

"At The Corner of Absinthe and Anisette"

From: An Elephants Track and Other Stories, by M.E.M. Davis

AN ELEPHANT'S TRACK AND OTHER STORIES

By M.E.M.Davis

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AT THE CORNER OF ABSINTHE AND ANISETTE

IT was drizzling, and the banquette was overlaid with a black slush which seemed to ooze from the very paving-stones. The girl standing on the corner - her slim, white-gowned figure softly outlined against the pink stucco of the wall behind her - appeared curiously at variance with the November-afternoon gloom. The single passenger in a street-car crawling past glanced out at her with a momentary gleam of interest. "She looks like a bayou lily," he murmured, returning to his evening paper.

There is nothing earthly which can compare, for whiteness, with the bayou lily - hovering above the dark marsh like a tethered soul - pure, spotless, radiant; exhaling an innocent perfume, its flexible stem rooted far below in the slime.

The drizzle became a downpour, and the few pedestrians scurried into shelter, leaving the narrow street quite deserted. The girl drew a little farther under the high, projecting balcony, with its wrought-iron balustrade. Her white gown, slightly open at the throat, as if designed for indoors, was drenched with the wind-blown rain; though, by some miracle, the hem remained unsmirched by the ooze beneath her feet. She was very young. The delicate, almost child-like face beneath her round hat was pale; her violet eyes had a strained, expectant look. She leaned against the wall of the old building, trembling, as if frightened or over-fatigued.

The heavy batten shutters were flung back; their enormous bolts turned aslant; the inner doors, whose upper halves were composed of fancifully shaped panes of ground glass, were closed.

On the same spot - christened by some dead-and-gone wag The Corner of Absinthe and Anisette - stood, in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and thirteen, the self-same building. It was even then more than a quarter of a century old, and a conspicuous landmark in its isolated situation; a few low habitations only clustering between it and the outlying swamps, and but a thin scattering of houses stretching down to the river. The steep roof of the single squat story was tiled; a long arm thrust out from the eaves held a lantern over the muddy, unpaved street. It was a cabaret then as now; and then, as now, famous for its "green hours."

Its rough outer wall, one morning in the autumn of that year, was adorned with a large printed poster which set forth, in the three languages then current in the old town on the Mississippi, the misdeeds of one Jean Lafitte, smuggler, marauder, desperado, and pirate, and offered, in the name of his Excellency Governor Claiborne, a reward of five hundred dollars for the capture of the said Jean Lafitte and his delivery into the hands of justice.

The laughing eyes of a knot of apparent idlers on the wooden banquette were turned alternately from this placard to the tall, handsome man - no less a person than Jean Lafitte

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himself! - who leaned against the wall, the long, curling locks of his hair blown against the signature of his (late Provisional) Excellency. But there were covert flashes of malign intelligence in some of the laughing eyes, and an imperceptible movement of the crowd towards the batten door at the outlaw's right hand. His own glances, as he bandied jests with the leaders, toying the while with the fringed end of his green silk sash, went warily about. He knew himself to be in danger of arrest; he might, indeed, pay with his life for his seeming bravado. But he was not thinking of himself. His ear was strained to catch the slightest sound within the cabaret, where Henri Destréhan was blithely quaffing his glass of absinthe, unaware that his enemies, sworn to butcher him like a rat in a trap, were closing upon him.

It was the knowledge of his friend's impending peril which had drawn the pirate chief from his lagoon fastnesses.

"How about that last bale of smuggled silk brocade, Lafitte?" demanded a brawny, dark-browed man, lightly, edging nearer to the wall as he spoke.

"Sold at ten dollars the yard for the waistcoats of his Excellency, the Governor!" returned Lafitte, in the same tone.

"And the gold chain captured on the high seas from His Grace, the Mexican Bishop?" laughed another.

"Sold off in inches for the repose of his Grace's soul.

He had dropped the end of his sash. His hand, as he spoke, was on the door. "À moi, Destréhan, à moi!" he cried, bursting into the dimly lighted cabaret. And, catching the bewildered young officer into the sweep of his powerful arm, he lifted him from the floor, bore him through the very midst of his enemies, turned the corner with the leaping speed of a stag, and disappeared behind a clump of cabins in the direction of the swamp. A howl of rage and a volley of shot from the baffled plotters followed the fugitives, but they were already safe from pursuit.

A few days later Destréhan was about starting on his roundabout journey to France. A pirogue, dancing on the breast of the sinuous bayou which led away from the outlaw's stronghold at Barrataria, awaited him with its lithe, dark-skinned paddler. "If ever a Destréhan" - these were his parting words to Lafitte, with a warm hand-clasp - "if ever a Destréhan fails a Lafitte in the hour of need, may his soul die and his bones rot unburied."

Léonie Destran, apparently unconscious of the rain, which continued to fall, was waiting still.

The pallor of her delicate face had increased. She moved nearer to the closed door of the cabaret.

Within there was a drowsy silence. The fat, bald-headed proprietor was nodding over an out-worn copy of La Mouche.

It was midway between les heures vertes - early and late - of the staid and respectable

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habitues who came with the regularity of unimpeachable clocks every day at noon, and every day before setting towards their late dinners.

The floor had been re-sanded since noon and swept into fresh geometrical figures, and the old-fashioned wooden bar with its simple fixtures was in readiness for the six o'clock clientèle.

There was, however, a single patron, who stood with his left hand resting lightly on the bar; in his right hand he held a small tumbler; the wan light filtering in through the ground glass of the door fell upon its cloudy green contents, giving them a strange, unearthly gleam.

The man, who was elegantly and fashionably attired, was young and extraordinarily handsome, though his face showed signs of dissipation, and his dark eyes beneath the thick brows had a bold, unpleasant expression.

He wore a white flower in his buttonhole.

He lifted the glass to his lips, but set it down hastily. Octave Lafitte! It was a whisper, a faintly dying breath, but he heard his own name distinctly pronounced. He looked at the deaf old man half asleep in his chair; then he stepped noiselessly to the door. The rain, striking him full in the face as he opened it, blurred his vision for a second.

"Mademoiselle Destran! Léonie!" he exclaimed, starting back surprised, his dark face flushing with pleasure.

She lifted her hand. "Stay, monsieur," she said, speaking rapidly and in French, "there is no time for words. I was following you, and I saw you enter here. I have been waiting for you to come out, but I dared wait no longer. You must leave this State - this country - at once Stay" - for he was beginning to speak - "Toinette Farge, on Bayou Desnoyers, near our plantation, has confessed to her father that it is you" - a wave of crimson dyed her face and throat, but she continued to look steadily at him - "that it is you who have disgraced her and ruined their home. Old Dominique Farge will kill you. He has sworn to hunt you down like a dog. My father is ill . . . we fear he is dying . . . he could not come himself to warn you . . . I did not even stop to change my dress . . . I have been travelling all day." She stopped, panting for breath, with her hand pressed to her side.

His eyes were glowing; he smiled exultantly. "And you have done this for me, Léonie, for me!" he whispered, tenderly, moving towards her with outstretched arms. "Then you do care for me! You do love -"

She drew away with a gesture of loathing. "You! God forbid!" she cried. "I do the duty of the Destréhan to the Lafitte," she added, calmly. "But you must go at once, monsieur. Dominique Farge may reach the city at any moment. Go, before it is too late -"

It was already too late. There was a sound of footsteps above the rush of the rain, and Dominique Farge came around the corner - a large old man, with a swart, bearded face. His blue cotton shirt - he wore no coat - was open at the throat, showing his massive chest; and the unbuttoned sleeves fell away from his hairy wrists. His deep-sunken eyes were bloodshot; his long, grizzled hair, soaked and matted by the rain, clung to his

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cheeks. At sight of his prey his face lighted horribly. "Li mové nomme!" he hissed, with a forward spring.

Lafitte, with his eyes on the uplifted hand, stood rooted to his place. But there was a quick movement on the girl's part.

She had thrown herself in front of the intended victim; and the alligator knife in Dominique's hand, descending, sheathed itself in her bosom.

Without a cry, and like a bayou lily whose stem has been suddenly cut, the white figure sank into the ooze of the banquette, her spirting blood dyeing the stuccoed wall.

The old man passed his hand over his starting eyes. He did not even stoop to see if the child of his neighbor and old comrade-in-arms were dead; but stepping back a pace, he drew a revolver from his belt and placed the muzzle against his forehead.

His body fell heavily at her feet.

The report of the pistol brought a voluble, hurrying crowd into the drowned street, but there had been no witnesses of the double tragedy - which caused extraordinary comment. No one ever knew its meaning. "Toinette Farge, cowering over her nameless infant in the cabin on Bayou Desnoyers; Henry Destran on his deathbed in the old Destréhan plantation-house - even these but dimly surmised the truth.

The deaf old cabaret-keeper came out to watch the removal of the dead bodies, leaving the little room quite empty.

The untasted glass of absinthe on the bar glowed like a huge, scintillating opal in the purple shadows.

A year later a man drifted at nightfall one day - alone - into a cheap pot-house on the outskirts of Paris. There was an air of decayed gentility about him. His well-fitting clothes were shabby. The lining of the top-coat he carried over his arm was frayed and much soiled.

His face, covered with a stubble of black beard, was haggard. His dark, shifting eyes had a dull, outworn expression.

The hand which he stretched out towards the little glass pushed towards him by the gruff, ill-looking proprietor, shook almost as if with palsy.

He grasped the slender stem eagerly and raised the glass to his lips, but set it down again with a nauseate shudder and turned away. "I cannot drink it!" he muttered, dropping upon the rude bench outside the door, and drawing the brim of his hat over his eyes, as if to shut out something from his sight. "God! I am dying for it, yet I cannot drink it! There were exactly those green, changing lights in her eyes that day! And when I remember" - he threw out his arms with a gesture of self-loathing - "when I remember that I am, after all, a Lafitte only by adoption -!"