



THE BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS

CHAPTER 6

THE TAVERN KEEPER'S TALE

And

MONSIEUR VILLERE'S TALE

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I run a first-class *taverne*. It is very *populaire*. Half my family works here. The other half works in our bakery. All of us are driven in our own way to achieve perfection. That is how we were raised. My *grand-père*, my mother's father was a proud soldier in Saint-Domingue and renowned as a baker. He was a free man, a slaveholder in fact, who paid his own fare to New Orleans. And married BeBe here, lighter even than he was. They raised my mother on Rue Tremé. She and BeBe punched bread dough every day until their arms were *très formidable*. All of us grew up baking great loaves like the limbs of trees.

Our *boulangerie* is still very successful with the *hôtels* and people from all over the *cité*'. BeBe is old now, but she sits by the door, which she leaves open in all but the worst weather to let out the aroma. It is our best advertisement. Passersby on the street are drawn in irresistibly by the smell of baking bread. They carry our *croissants* away on the *banquette*. BeBe speaks a sort of French and island *patois*, welcoming passersby walking down the street and everyone who enter our establishment. In New Orleans, customers love a friendly shopkeeper.

All the people in Tremé speak French. French is the language of my family, but my father was born of an Englishman who happened to be passing through

Quebec. So my father is multi-national, but truly a *Québécois* who speaks both languages. He was sent to *La Louisiane française* by a Canadian investor hungry for plots of land. This all sounds confusing. My father, you see, was a surveyor. He taught me in English. I speak this language quite well, which is becoming an especially valuable skill in New Orleans.

Anyway, I took a different path and, with my uncle on my mother's side, opened our tavern. He supplied the money which he brought with him from the island and I supplied my talents. I am good with people and have soothed the wounded feelings of many an offended aristocratic drunkard. We've always had entertaining ladies, of course, (I manage them well) though they don't interest me except as necessary employees.

We trade with the newcomers, these Americans from upriver, every day. We are happy to do it though they may lack the finesse and sensibilities of our regular patrons. So far, their paper money is nearly as good as gold. Bargemen and sailors, soldiers and speculators, they all like to drink and gamble and they all pay in cash.

"Parrot," they say. "You run a mighty fine saloon here."

My name isn't "Parrot," of course. It is Peret.

Now the Americans have placed a navy here – four gunboats painted red and white, a frigate and a schooner – to "protect the city," they say. Since when do we

need protection and from whom? First they say, from the French, of which I am one. So that is unnecessary. Then they say, from the Spanish, who ruled this province until quite recently. Spain is a nation much loved by the Negro slaves hereabouts, since all of them were considered subjects of the king to whom they could appeal for relief from harsh treatment at the hands of their owners, but it is a bloodthirsty Christian nation much feared by my parents. It is the French, after all, who believe in *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. And now the Americans, they say they are here to protect us from the English, who are my father's own people.

Well, whomever they are protecting us from, the Americans are here. They drink in my bar and they buy baguettes by the bushel and piles of pies from our bakery. We are a state in *des états-unis* now. We were sold, river and all, by our distinguished consul Napoleon. Why? Was it so that the Americans, not the Emperor, would have to defend our swamps? Governments are all so temporal and I, for one, hope it stays that way. I dislike regulations and I find personal opportunity in transitions. I will prosper. Everybody needs good wine. Everybody needs good bread. Every man needs good love.

My family doesn't, however, socialize with the Americans.

This city is my home. These Quarters are what I know. Every stone means something to me. I can sit by the river and watch the Africans load the ships. Such

artistic bodies with rippling muscles. Inhaling the coffee, smelling the burlap that comes wrapped around boxes of ladies' millinery, carried by men with the broad chests of a Minotaur. I have my place here and I will never leave.

I will tell you though that, especially since the Americans arrived, the color of my skin can be very inconvenient. I am often mistaken for a slave. Foreigners, strange to our society, can be rude. Or they will seem not to see me, as if I were just some empty vase of flowers. They expect me to step out of their way or hold the door open for them. Generally, in New Orleans, our slaves are treated very well. (My own sister has a slave who is much more trouble than she is worth, yet my sister still keeps her.) But just like no one wants to go to heaven tomorrow, no one wants to be a slave.

The magnificent Africans who work on the quays, loading and unloading ship after ship after ship, live in shanties beside the river. Their hovels flood not just in the spring but every time it rains. Every time. The air around these pitiful *baragues* is foul with the smell of sewage and it swarms with biting insects. These people raise pigs and chickens and they sleep with them to keep them from being stolen.

You and I would think it a terrible punishment to live like that. We would think that these slaves, forced to work the docks, would much rather work at their

masters' sugar cane plantations upriver, carved out of the swamps to be sure, but comparatively orderly and clean. People in the country - they have nothing but fresh air and healthy food from the garden, while those who work the ships in New Orleans live in filth and pestilence. Surely, we would think no one would prefer that life. But we would be wrong. The slaves who live here in the mud relish the ease with which they can find wine to drink or loose women to chase, but mainly they love the illicit bits of money they can make in a hundred different ways even though they are the property of another man. Their women sell sweets. "Come, come and try my sweets." Do you know what a sweet is?

Even those slaves who have their little businesses on the side must have a pass to walk on the street or else they risk getting arrested. My sister's slave is required to have a pass, though she is so lazy she hardly ever goes outside.

"Why don't you get rid of her?" I ask.

"Because she dresses me and keeps me company. And she makes a wonderful *gumbo z'herbes*."

Sure – once a year she makes a soup – but I keep my mouth shut to keep peace in the family.

I obviously don't need a pass because I am free.

The slaves can't be armed, also for obvious reasons. But I am very much armed. I have a collection of weapons. In it are a Charleville .69 caliber smoothbore musket and a Denix flintlock pistol. Very valuable and deadly. I prefer weapons known to have been used by Napoleon's soldiers. Foolishly, I suppose, I put almost all of my earnings into this collection and I plan to leave it all to my closest friend Robert, who also helps me manage my tavern. He's afraid to fire a pistol or shoot anything, but he likes the ornate craftsmanship and precision of the mechanisms. With them will go this history of how they were used. There is no one I particularly wish to shoot either, but our militia, Major Daquin's Company, is ready for the bloody English if and when they come.

We parade and drill incessantly in the Place d'Armes but now we have to share space in the square with the other Louisiana militias who have been called up. They are *blanc* Frenchman from the so-called good families. Ours is also made up from the best families, but we are considered *les gens de couleur libres*, free people of color. Quite as good as them, but they may not think so.

My uniform is superior to theirs anyway. *Objectivement*. In Plauche's white *milice* there are, perhaps, four hundred men, and in my Daquin's company there are only two hundred - but we are a splendid force. We are precise as pieces on a chessboard, as the petals of a flower. Our epaulets are imported and immaculate.

Our boots are polished like the eyes of hawks and every one of us knows it is not just for show. I am certainly content with my *couleur*.

The war is coming. The Americans are bringing it with them. There are not many American soldiers here yet, but more are expected any day. The English will be right on their heels.

In Daquin's militia our aim is true.

When all the marching and fighting is over, when we retire into our taverns before going home for the night, I have to confess I have this one little fear. Don't you get it? a little voice says. The Americans have slaves by the thousands. One-sixty-fourth negro blood makes you to them a slave. And here you are, the color of *café au lait*. Wake up my brother, that little voice whispers.

I talk to Robert about this over a glass of wine after our guests have left, and he tells me, "Don't worry so much. The law will protect us."

Yet we all know that what passes for the law in Louisiana is as substantial as a flight of geese in the sky. We are a new *nationalité* every day. Wherever the geese choose to rest tonight, that is "the law."

"What, dear friend, do you and I have in common with any American?" I ask him.

“Love and money,” Robert says. “We all have that in common.”

We open a second bottle.

“What you neglect to mention,” I say, “is that the Americans can make their money by taking over our businesses. You yourself are only a whisker away from being an African in their eyes, light as your soft skin may be. Who says you won’t need a pass to walk down a public street?”

“You are exercising yourself unnecessarily,” he replies. “We are well established. And we always have your guns.”

“You are not being serious,” I tell him. “You must realize that there is no way we will come out of this okay. We have to rise up now while we can.”

“That’s the wine talking.”

He’s right. Never mind. I’m drunk. I impose my remote and irrelevant concerns on a beautiful moonlit night.

* * *

When I look back on it now I just laugh. It's all because I lost a bet. We were at this speakeasy where the colored people sell their rum. It's cheap, but consider the source. Top of the line comes from Cuba, by way of the pirates, and even it is guaranteed to be watered down. Bottom of the barrel comes in from the sugar plantations where the slaves make it in the stills they hide in the woods. We have slaves so I'm acquainted with the flavor of that raw liquor and it will get you drunk as a bishop. An archbishop. Drunk enough and you're lucky not to get cut up and hung from a lamppost for sport, you might say.

Colored people are not just admitted to this tavern but are welcomed. In fact they own the place. No griffes or quadroons in the front bar, thank you, but fair young octaroons who make a living pushing drinks. In this place a mulatto is called a lady. They pose themselves on barstools as if on settees in an aristocrat's parlor and our soldiers and businessmen chat them up.

I had business in the city and rode about two hours to get from our estate to here, from way out in the country. I had been summoned to town by my father, who is the general of our state militia and a man not to be trifled with. I presented myself in the Cabildo and was shown to the "war room" where I was introduced to the American commander, Andrew Jackson. He is here to take charge of our defense and our forces and has a face accustomed to sucking lemons. That was my first impression.

I was, however, careful and deferential since he had arrived in the city with at least a thousand men under arms and he demanded obedience from one and all. That's how my father put it, with a little wink and a nudge, but I didn't see much humor in the American's stony eyes. Of course, I couldn't understand everything that was said since French is my tongue and the words our new general, or possibly colonel, spoke made little sense to me. *Mon père* was at a total loss and had with him a black slave who did his best to translate. A bit of a farce, this politeness. Jackson clearly despised us both.

They were seated at a square table and drinking well water and I was ecstatic that my interview was short. I got my orders and they were easy enough. I was to return immediately to the comfort of our plantation downriver, nobly named Conseil, a place where we would enforce the judgments of, alas, Napoleon, and once home, I was to secure the waterways about and post sentries against a possible invasion. The dubious path through Bayous Bienvenue and Mazant was, of course, just one of a hundred ways the British could get ashore. I heard no special emphasis being given to the possibility.

With the business of my meeting with "The General" concluded, I could relax for the rest of the afternoon, and have a fine meal with my friends. Dugas, linked to me by marriage but no longer linked to the land like I was, is my running partner in the graceful city. He had left his estate behind, after years of failing to

make money growing indigo, and, with that decision, he lost his chance to make real money, which is in sugar. Sugar cane, *sucré*, molasses, rum, just so many words for lucre, dix, and money. Too much work, he said. Live while you can. Buy and sell imported ladies' finery – that's the thing. And he wasn't doing too badly at it though the war had disrupted the flow of embroidered underwear from Europe.

Our conversation went like this, translated of course from the French.

I say, "I'll take two cards. Trust me, the Englishmen won't be coming here with their artillery and soldiers. That would destroy the very place they want to capture. They will use Mobile for their base and simply blockade the mouth of the Mississippi River until we give them anything they ask for."

"No," protested Dugas. "That would take too long. They would run out of food. They have sent an army far from home, and they will want to use it. Their best play is to storm the gates, to rob and plunder, then to take what they want for themselves. There is endless money to be made in New Orleans and an ocean of taxes to collect."

"Well, if you are right, they will sail into Lake Pontchartrain and have their pick of good spots to land. They can come in by way of Spanish Fort and Bayou St. John, for instance, and who is to stop them?"

Also in our game was the grand pirate Lafitte, his goatee gleaming like licorice. He is a near-gentleman who likes to show off how much money he has in his pocket. He says, as if he actually knew, “The English are coming right enough. Why else would Jackson and those hundreds of Americans be pitching their tents ten blocks from here? Why is that red-bearded farmer standing by the bar over there? Have you ever seen his type here before? I have, but without a uniform when he was trading tobacco for Spanish silver. Now he is here to fight the English. Why are we under martial law? Why am I to be arrested in the morning?”

“Really? You?”

“Unfortunately, it’s official. I want three cards.”

The brown dealer to my right, a man I know as Parrot, whose relatives were all about the place tending bar, selling feathered darts and guarding the door, says, “I hope you are right, Monsieur Lafitte, since I am a lieutenant in Daquin’s militia which General Jackson has fully activated. We are ordered to report before dawn to the *terminus* of Bayou St. John and to march from there to its mouth at the lake and occupy the defenses. I am told that those are nothing but mud walls and an old wooden platform for the cannon we are supposed to get someday. Here are your cards, monsieur. I will be proud to fight. I do agree with Major Villere, however,” indicating me, “that Lake Pontchartrain is not where the British will invade. They

will show up at Monsieur Lafitte's grand port at Baratavia, south of New Orleans but close to their ships. Those ships, as everyone knows, rule the waves."

They all laughed. Lafitte's pirate ships ruled the waves.

"That's ridiculous," Lafitte said. "There is deep water there, sure, but then it's nothing but marsh. They couldn't stand the bugs and the snakes."

"You make that passage often enough, and it doesn't seem to bother you," Dugas said, and they all laughed again.

"They have engineers," the colored dealer Parrot pointed out .

"And you, my friend," Dugas said to me, "hadn't you better get back home and mind your own house as ordered?"

"I'm going back tonight, but not because of Mister Jackson or the English. Because I want to see my wife."

"And because you were told to, yes?"

"Perhaps there was a translation problem," I suggested.

"Be on your way my insubordinate friend. I'll bet you ten dollars you see more than your wife. Your plantation is closer to the sea than any other likely spot."

“Monsieur Dugas could be right,” the dealer Parrot said. “I’ll join him and bet you another ten dollars they come down your Bayou Bienvenue.”

“You’re both on,” I told them. “We will meet right here after this affair is concluded and settle up these wagers.”

Home I went, riding with my cousin Celeste under a winter moon and a cloudless sky. We nursed a bottle of wine of a far better quality than any native rum or hillbilly spirits. I brought another bottle for my wife and even got it safely home. Together we drank it up and slept like the dead, dreaming only of our Christmas coming within the week.

Just two days later, very early in the morning, relieving myself from my porch when I thought I was the only man under the heavens to be awake, I watched the mist rise gracefully from the river to my left and shroud in mystery the swamp to my right. In between were God’s richest acres, now covered with stubbles of harvested cane all glistening with dew. It was magical. The slave quarters, fifty-two happy and healthy souls, emitted cheerful morning sounds. The mules in the barn were waking up and hee-hawing for their breakfast.

Then I looked into the woods in the direction of Bayou Mazant (named for another of our French Canadian pioneers) and here they came, rifles in hand, red uniforms and all.

Never have I seen anything like that here, there or anywhere. First a few scouts came into the pasture and sniffed around. And a minute later the whole lot came pushing out of the trees and into clear view in my yard. Someone, an officer obviously, pointed to my house, and all at once every one of them came straight in my direction at a fast trot.

I had barely enough time to run inside and shout at my wife to tell her to get dressed, and at my sleeping cousin, and then jump out the back window like a fleeing adulterer and run for my horse. I mounted him without a saddle and spurred him into action. Leaving the household to fend for itself, my horse and I raced up the river road past De La Ronde Plantation and then on to New Orleans spreading the alarm to everyone I encountered.

My bets with my friend Dugas and the colored saloon keeper were lost, but the latter had to run hard to collect it. His majesty, General Andrew Jackson, had sent the plumed Creole militia to guard Lake Pontchartrain, and when I sounded the alarm, he ordered them to run full speed five miles back to the city. Before nightfall the autocratic American had massed all of his coarse highland riflemen, together with some real uniformed American soldiers, and our Louisiana militias, both the colored and the French, to rush into battle on the Advent of Our Lord, the night before Christmas Eve.

Our heroic forces engaged the British on my family's land and shelled their new camp from a ship on the river, just as the enemy was getting settled around my Conseil home. What a chaotic mess that made of everything we owned.

I, unfortunately, missed it. I was in the gentleman's gaol. His majesty Jackson, surprised by the invasion, took it out on me, impugning my character by suggesting that I had done little to block the mouth of Bayou Mazant, into which our drainage canal emptied and the route by which the invasion arrived. To do as he said actually would have been impossible since we had nothing to block it with, but we nevertheless had placed sentries there in the Spanish fishermen's village. Those vagabonds were never heard from again. Knowing these itinerants and the negro as I do, I am sure they joined the Englisher to get as far away as possible from their rightful service to me and my family. Andrew Jackson actually had me court marshalled, but I was of course fully exonerated when tempers cooled.

It was a good thing that the Americans and our brave militiamen shocked the British that night, tucked away in their *lits* and drinking the wine stolen from my house. Meeting the invaders forthrightly and quickly denied them a wide-open road to New Orleans. Taken prisoner, my wife was sent across the lines a few days later by one Colonel Thornton, and she joined me in the city. Had I not escaped I would surely have been kept as a hostage, as a very important militia major, and I might not have been exchanged until months after the conflict ended. As it was, we

were free, but my family home became the enemy's headquarters and it was stripped bare of everything of value when they finally left.

I think my role was quite heroic.

Our fifty-two slaves, however, were stolen from us and I am still waiting to hear what the state legislature intends to do about that.