

The Taming of Jezrul

By Virginia Frazer Boyle

It was a nine days' wonder that Jezrul had ever taken a fancy to Lemuel's Crecy, for Jezrul was Colonel Greene's butler, as pompous, if not so rotund, as the Colonel himself, and Lemuel's Crecy, as every one know, had never done anything but pick cotton in her life.

But the fancy grew, and so did the stories, when Jezrul asked that she might be brought from the field and taken on trial as a housemaid. When Madame demurred, Jezrul promised to assist in the training himself, and he begged so hard that Madame finally agreed, first stipulating, however, that Crecy should learn to wean shoes; and this was how Jezrul's trouble began, for Crecy could not be fired with ambition even by the most ardent lover, and did not even appreciate the honor conferred.

Moreover, it was impossible to keep the shoes on her feet, though Jezrul tied them hard and fast every morning, with a warning; but they turned up mysteriously in every corner of the house, once even—oh! the horror of the thing!—behind the door in Madame's drawing-room, and were discovered just in time to save Jezrul from overwhelming mortification.

In view of his contract with Ole Miss, Jezrul groaned helplessly in secret, as Crecy plodded plantigrade about the house, slipping nervously into the little black prisons and opening her mouth wide whenever she was called; but he was loving Crecy, and even these thorns, as sharp as they were, were blunted by love's power.

The hardest trial came about through the conventionalities of high life in the Quarters, for Jezrul was a born gallant, and used to the making of pretty compliments, copied studiously from the "Big House," but which "language of the court" was as Greek to Crecy's oars.

Then there had been a little feeling when Madame had given a great ball and Crecy had been ignominiously sot aside as too awkward and ungainly to serve upon the occasion, though that pain had been soothed by the policy of Jezrul, and the culmination came at the time of the Christmas "break-down."

Ole Manse had just been to New Orleans, and as a Christmas gift to the Madame had brought Susanne, whose "Cagion" French and cunningly arched head-handkerchief bow had proved too much for Jezrul's peace of mind, for he was an ardent believer in feminine accomplishments. And how she could dance! Her very feet seemed to be made of a different material from those of the others. Louisiana was giving Mississippi points, and, alas! the star of Mississippi was on the wane.

In her humble blue cotton gown, at first Crecy was awed and dazzled by the unfamiliar gorgeousness of the new-comer, with her flashing eyes and sallies of wit, until she saw the all-devouring gaze of Jezrul; then the reality fell like a leaden weight, and the fires of jealousy burned briskly, fanned, too, it is to be feared, by meddling observers, for in all of the gayeties Jezrul had not even seemed to see her. At first she sat apart, aimless and listless, watching the pain through half-closed eyes; it was a new experience, and thought travelled slowly. Then she threw herself wildly into the dance.

"I lay I l'arn him ter go kerhootin' arter er strange gal!"

Faster and faster flew her feet; now she curtsied, now coquetted with a shuffling would-be partner, always keeping within the circle, but always dancing alone, with her eyes fixed upon the object of her jealousy.

“Go it, Crecy!” shouted the fiddler, and the music and patting grew louder and faster—“Pea-patch Ladies,” “Chicken in the Bread-Tray,” “Buzzard Lope,” and a score of others; then a medley of wild, half-savage fiddling and chanting followed, and the dancers were tiring out; but still Crecy whirled, her body swaying almost to the floor as she spread the folds of her swelling skirts. She was dancing to the pair, but Susanne and Jezrul wore oblivious. Susanne was teaching him a shuffle that he had never seen before, and he was beating time for her, independent of the chanters. There was a strange light in Crecy’s eyes, and then Lemuel tried to drag his daughter from the floor, for the fiddler had stopped to rest, and the singers had quit from sheer exhaustion. But with a high, resonant note she struck into a wilder chant alone, wheeling and veering like a wounded bird.

“Look!” came the awe-struck whisper.

Still swaying and singing, every movement consorting with the rhythm of the chant, she bared her shapely body to the waist, whirling now above her head and now about her knees a cluster of rude castanets swung by a leather thong.

At each revolution, accompanied by a high note in the wail, the rough edges of the shells cut sharply into the steaming flesh.

The space was clear; every dancer had given way: they had been dancing for a jubilee, but this dance was another thing. The spell was irresistible; one by one the hoodoos who had been hanging on the outskirts moved forward, first with a vibrating finger, then with a waving arm, like the great claw of a sand-fiddler signalling from his hole, and then the entire figures, rags and all, reeled with the horrid song.

Only the hoodoos joined in it; the rest were dumb; and at last even Jezrul and Susanne were conscious of the mysterious thing, and Jezrul touched the charm he wore around his neck, and Susanne laughed softly and nervously.

Out and in, the figures of the hoodoos turned, weaving a cabalistic sign with that of Crecy, from whose breast and shoulders the blood was fast trickling.

The chant and dance, if such it could be called, continued for nearly three-quarters of an hour, when suddenly the girl raised both arms, with a yell like that of a crazed animal, and fell upon her clattering castanets; and the hoodoos carried her out, for Lemuel was afraid to touch her.

A red glow lighted the cabin faintly. Goochers and sweet-potatoes were roasting on the hearth, but Crecy let them burn.

Mumbling and moaning, she was busying herself with rags and sticks and thread, for out of her rude material she was fashioning a man.

“I gwine tame him—I gwine tame Jezrul! He gwine fool de toof or de big green sarpint. He gwine be hot in de mouf an’ cole in de belly. I lay I gwine l’arn him!”

Slowly the work grew under the clumsy, eager fingers, and the sunbeams wore shining through the chinks before she hid the little image of Jezrul in a crevice by the chimney.

All that day Crecy moped alone in the cabin; she had been dismissed from the “Big House” for nodding over her work, and Jezrul had not even interceded; but there was some comfort in it all, for she was freed from the humiliating comment of the house

negroes and the despised shoes had been left behind, though the loneliness was oppressive, for the Christmas festivities were at their height. Still keeping her fast, for she had eaten nothing since the day before, she stirred the coals upon the hearth, whipping her wrath into a frenzy; and as she heard the voice of Susanne in the quarters and Jezrul's laugh that followed, she thrust the image through with a toasting-fork and held it over the flame.

"Burn! Burn!" she hissed. "Burn wid do fires dat's er-eatin' out dose in'ands,— 'case I gwine ter tame you, Jezrul! Burn, I say!" And putting out the blaze that started, she held the thing over the coals again. "Hit 'll retch yo' heart, an' sizzle hit lack de fires or de debil, 'case you gwine ter be mine, Jezrul!"

Day after day Crecy tortured the little image, now sticking it full of pins, now scorching it again, but always taking the precaution not to utterly destroy it—"case he cain't die—'case he's mine," she muttered.

Though night after night the festivities went on, Susanne coquetted and Jezrul laughed, and Crecy was forgotten.

But New-Year's Day had filled the quarters with sensation, and dozens of oars were tingling with the news.

Old Manse had been giving a stag dinner to the judge of the circuit and the attorney-general. They had been sitting at table for nearly three hours, and Jezrul, who adored such great personages, was in his glory; but just as he was bringing in the cigars and liqueurs with his usual flourish upon such occasions, he fell in a fit at Old Manse's feet. Such a thing as a ripple in the course of one of Old Manse's dinner-panties had never occurred before; the Colonel was beside himself, for he was helpless without Jezrul.

Jezrul was a long time in coming round, and in the confusion Susanne threw her apron over her head and went into hysterics, as the knowing ones whispered; while down in her cabin alone, with the little image stuck full of pins and pressed close against her breast, Crecy gave a fiendish yell, for she believed that the spell she had set, was working at last. With ghoulish delight she tortured the miserable doll; and day after day, fearful and livid with superstition, but still unwilling to give up Susanne, Jezrul fell to the floor under the strange delusion; and at last, too ill even to creep up to the house, he begged so piteously for the curse to be removed, that the Colonel thought that he was wandering in a fever, and alternately bled him to remove the engorgement and stimulated to remedy the depletion, until he dragged about, dodging and starting at the casting of his own shadow.

Susanne was comforting in these dark days, and he could not give her up, for her long slender hands were as ready as her nimble feet; and the wiseacres said that Susanne would marry Jezrul if he ever got well, which now seemed very unlikely. But a pair of great wide eyes were watching the ministrations furtively and jealously, and another little image, a smaller one in petticoats, appeared in the cabin.

There was plenty of gossip in the Quarters, beside the blazing pine knots, over the sweetpotatoes and chestnuts roasting in the ashes, for though the fits were coming upon Jezrul harder than ever, he had suddenly refused to let Susanne even come near him, and Maumer Belle touched her cunger knowingly, and said that she had seen Jezrul turn away from Susanne in positive loathing, for all that he had loved her so; and Susanne, in

mortification, finding no sympathy among the negroes, had gone to the Madame, but Ole Miss calmly told Susanne that Jezrul was crazy—"as crazy as a loon," said Ole Miss.

"Dat's nuffin," said Unc Ephraim, throwing his blazing cob into the fire and adjusting another. "Dat's on'y what we gotten 'spec', case hit's de dark er de moon now, an hit's nuffin but on hoodoo dat ail Jezrul, an' Crecy she sho at de bottom uv hit all. Maumer Belle, yo' knows yo' tole Lemuel dat Crecy gwine ter be er hoodoo, 'fore she were free day ole."

"Um, um," grunted Maumer. "An' las' night my Sam he rid fru de parster, er-sarchin' fur de muel colt dat git out somers, an' he say dat de hoodoos was er-dancin' ergin in do big ditch; an' sech er dance! an' Crecy were wid 'em. Crecy was er-swingin' dem shells ergin, an', Sam say, wore er-scatterin' ashes ober her head, too, an' putty nigh start naked, lack she were de odder night, an' I sho dun'no' what Lem mean fur ter let dat gal take on so; but yo min' my words, 'case I knows what I's er-tellin' yo, dat mean dat Jezrul gwine ter take Crecy back 'fore he git outen dis. Hain't no common yarb truck nor teas gwine ter do Jezrul any good, 'case Crecy sho tamin' uv him."

There was a thoughtful silence and a steady gazing into the fire, when a hoarse scream brought the gossipers to their feet.

"Dat's Jezrul," whispered Maumer Belle, "an' his voice soun' sorter nat'rul."

The night was very dark, and the sick man had fallen in front of his cabin, but by the uncertain flare of the hastily lighted torches the watchers could see Crecy down upon her knees beside him, and the willowy form of Susanne scurrying away into the shadow.

"Take hit off! take hit off!" he moaned. "I's er dyin' man, but I lubs on'y you, Crecy!"

The teeth of the girl glistened in the torch-light.

"Fur good?"

"Fur good." It was only a whisper, but it was an earnest, solemn truth.

Her right arm was around his neck, but her left hand was pressing into his the little images of Susanne and himself.

"Come inter do cabin an' burn 'em wid you' own han', honey, 'case dat 'll make yo' well!" Crecy rose and led the way, and Jezrul meekly followed, for Jezrul was "tamed."