

CHAPTER XIV

RETRIBUTION

DURING the next two days I had more evidence of Monsieur de St. Gré's ability, and, thanks to his conduct of my campaign, not the least suspicion of my mission to New Orleans got abroad. Certain gentlemen were asked to dine, we called on others, and met still others casually in their haunts of business or pleasure. I was troubled because of the inconvenience and discomfort to which my host put himself, for New Orleans in the dog-days may be likened in climate to the under side of the lid of a steam kettle. But at length, on the second evening, after we had supped on jambalaya and rice cakes and other dainties, and the last guest had gone, my host turned to me.

"The rest of the burrow is the same, Mr. Ritchie, until it comes to the light again."

"And the fox has crawled out of the other end," I said.

"Precisely," he answered, laughing; "in short, if you were to remain in New Orleans until New Year's, you would not learn a whit more. To-morrow morning I have a little business of my own to transact, and we shall get to Les Îles in time for dinner. No, don't thank me," he protested; "there's a certain rough honesty and earnestness ingrained in you which I like. And besides," he added, smiling, "you are poor indeed at thanking, Mr. Ritchie. You could never do it gracefully. But if ever I were in trouble, I believe that I might safely call on you."

The next day was a rare one, for a wind from somewhere had blown the moisture away a little, the shadows

were clearer cut, and by noon Monsieur de St. Gré and I were walking our horses in the shady road behind the levee. We were followed at a respectful distance by André, Monsieur's mulatto body-servant, and as we rode my companion gave me stories of the owners of the different plantations we passed, and spoke of many events of interest in the history of the colony. Presently he ceased to talk, and rode in silence for many minutes. And then he turned upon me suddenly.

"Mr. Ritchie," he said, "you have seen my son. It may be that in him I am paying the price of my sins. I have done everything to set him straight, but in vain. Monsieur, every son of the St. Grés has awakened sooner or later to a sense of what becomes him. But Auguste is a fool," he cried bitterly, — a statement which I could not deny; "were it not for my daughter, Antoinette, I should be a miserable man indeed."

Inasmuch as he was not a person of confidences, I felt the more flattered that he should speak so plainly to me, and I had a great sympathy for this strong man who could not help himself.

"You have observed Antoinette, Mr. Ritchie," he continued; "she is a strange mixture of wilfulness and caprice and self-sacrifice, and she has at times a bit of that wit which has made our house for generations the intimates — I may say — of sovereigns."

This peculiar pride of race would have amused me in another man. I found myself listening to Monsieur de St. Gré with gravity, and I did not dare to reply that I had had evidence of Mademoiselle's aptness of retort.

"She has been my companion since she was a child, Monsieur. She has disobeyed me, flaunted me, nursed me in illness, championed me behind my back. I have a little book which I have kept of her sayings and doings, which may interest you, Monsieur. I will show it you."

This indeed was a new side of Monsieur de St. Gré, and I reflected rather ruefully upon the unvarnished truth of what Mr. Wharton had told me, — ay, and what Colonel

had her father dismounted than she threw herself into his arms. Forgetful of my presence, he stood murmuring in her ear like a lover; and as I watched them my trouble slipped from my mind, and gave place to a vaguer regret that I had been a wanderer throughout my life. Presently she turned up to him a face on which was written something which he could not understand. His own stronger features reflected a vague disquiet.

"What is it, *ma chérie*?"

What was it indeed? Something was in her eyes which bore a message and presentiment to me. She dropped them, fastening in the lapel of his coat a flaunting red flower set against a shining leaf, and there was a gentle, joyous subterfuge in her answer.

"Thou pardoned Auguste, as I commanded?" she said. They were speaking in the familiar French.

"*Ha, diable!* is it that which disquiets thee?" said her father. "We will not speak of Auguste. Dost thou know Monsieur Ritchie, *Toinette*?"

She disengaged herself and dropped me a courtesy, her eyes seeking the ground. But she said not a word. At that instant Madame de St. Gré herself appeared on the gallery, followed by Nick, who came down the steps with a careless self-confidence to greet the master. Indeed, a stranger might have thought that Mr. Temple was the host, and I saw Antoinette watching him furtively with a gleam of amusement in her eyes.

"I am delighted to see you at last, Monsieur," said my cousin. "I am Nicholas Temple, and I have been your guest for three days."

Had Monsieur de St. Gré been other than the soul of hospitality, it would have been impossible not to welcome such a guest. Our host had, in common with his daughter, a sense of humor. There was a quizzical expression on his fine face as he replied, with the barest glance at Mademoiselle Antoinette:—

"I trust you have been—well entertained, Mr. Temple. My daughter has been accustomed only to the society of her brother and cousins."

"Faith, I should not have supposed it," said Nick, instantly, a remark which caused the color to flush deeply into Mademoiselle's face. I looked to see Monsieur de St. Gré angry. He tried, indeed, to be grave, but smiled irresistibly as he mounted the steps to greet his wife, who stood demurely awaiting his caress. And in this interval Mademoiselle shot at Nick a swift and withering look as she passed him. He returned a grimace.

"Messieurs," said Monsieur de St. Gré, turning to us, "dinner will soon be ready—if you will be so good as to pardon me until then."

Nick followed Mademoiselle with his eyes until she had disappeared beyond the hall. She did not so much as turn. Then he took me by the arm and led me to a bench under a magnolia a little distance away, where he seated himself, and looked up at me despairingly.

"Behold," said he, "what was once your friend and cousin, your counsellor, sage, and guardian. Behold the clay which conducted you hither, with the heart neatly but painfully extracted. Look upon a woman's work, Davy, and shun the sex. I tell you it is better to go blindfold through life, to have—pardon me—your own blunt features, than to be reduced to such a pitiable state. Was ever such a refinement of cruelty practised before? Never! Was there ever such beauty, such archness, such coquetry,—such damned elusiveness? Never! If there is a cargo going up the river, let me be salted and lie at the bottom of it. I'll warrant you I'll not come to life."

"You appear to have suffered somewhat," I said, forgetting for the moment in my laughter the thing that weighed upon my mind.

"Suffered!" he cried; "I have been tossed high in the azure that I might sink the farther into the depths. I have been put in a grave, the earth stamped down, resurrected, and flung into the dust-heap. I have been taken up to the gate of heaven and dropped a hundred and fifty years through darkness. Since I have seen you I have been the round of all the bright places and all the bottomless pits in the firmament."

"It seems to have made you literary," I remarked judicially.

"I burn up twenty times a day," he continued, with a wave of the hand to express the completeness of the process; "there is nothing left. I see her, I speak to her, and I burn up."

"Have you had many *tête-à-têtes*?" I asked.

"Not one," he retorted fiercely; "do you think there is any sense in the damnable French custom? I am an honorable man, and, besides, I am not equipped for an elopement. No priest in Louisiana would marry us. I see her at dinner, at supper. Sometimes we sew on the gallery," he went on, "but I give you my oath that I have not had one word with her alone."

"An oath is not necessary," I said. "But you seem to have made some progress nevertheless."

"Do you call that progress?" he demanded.

"It is surely not retrogression."

"God knows what it is," said Nick, helplessly, "but it's got to stop. I have sent her an ultimatum."

"A what?"

"A summons. Her father and mother are going to the Bertrands' to-night, and I have written her a note to meet me in the garden. And you," he cried, rising and slapping me between the shoulders, "you are to keep watch, like the dear, careful, canny, sly rascal you are."

"And — and has she accepted?" I inquired.

"That's the deuce of it," said he; "she has not. But I think she'll come."

I stood for a moment regarding him.

"And you really love Mademoiselle Antoinette?" I asked.

"Have I not exhausted the language?" he answered. "If what I have been through is not love, then may the Lord shield me from the real disease."

"It may have been merely a light case of — tropical enthusiasm, let us say. I have seen others, a little milder because the air was more temperate."

"Tropical — balderdash," he exploded. "If you are not the most exasperating, unfeeling man alive —"

"I merely wanted to know if you wished to marry Mademoiselle de St. Gré," I interrupted.

He gave me a look of infinite tolerance.

"Have I not made it plain that I cannot live without her?" he said; "if not, I will go over it all again."

"That will not be necessary," I said hastily.

"The trouble may be," he continued, "that they have already made one of their matrimonial contracts with a Granpré, a Beauséjour, a Bernard."

"Monsieur de St. Gré is a very sensible man," I answered. "He loves his daughter, and I doubt if he would force her to marry against her will. Tell me, Nick," I asked, laying my hand upon his shoulder, "do you love this girl so much that you would let nothing come between you and her?"

"I tell you, I do; and again I tell you, I do," he replied. He paused, suddenly glancing at my face, and added, "Why do you ask, Davy?"

I stood irresolute, now that the time had come not daring to give voice to my suspicions. He had not spoken to me of his mother save that once, and I had no means of knowing whether his feeling for the girl might not soften his anger against her. I have never lacked the courage to come to the point, but there was still the chance that I might be mistaken in this after all. Would it not be best to wait until I had ascertained in some way the identity of Mrs. Clive? And while I stood debating, Nick regarding me with a puzzled expression, Monsieur de St. Gré appeared on the gallery.

"Come, gentlemen," he cried; "dinner awaits us."

The dining room at Les Îles was at the corner of the house, and its windows looked out on the gallery, which was shaded at that place by dense foliage. The room, like others in the house, seemed to reflect the decorous character of its owner. Two St. Grés, indifferently painted, but rigorous and respectable, relieved the white-

ness of the wall. They were the Commissary-general and his wife. The lattices were closed on one side, and in the deep amber light the family silver shone but dimly. The dignity of our host, the evident ceremony of the meal, — which was attended by three servants, — would have awed into a modified silence at least a less irrepressible person than Nicholas Temple. But Nick was one to carry by storm a position which another might wait to reconnoitre. The first sensation of our host was no doubt astonishment, but he was soon laughing over a vivid account of our adventures on the keel boat. Nick's imitation of Xavier, and his description of Benjy's terrors after the storm, were so perfect that I laughed quite as heartily; and Madame de St. Gré wiped her eyes and repeated continually, "*Quel drôle monsieur!* it is thus he has entertained us since thou departed, Philippe."

As for Mademoiselle, I began to think that Nick was not far wrong in his diagnosis. Training may have had something to do with it. She would not laugh, not she, but once or twice she raised her napkin to her face and coughed slightly. For the rest, she sat demurely, with her eyes on her plate, a model of propriety. Nick's sufferings became more comprehensible.

To give the devil his due, Nick had an innate tact which told him when to stop, and perhaps at this time Mademoiselle's superciliousness made him subside the more quickly. After Monsieur de St. Gré had explained to me the horrors of the indigo pest and the futility of sugar raising, he turned to his daughter.

"Toinette, where is Madame Clive?" he asked.

The girl looked up, startled into life and interest at once.

"Oh, papa," she cried in French, "we are so worried about her, mamma and I. It was the day you went away, the day these gentlemen came, that we thought she would take an airing. And suddenly she became worse."

Monsieur de St. Gré turned with concern to his wife.

"I do not know what it is, Philippe," said that lady; "it seems to be mental. The loss of her husband weighs upon her, poor lady. But this is worse than ever, and she

will lie for hours with her face turned to the wall, and not even Antoinette can arouse her."

"I have always been able to comfort her before," said Antoinette, with a catch in her voice.

I took little account of what was said after that, my only notion being to think the problem out for myself, and alone. As I was going to my room Nick stopped me.

"Come into the garden, Davy," he said.

"When I have had my siesta," I answered.

"When you have had your siesta!" he cried; "since when did you begin to indulge in siestas?"

"To-day," I replied, and left him staring after me.

I reached my room, bolted the door, and lay down on my back to think. Little was needed to convince me now that Mrs. Clive was Mrs. Temple, and thus the lady's relapse when she heard that her son was in the house was accounted for. Instead of forming a plan, my thoughts drifted from that into pity for her, and my memory ran back many years to the text of good Mr. Mason's sermon, "I have refined thee, but not with silver, I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction." What must Sarah Temple have suffered since those days! I remembered her in her prime, in her beauty, in her selfishness, in her cruelty to those whom she might have helped, and I wondered the more at the change which must have come over the woman that she had won the affections of this family, that she had gained the untiring devotion of Mademoiselle Antoinette. Her wit might not account for it, for that had been cruel. And something of the agony of the woman's soul as she lay in torment, facing the wall, thinking of her son under the same roof, of a life misspent and irrevocable, I pictured.

A stillness crept into the afternoon like the stillness of night. The wide house was darkened and silent, and without a sunlight washed with gold filtered through the leaves. There was a drowsy hum of bees, and in the distance the occasional languishing note of a bird singing what must have been a cradle-song. My mind wandered, and shirked the task that was set to it.

Could anything be gained by meddling? I had begun to convince myself that nothing could, when suddenly I came face to face with the consequences of a possible marriage between Nick and Mademoiselle Antoinette. In that event the disclosure of his mother's identity would be inevitable. Not only his happiness was involved, but Mademoiselle's, her father's and her mother's, and lastly that of this poor hunted woman herself, who thought at last to have found a refuge.

An hour passed, and it became more and more evident to me that I must see and talk with Mrs. Temple. But how was I to communicate with her? At last I took out my portfolio and wrote these words on a sheet:—

"If Mrs. Clive will consent to a meeting with Mr. David Ritchie, he will deem it a favor. Mr. Ritchie assures Mrs. Clive that he makes this request in all friendliness."

I lighted a candle, folded the note and sealed it, addressed it to Mrs. Clive, and opening the latticed door I stepped out. Walking along the gallery until I came to the rear part of the house which faced towards the out-buildings, I spied three figures prone on the grass under a pecan tree that shaded the kitchen roof. One of these figures was Benjy, and he was taking his siesta. I descended quietly from the gallery, and making my way to him, touched him on the shoulder. He awoke and stared at me with white eyes.

"Marse Dave!" he cried.

"Hush," I answered, "and follow me."

He came after me, wondering, a little way into the grove, where I stopped.

"Benjy," I said, "do you know any of the servants here?"

"Lawsy, Marse Dave, I reckon I knows 'em,—some of 'em," he answered with a grin.

"You talk to them?"

"Shucks, no, Marse Dave," he replied with a fine scorn, "I ain't no hand at dat ar nigger French. But I knows some on 'em, and right well too."

"How?" I demanded curiously.

Benjy looked down sheepishly at his feet. He was standing pigeon-toed.

"I done e'ressed some on 'em, Marse Dave," he said at length, and there was a note of triumph in his voice.

"You did what?" I asked.

"I done kissed one of dem yaller gals, Marse Dave. Yass'r, I done kissed M'lisse."

"Do you think M'lisse would do something for you if you asked her?" I inquired.

Benjy seemed hurt.

"Marse Dave—" he began reproachfully.

"Very well, then," I interrupted, taking the letter from my pocket, "there is a lady who is ill here, Mrs. Clive—"

I paused, for a new look had come into Benjy's eyes. He began that peculiar, sympathetic laugh of the negro, which catches and doubles on itself, and I imagined that a new admiration for me dawned on his face.

"Yass'r, yass, Marse Dave, I reckon M'lisse 'll git it to her 'thout any one tekin' notice."

I bit my lips.

"If Mrs. Clive receives this within an hour, M'lisse shall have one piastre, and you another. There is an answer."

Benjy took the note, and departed nimbly to find M'lisse, while I paced up and down in my uneasiness as to the outcome of the experiment. A quarter of an hour passed, half an hour, and then I saw Benjy coming through the trees. He stood before me, chuckling, and drew from his pocket a folded piece of paper. I gave him the two piastres, warned him if his master or any one inquired for me that I was taking a walk, and bade him begone. Then I opened the note.

"I will meet you at the bayou at seven this evening. Take the path that leads through the garden."

I read it with a catch of the breath, with a certainty that the happiness of many people depended upon what I should say at that meeting. And to think of this and to compose myself a little, I made my way to the garden in search of the path, that I might know it when the time