Repos.

The assassin lay like a heap of soiled bedclothes on the ground. Royal had vanished into a nearby stand of trees, and I heard shouts and shots and the crashing of men plunging through the dense second-growth of pine and sweetgum saplings.

A shotgun boomed. Silence for six or seven heartbeats, then two revolver shots, Blam! Blam!

Desperate to learn what was happening, I drew my pistol and followed the sounds into the trees. The wind seemed to hold its breath; invisible birds were screaming, but the noise of the fire-fight had slain all movement save mine.

I paused and stood listening. The shotgun boomed again close by, followed by a revolver shot and

a strangled outcry. I hastened through the blinding tangle, panting, inhaling the reek of sulphur mingled with the wine-cork smell of spring growth.

In a little glen I found a figure weltering in the grass—another hooded man, a big one. I lifted the hood and saw the landlord's broad face and tiny eyes. He had been shot through the throat, and his sharp little eyes turned to dull pebbles as I watched.

A new fury of shots broke out. A deathly pale young man broke from the thicket and ran past me, his breath rattling like a consumptive's. He ran like a hare, this way and that, either to make aiming difficult or simply in the madness of fear. Then he was gone, and I was alone with Royal.

I whispered bitterly, "You might have spared me this."

I had not forgotten all woodcraft, and slipped without a sound past slender pale trunks and rough pine branches, over thorny mats of wild grape and thick dying undergrowth. In the treetops strong sunlight vibrated, but down in the tangle evening colors—blue and bronze—enveloped me. Then I stumbled on a heap of dry wood, something cracked under my feet, and behind me Royal's voice said, "Hello, Nick."

I turned and faced him. He leveled his revolver and said, "Your weapon."

A smile of relief began to cross my lips, and he said more sharply, "Come, come—your weapon! And let me tell you, brother, you have but little to smile about."

In that he was wrong, for I was watching Monsieur Felix emerge from the ruins of his house. Then that unforgettable voice ground out, Aha, tu p'tit diable!

Royal turned his head, and looked into the one glinting eye and the one oozing pit. That was when I shot him down, and shot him again where he lay.

For a long moment the Overseer and I stood gazing at each other over the body. He smiled, that thin smile I remembered so well, like an arroyo between his blade of a nose and blue hillock of a chin. I hated him then, yet not half so much as I hated myself, for having sold my destiny forever to such an one as he.

Then, like a shadow struck by light, he vanished without a sound.

* * * *

Strange, very strange, he thought, rereading what he'd written. After all, his tale was a confession. But who was he confessing to? God had long ago departed from his universe, and Royal and Rose already knew his guilt, assuming they knew anything at all.

The slow approach of shuffling footsteps in the hall interrupted his brooding. Hastily he locked up his manuscript and assumed the demeanor of a hanging judge. The door opened, and Cleo and Euphrosyne together helped Morse limp in to face the music.

His face was swollen, one eye was a purple plum, and he winced at every movement from the pain of his ribs, though the doctor had told Lerner that the bones were only cracked, not broken.

The old man greeted him with silence, then waved the women away. For several long minutes Morse stood before him, his one good eye fixed in contemplation of his toes. Finally Lerner spoke in what he hoped were the tones of Fate.

"I suppose you know that you might have been beaten to death."

Morse nodded.

"I can't prevent you from embarking on such adventures again. But I can withdraw my protection. Once more, and you're on your own. Then you'll either die at the hands of the police or else go to prison where, I promise you, you'll learn many things, but nothing to make you grateful to your teachers."

Morse nodded again. He already knew that he would be forgiven one more time. How else to explain the fact that he was here, rather than lying on the oozing brick floor of the prison, watching enormous cockroaches feast on spatters of his own blood? He also knew without being told that he'd reached the end of his rope, that he'd have no more chances, and that his hopes of inheriting a portion of the old man's wealth were probably over.

What he couldn't know were the thoughts passing through Lerner's mind. The old man was looking at Morse but, still full of the story he'd been writing, thinking not of him but of himself and Royal.

Well, we all come to it in time—we are broken down to ground-level, and must construct ourselves anew. If we survive, we become stronger: with few exceptions we do not become better. For most of us, when all else has failed, turn to the demon.

He drew a deep breath, said, "Sit down," and watched Morse relapse, wincing, into the same chair—now battered and dusty—where Rose had sat so long ago.

Opening the safe, Lerner took out a fist-sized parcel of rice paper. He unwrapped it, revealing a sticky dark mass of opium. The doctor had obtained it for him at a handsome markup; he used the drug in his practice, and made sure that it was legally bought.

From the tantalus, Lerner lifted a crystal flask of bourbon and two shot glasses. By now Morse had raised his one good eye and was watching as if mesmerized. Lerner prepared two shots of laudanum and offered one to Morse.

After they had both swallowed their medicine, and the mixture was spreading a slow fiery comfort through their veins, Lerner delivered his verdict: "Hereafter, Morse, you will use the drug with me in these rooms, and nowhere else."

"Yes," he mumbled. "Yes, Father."

"I take that as your word of honor," said the old man, noting wryly how odd the word *honor* tasted on his tongue. "If you break it, I will have no mercy on you. Now help me to bed. Tomorrow you'll do only what is most necessary, and otherwise rest."

The bedtime ritual that night was even slower than usual, with Morse wincing—sometimes gasping—with pain, and pausing again and again to recover. Lerner had plenty of time to think, and what he thought about was how, in one way or another, he'd lost everyone who had ever been close to him: Elmira, his and Elmira's children, Papa, Rose, and Royal.

All of them gone. Soon he would be gone too. But it was still within his power to save something from the wreckage, through a man of his blood who would live on after him. *He is, after all, the last of our family and, even if adopted, the only son I shall ever have. But if he continues the way he's going, he will die too, and nobody will be left at all.*

Old people have to decide things quickly, having no time for the long thoughts of youth. He resolved to act tomorrow—summon his lawyer and settle everything while Morse lay resting upstairs in bed. Lerner's old habits of deep suspicion didn't quite leave him, for he also thought: *Better not tell the boy. I know what I might do, if one old man stood between me and a great inheritance.*

He smiled craftily, thinking what a surprise ending he could now give his confession. Then leave it to be read once he was safely gone. Confession might be good for the soul, but if incautiously made public might be death to the body. After all, he reflected, his veins and Morse's held much the same blood.

* * * *

No one instructed me as to how I should conceal my crime (he began to write next day, after the lawyer had come and gone). *Nor did anyone need to.*

I grasped Royal's hand, dragged his carcass down into the glen, and pressed my pistol into the hand of the dead innkeeper. Then I set out briskly enough, rehearsing my story as I went, and after disarranging my clothing, staggered into Red River Landing, crying out a shocking tale of ambush and sudden death.

All who saw me that day knew that I truly grieved, though they did not know why. General Hobbs, of course, knew what had happened, but my secret was safe with him. Rose (I think) divined the truth, but could do nothing, having no protector but myself, and needing one more than ever, because she was with child.

'Twas almost miraculous, how all the pieces fell into place. The hue and cry over the murder was great, for Royal had been a rising star of the Republican Party, and his death became a hook upon which President Grant could hang new and stringent measures against the Klan. In the months that followed, I traveled to Washington thrice to testify, and made (I may say without false pride) a good job of it: in lengthy testimony on the Hill, I never made a serious error; never was at a loss for words; most important of all, never told the truth.

Based largely upon my testimony, Congress concluded that two loyal Union men had been attacked by Klansmen, one being killed and other barely escaping with his life. The outrage led directly to passage of the Ku Klux Act, which caused so much trouble to General Hobbs and his friends: 'twas under that law he was later arrested for some trifling murder, tried by military commission, and sent to Fort Leavenworth, where he died.

Thereafter I was a marked man amongst his followers, as I was already a pariah to all who hated

the Yankee occupation. Yet isolation was familiar to me, and I was not unhappy to be rid of so impulsive and violent a friend. For great changes were in the air, and a cool head was needed to take advantage of them. In 1873 a depression devastated the Grant administration, which was already falling by the weight of its own corruption. Another three years, and the Democrats seized power in Louisiana; Governor Wharton was impeached, and departed public life with a fortune (said to be in the range of two millions) to comfort his old age.

He paid me a handsome price for my land near Red River, and there built the grand and intricate monstrosity of a house he calls Réunion. He sited his mansion at the end of the great oak alley, clearing away the old chimney in the process, and the ruins of Monsieur Felix's house as well, which spoiled his view. 'Twas in this house, in rooms that were perfect symphonies of bad taste, that I courted his daughter Elmira, and won her consent to be my bride.

The marriage was sumptuous. Like the great slave-owners he had always secretly admired, the Governor displayed an instinct for magnificence. As the wedding day approached, he imported from South America hundreds of spiders known for the beauty of their webs and turned them loose in the oaks. When their shining orbs had taken form, with his own hand he cast handfuls of gold dust upon the threads.

Up this astounding aisle, more splendid than any cathedral, 'midst golden glitter and dancing sunlight he led Elmira, clad in ashes-of-roses chenille and watered silk and Brussels lace, to where I waited for her beside the soaring staircase of Réunion. There we were wed, and the parson prayed that our marriage might symbolize an end to the strife which had so long bloodied the State and the Nation.

After kissing my bride, I embraced my new father-in-law with one arm, whilst he hugged me with two. Tears leaked into his whiskers as he saw his family joined forever to what he liked to call, in hushed tones, "the old aristocracy."

Rose's story was less glorious. Eight months after Royal's death, she gave birth to an infant which she freely acknowledged to be his.

I was by then a busy man, between my Washington trips and my courting of Elmira, and was at some difficulty to cover things up. In the end I arranged for Rose to visit Natchez in the character of a widow, accompanied by a discreet woman of my acquaintance. There a hale and noisy male infant passed through the gates of life, and entered this world of sin. The final act of the tragedy came when Rose died of a hemorrhage resulting from a difficult labor. Well, she had always been sickly and frail—not a good candidate to bear a large and lusty man-child!

I was somewhat at a loss what to do with this new and (at first) unwelcome kinsman of mine. I

expected to have children with Elmira. Along with the Old South had vanished those easygoing days when a large brood of varicolored youngsters, some slave and some free, some legitimate and some bastards, could all be raised together under one paternal eye. Since then a certain niceness and propriety had come into life, and appearances had to be preserved.

I named the boy Morse, an uncommon name for a black. At the time I knew not why I chose it, though I now believe 'twas a strangled echo of the remorse I felt over his father's death. I hoped that he might be light in hue and featured like an European, which would have made everything easier. But in a few weeks it became plain that—despite a double infusion of white blood, from his mother and his father's father—robust Africa was stamped firmly and forever upon his visage.

I put him out to be suckled by a wet-nurse in the Creole quarter, and this woman solved the problem for me. Recently she had lost an infant and been abandoned by her lover; she longed for a child, and she needed work. I took her into my household as a maid, where she remained until her death, representing herself to Morse as his mother. I believe that this woman, spotting a certain ghostly similarity in our features, decided that Morse must be my bastard, and in time passed on this bit of misinformation to her charge.

Yet he was my kinsman, and discreetly I watched over his raising, as in the past Papa had watched over Royal's. He grew strong and clever, learned to read and write and cipher to the rule of twelve, and in my service was trained to the duties of an upper servant. The walls of my house shielded him from much that was happening to his people in the outside world where, abandoned by the North, they were made into serfs by the South.

All unknowing, I was preparing a caretaker for myself. Ever since I had angered the Klan, a series of events had placed my life in danger: I but narrowly escaped two assassination attempts, and once had my house set on fire (though so incompetently that the blaze was readily extinguished). I hired Pinkertons to protect me, and for a time the attempts ended. But in '93, on busy Canal Street at noonday, an empty four-horse dray came careening around a corner and knocked me to the ground. The vehicle swerved around the next corner, and vanished: 'twas later found abandoned in a weedy lot near the river, the horses unbridled and peacefully cropping grass. The driver was never discovered—or so the police reported.

Thus by a spinal injury I became an invalid at the age of fifty, when otherwise still vigorous and in the prime of life. Believing that my former associates had forgotten nothing and forgiven nothing, I turned increasingly into a recluse, dependent upon Morse, the only caregiver I felt that I could trust. And so—

* * * *

Unnoticed by Lerner, dusk had come, and with it came Morse, barging through the door with a touch of his old insouciance, despite his stiffness and the plum over his eye, carrying the dinner tray in which the old man felt no interest, and the drug he truly needed.

Lerner hastily put away his manuscript and closed the safe. Toward the food he made only a gesture, swallowing a forkful here and there and thrusting the rest away. After he had been settled for the night, Morse sat down beside the bed on a footstool, his head resting against the moss mattress, and they shared the opium.

As usual these days, one dose of laudanum wasn't enough for Lerner. The second put him into a state like the trance of a medium. He saw the specters of the past rising up about him, and whispered, "Look, look there."

"Where?"

"There, in the mirror. Can't you see him? It's Monsieur Felix! Look how his one eye gleams!"

"You're crazy, Father," Morse said, not unkindly.

"He wants me to come with him to his house. It lies halfway to the quarters, and once there I can never leave. Ah Morse, how can I tell him *No*, when I have so often told him *Yes*?"

"Rest, old man," Morse said, "for the past is dead and gone."

"No, no, 'tis a phantom limb that aches more than a real one, for there is no way to touch it, to heal it, to give it ease."

"Sleep," Morse said, and mixed him yet another dose. Lerner drank it off at a gulp, choked, gasped for a moment, then relaxed against his pillows.

Little by little the shadows of the room turned bronze, then brown. For a time the old man seemed still to be conversing with Morse; he heard voices, one of which sounded like his own, and unless mistaken he heard spoken the word *perdu*. But the voices became still; he found himself enjoying a brilliant scene of people waltzing at a masked ball. Then nothing.

Next morning he woke with his head, as usual, filled with ashes. For a time he lay in bed, unable even to reach for the bell. When his mind cleared, he rang as usual, but no Morse appeared. Nor anyone else.

After ringing again and again, Lerner, cursing, stretched out a trembling arm, drew the wheelchair beside the bed and despite a shock of pain, wrestled himself into it. Where the devil was everyone? He trundled to the door of his den and flung it open.

The safe door stood ajar. He rolled into the room and put a trembling hand inside. The manuscript was gone. *Well,* thought Lerner, *he was always a clever fellow.*

The house was utterly silent. Morse must have sent Cleo and the cook away. Lerner spun the chair this way and that. What to do, what to do? The telephone was out of reach, and anyway Morse might be waiting in the hallway. The old man peered back into the bedroom, but with only the one barred window it was a trap without an exit. He couldn't lock himself into the den, for the key to the hall door had vanished years ago—possibly removed by Morse, so that he could enter at will.

And he'd put his life into the hands of this man! Soon he'd be coming to accuse Lerner of murdering his real father. Coming with the razor, but not to shave him.

He turned to his desk, pulled out a handful of ancient bills that stuffed a pigeonhole, pushed aside a panel at the back and touched a hidden spring. A second panel opened into a dark recess. He thrust in his hand and pulled out the Remington. He clamped it muzzle-first in his left armpit, broke it open and checked the load of six brass cartridges. He snapped the weapon shut again. The hammer was stiff, but he cocked it easily with his one hand accustomed to doing the work of two.

He hid the gun under his lap robe and wheeled himself back into the bedroom. Closing the door to his den behind him, he waited for Morse—an old and crippled wolf, but not a toothless one.

Yet his first visitor appeared, not at the door, but in the mirror. Monsieur Felix couldn't bear to miss out on what was about to happen, and suddenly there he stood in the clouded pier glass—one eye gleaming, thin smile widening like an arroyo between the blue chin and the great blade of a nose. Perhaps he was too eager, for Lerner read his mind.

Why, he wondered, *did I ever imagine his vengeance would stop with Royal? Did I not call him swine, connive at his death, supply the weapon that killed him? Did I not write my confession at his command? In an opium dream, did he not cause me to speak the word* perdu *that let Morse*

open the safe? Is it not his pleasure now to destroy me and Royal's son at one stroke? For either I'll kill him and perish of my infirmities, or he'll kill me and go to the hangman for murder.

At that moment the door slammed open and Morse entered, razor flickering in his hand. His face was swollen, his eyes drugged to pinpoints, his smile an arid duplicate of the one in the mirror. He whispered, "I've come to scrape your throat, Uncle."

Lerner pulled the revolver from under the lap robe. Morse halted like a man suddenly transmuted into stone. In the fearsome quiet that followed, Lerner spoke to him for the last time.

"Whatever else I've done in a long and mostly foul existence, Morse, remember how at the very end I saved you from the hangman's noose and gave you a new life for my brother's sake."

Two crashes of thunder. The shards of the mirror were still tinkling on the floor when Lerner slumped in his chair, the pistol slipping from his hand.

The smoke was dense, and through it Monsieur Felix, emerging from the shattered mirror, passed like a shadow seen in fog. He stared at Lerner, absolutely baffled. The vatic power he depended upon, the power that enabled him to plan his murders a decade or more in advance—why had it been blind to this possibility?

J'ai perdu son âme, he thought, almost in despair. *I've lost his soul.*

Then he turned his gaze on Morse. His trademark smile slowly rekindled, as he recalled the deepest secret of the young man's life: how, as a child, he'd entered the nursery in this house, turned Elmira's son over in his crib, and pressed the baby's face into the mattress until he suffocated—all out of fear that the white child would take his own place in Lerner's favor.

Now the poor devil needed help, which Monsieur Felix was always happy to supply.

Gradually Morse recovered from his shock. First he'd forgotten to breathe; then panted like a winded animal, heart thundering. Now his breath evened, his heart slowed to a regular beat. He folded the razor and put it into his trouser pocket, while cool thoughts seemed to rise from some unshaken region of his mind.

I must touch nothing. I must telephone the police. I must report the suicide. His illness and the drug will explain everything. And aren't the police identifying people by their finger-marks these days? Well, his finger-marks are on the pistol's grip.

But there was something else. *The police—suppose they decide to bury the evidence and hang me as they've hung other blacks, for the mere pleasure of it?*

A thought tickled the back of his mind. *There's something in the desk.*

He turned back into the den. Took the razor out again and threw it into the safe, so it wouldn't be found on him. He slammed the iron door, spun around, knocked the pile of ancient bills off the desk and reached his arm to the elbow inside the open hidey-hole. What was he touching?

He pulled out a leather purse with a string closure, opened it and grinned at the cylinder of gold double-eagles it contained. *Why, the old devil,* he thought. *Here's his secret cache, and all the time I thought it was in the safe!*

A few bribes would enable him to handle the police, and that was all he knew or cared about now. The fact that he would soon be rich—that he would have power beyond the imagining of ordinary people to exercise an appetite for cruelty that had grown up in him during a lifetime of stifled rage—all that remained to be discovered.

The Demon stood behind him, smiling, lending him useful thoughts, mentoring him, delighted as always to be the Overseer of human destiny.

Aha, le p'tit diable! whispered Monsieur Felix. *Him I won't lose.*