

A Black Woman and A White Man

A whirlwind of flames rose over the city of Le Cap. Human blood foamed in the streets. Everywhere torrents of vengeance paid for murder with murder, torture with torture. The independence of blacks had just been proclaimed, and degraded creatures, brutish slaves flocked from everywhere, with hatred in their hearts and weapons in their hands, asking that barbarous masters account for having destroyed their intelligence and crushed their freedom. The sea was already covered with small vessels; several rescue ships were already taking on board the unfortunate fugitives, victims of all the hatred, all the fury let loose on this desolate land. They ran, they rushed, they collapsed as they neared this beacon of hope and salvation. Some, pushed back violently by the crowd, which every minute grew larger, fell and met their death in the sea. Others clung to the ropes, and the air echoed with their desperate cries while their companions, no less unfortunate, were crammed together beneath the feet of those who could still stand up on the deck. In one place I noticed an unfortunate father tearing out his hair after having seen his son drown before his very eyes; in another I saw a woman making vain efforts to save her wounded husband, who was about to disappear beneath the waves. The two arms of this poor woman were wrapped around his and she fought valiantly; but her husband dragged her down . . . they both would perish.

Arrogant colonists, foolish whites: what horrors have you brought forth! what crimes have you wrought! for you, yes you alone, have brought about these bloody disasters, these devastating wars that have led to your destruction. Without your awful despotism, your base desires, your ferocious greed, your execrable vengeance, Saint-Domingue would have remained at peace, the unhappy slave would have died a slave. But you wanted to teach him war, and then he demanded war. You put the word Vengeance in his mouth, and the whole colony resounded against you with this rallying cry: Vengeance! vengeance!

You say you have suffered; you call blacks barbarians and assassins. Ah! why didn't you just leave the child of Africa in the middle of his desert? He would have lived simply, innocently, hospitably. He would have farmed his land. Happiness would have brought him industry, art, enlightenment. Happiness would have produced Christians, and you have produced monsters! . . . How can you complain? Did you think then that the God who punishes all crimes would protect the ones you committed? that this God, who condemns theft, kidnaping, murder, treason would approve of them when they are committed by whites against blacks? that this God, who said "All men are brothers," would have wanted to create one species of men who would be the slaves and victims of another species of men? Wretched madmen that you are!

Chaos was at its worst and deserted houses were being looted. Frightened by the ominous cries coming from all sides, Nelzi drew near the window. She saw the crowd moving in the direction of the coast, she heard the threats coming from blacks, the exclamations of rage, fear, and despair from whites. "Oh my master! she said. Can I stand by and watch you massacred before my very eyes? My poor young master, weak, wounded, almost unconscious, how can I carry you from this bed where you lie dying? Alas! all your friends are far away: some in battle, others deceased, still others in flight. All have abandoned you. Your slaves are free and will return as your enemies. The only one who remains is me, just me. Can I, alone, save you? Ah! at least I'll try. Dear God, protect your Nelzi. Oh! how poor Nelzi will love you!"

Her need to do a good deed, to save the one she loved, her ardent enthusiasm for virtue set her afire with resolution. Nelzi moved rapidly, lifted the victim from what would have been his deathbed, wrapped her arms around him, supported him on her shoulders, descended the stairs as rapidly as the weight of her burden allowed, making her way through a house about to be destroyed by fire at any moment. She arrived at the coast: a rowboat was departing . . . "Save him!" she cried with a heartrending sound. A white-haired officer heard her voice and signaled the impatient sailors to stop. He reached out to the young black woman. She handed over into his arms the wounded man, who had fainted. She too jumped into the boat. Then, hastening to kneel and raising her wide, tearful eyes toward heaven, she rejoiced, "He is saved! Oh my God how I love him!"

The old officer's boat soon reached a vessel setting sail for America. When Charles had revived, when the officer had presented Nelzi to him as the guardian angel who had saved him from the most awful massacre, the young Frenchman held out his hand to his friend, and looking at her tenderly: "Oh my Nelzi, he said to her,

I owe everything to you. How will I ever be able to repay you? You are all that's left to me in the world. Ah! may I forget all my woes in caring for your happiness.”

Nelzi kissed with rapture the hand that Charles had placed in hers. Then she lovingly answered him: “I am near you, my dear master, I want nothing more. – I am not your master, Nelzi. You don't belong to me, you belong only to yourself. – Dear God! do you want to abandon me? – I shall never abandon you, Nelzi. We will always live together, but I will not be your master. I will be your friend, your father. – My friend, my father, Oh! whatever you wish.”

Charles de Méricourt was thirty years old. An orphan since he was very young, heir to a great name, but poor, he owed his brilliant education and social position in the colonies to his uncle, M. de Bellerive. Charles happened to be in Le Cap at that time. Amidst the chaos and hatred that reigned there, even within the parties at war with one another, he had managed to retain his gentleness and moderation until the events that we have just recounted. It was only then that, forced to participate, he was seriously wounded in the general turmoil and was only saved thanks to the devotion of his black slave.

America, that hospitable land, opened its arms to the fugitives. It consoled them, helped them, gave them the means to return to Europe or allowed them to use their talents in the New World. Charles accepted a modest job and established himself in a city in the great state of New York.

Nelzi took care of the household. Charles treated her like a sister, spending all his free time with her. He enjoyed forming this new soul, developing the intelligence that prejudice had repressed until that time. Sometimes he asked himself whether whites hadn't perhaps had some valid reason for treating blacks as a brutish race. A thousand times he had heard rich colonists and beautiful ladies say, with complete conviction: Blacks are only too happy to be our slaves: what would become of them otherwise? They are really only animals, far beneath monkeys. “Can I believe, he asked himself, that for several centuries, a horrible crime has been committed? Or shouldn't I think instead that the intellectual faculties of blacks are, in fact, out of proportion with human intelligence?” Then he would look at Nelzi and notice that fire in her eyes, that mark of a lively intelligence, that expression of deep feeling. He explained to Nelzi the phenomena of nature, the marvels of art, the consolations of virtue, the charms of friendship; and Nelzi understood everything, felt everything, and answered with that eloquence of the soul, with that pure enthusiasm that are proof of an elevated mind, a noble heart, a deep sensitivity. “How then does this soul differ from mine? How is this interesting being inferior to beings of my species? No, no, it is false, it is impossible. Oh cruel prejudice! No, her body alone has been less favored. . . . But doesn't she have her own beauty? Aren't her eyes beautiful, large, expressive? Aren't her teeth admirable? And what expression in her smile! And her dear voice is so sweet to my ear! Even her color has its glow, its nuances. I see it darken when a reproach passes my lips; it shines when I smile. Her figure is perfect, her curves are graceful. Her whole person is endowed with a poise, a piquant beauty. . . . Oh Nelzi, Nelzi, nature has adorned you too with a thousand charms!”

Thus spoke Charles, and with each day Charles cursed ever more European prejudices and colonial cruelty. At first he pitied Nelzi. Soon he admired her: how could he not love her? He was everything for her, she became everything for him. He gave her his heart and his faith before the God of nature.

Nelzi saw nothing above Charles. She had given herself to him from the first day she had known him. She believed that God himself spoke to her through his voice and consented with joy to find a husband in the person who for her gave meaning to the past, the present, and the future.

Charles wanted to teach his friend the precepts of our divine religion. The dogma of the immortality of the soul was adopted by her with all the gratitude of a heart full of the immense goodness of the Creator. She admired the pure morality of Christianity, that immutable basis of sound philosophy, tolerance, and freedom. She was touched by the divine order of the divine Redeemer: Love your neighbor like yourself; do unto others as you would have them do unto you. “Your religion must be mine, she said to Charles. What you love, Nelzi will love. What you admire, how could Nelzi not admire it? But, my beloved, among all your brothers, are you thus the only Christian? – What do you mean, Nelzi? – Are they Christian, they who took my brothers from their families, from their country? they who repay their thankless work with lashes of the whip? they who have used our blood to irrigate their land of misery? they who answer bitter tears with menaces and just complaints

with torture? Is that how Christians treat their neighbors, and is that how they do unto others what they would have done unto them?"

Charles often felt somewhat embarrassed in answering the objections of the innocent black woman, but he made her envision another life where the unjust would be punished, regardless of their color, and the virtuous would triumph, whatever skin covering they might have had on earth. Nelzi was reassured then. She raised her eyes to heaven, thought she saw black legions there crowned as martyrs, and thanked her friend for having opened her heart to this consoling religion.

A letter that arrived from Europe changed their fate. An unknown aunt had sent it to report that M. de Bellerive had lost his son and that his sorrow at this loss, combined with the terrible commotion caused by the events of the French Revolution, had led him too to the grave. The aunt added that having arrived from England two years before M. de Bellerive's death, she had consoled him in his last moments, and that the unfortunate old man had named in his will as his only heirs her daughter and Charles de Méricourt, but on one condition that surely Charles would hasten to accept. The aunt, Madame Darbois, ended her letter with these words: "Come back then, my dear nephew, so that I can embrace you. I know that you have a black woman who has served you faithfully. I know this story. Bring us this heroine of the black race. I assure you that I am ready to treat her more as a friend than as a black."

"I can hesitate no longer," cried Charles. My country, my country, I shall be able to see you again! You beckon me, ah! who could resist your enchanting voice? . . . I lead an aimless life here. I am only employed thanks to the generosity of the American government, which supports me. Oh my Nelzi, I shall possess a little fortune, I shall surround you with the pleasures of a life of ease. I shall show you off with pride as a model of all virtues. You shall help me fight the prejudices that my compatriots hold against your oppressed brothers. Come, my Nelzi, let us go."

Madame Darbois was a good woman; she engaged in good works but she had kept many of her ancestors' prejudices. Thus, after welcoming her nephew with open arms, she looked at Nelzi with a curiosity typical of a white person, came up to her with a familiar benevolence, then, in appreciation of what she had done for Charles, gave her a kiss, but a patronizing kiss. Madame Darbois put up her nephew as well as she could; as for Nelzi, she was given a small room, tucked away. But she did not dare complain. Charles himself was not complaining.

Charles had read the will: the condition that his uncle had put to the gift of his fortune had quite stunned him. It had to do with his marrying Mademoiselle Darbois; it was a whim of his uncle, a strange whim, an unthinkable whim if you will, but still it was on this whim that all of his future affluence depended. Charles was hesitating; he knew Nelzi; he knew that he was the only man she would ever love, and could he think that his beloved, because she was black, would patiently endure the presence of a rival and a happy rival? He had sworn to make her happy; he had sworn to love her forever. And if he married Mademoiselle Darbois, he would have to give up the intimacy which made Nelzi's happiness and proved to her that she was still loved. But if he refused the marriage, he bid farewell to any hope of wealth. The condition was clear; the one who refused to abide by it, gave up his share of the inheritance in favor of the other heir. Then, he would no longer have the means to support Nelzi in a prosperous manner; and what would he do? Apply for a job? What job? And what would Nelzi do, deprived of everything, accused of everything, and who would only have her love to help her fight both misery and dire poverty? Charles was wavering.

Mademoiselle Darbois was very young and very pretty: she seemed to have a sweet and tender disposition; she looked at Charles with pleasure; she smiled at him willingly. Charles could flatter himself that he was not disliked; he could even hope to be happy with this lovely girl; but would Nelzi, Nelzi, ever be happy? Would she not reproach him for his perjury? What shall he do? Whom could he consult? Well, he could ask her. Yes, yes, that is it. I shall speak to her, she will know my trouble today. No, tomorrow. Tomorrow comes, no, tomorrow, Charles would say, and tomorrow went by.

Madame Darbois had said a few words; Charles had answered without committing himself, but politely. His good aunt, who wanted the marriage to take place, could see that she would not meet any opposition from her daughter; she did not expect any from the nephew either, and was intensifying the

development of their intimacy. As she would never have thought on her own that a black woman could be an obstacle to her plans, and as she spoke in her presence the way one speaks in front of a table, a chair, a dog, or a bird, at every moment, she showed her joy, her hope, her impatience and her wishes. In Nelzi's presence, she would call Charles her son; in her presence she sung the praises of her future husband to her daughter. Nelzi quivered, looked at Charles, did not dare ask him questions in front of other people, never saw him alone, and could not take advantage of the commotion of a large circle since Madame Darbois had decided to stop entertaining until the marriage was celebrated. At last, enlightened by the aunt's speeches, dismayed by Charles's tenderness when he looked at the young lady, no longer doubting her misfortune, she felt her tears dry in her eyes; her mind clouded, a somber despair took hold of her senses, she escaped in great hurry from the house; she thought she was walking to her death.

An old man, followed by a servant, walked by her; he looked at her insolently, examined her carefully, let her take a few steps, still looked at her from behind, smiled, made a sign to his servant, hastily whispered a few words to his ear and went away.

The servant kept on following Nelzi; he noticed her nervousness, saw that her gait was uneven, that she stopped, wavered. "What are you looking for, Miss?" he said with an assiduous politeness. "Alas! I do not know myself," the unfortunate woman answered, informed about her present condition by this simple question. A stream of tears made its way; her hands covered her burning face.

"Come to my master; he will find a way to alleviate your misfortune." "Ah, if he is powerful, if he is sensitive, if he is rich, let him give me the means to leave this country, to go back to America. I shall see again the places full of the one I have loved too much; there perhaps..."

The unfortunate girl stopped and followed without thinking the stranger who guided her. She came to a magnificent mansion; she climbed a hidden stairway, went through a small waiting room, and found herself in a delightful boudoir. The servant left her; a door opened, a man came forward. His age should have inspired respect but his affected manners, his piercing eyes, his impertinent smile, only aroused disgust. He made her offers that, at first, she did not understand, but which then soon revolted and frightened her; she moved away indignantly; then the odious old man took her hand threatening to take her to the police as if she was a criminal whose flight he had stopped. Nelzi let out a cry, made an effort that knocked down her opponent, ran toward the first door she saw, found herself on a large stairway, quickly went up, threw herself in an apartment that was unlocked, went through several rooms, and fell at the feet of a young and beautiful woman. "Save me, I beg you, save me" she cried out. "What do you want from me, child?" answered an extremely soft voice. Encouraged by this expression of goodness, by the charm of an attractive face, Nelzi thought she had found a consoling angel. Her ideas were confused but she felt the need for empathy. With passion and energy she told her about running away from Madame Darbois and the odious meeting which followed. At the portrait she drew of the nasty old man, Madame de Senneterre blushed profusely and, as a young and beautiful woman may have an old libertine of a husband and not care for scandals, the charming lady had all the doors closed, sent all the servants away who were frightened by the sudden entrance of the black woman and, making poor Nelzi sit on a stool at her feet, she sweetly took her hands and wanted to know the smallest details of her misfortunes. Nelzi told everything and she told it with love, with distraction, with frenzy. The kind woman was moved. "Let them say that Blacks do not have the same feelings as we do. Is this not the eloquence of a burning love? Is it not the expression of a soul of fire? Poor blacks, poor child. I love you; I love what suffers; I love what loves." Madame de Senneterre said this with abandon; Madame de Senneterre was looking for tears; she found them. Several bells were heard; Madame de Senneterre kissed Nelzi, led her to a bedroom, promised to take care of her and to spare nothing to bring her back her happiness. "Happiness" Nelzi answered, looking at her protectress quite sadly and tenderly, "ah, without him, without him, it is always impossible!"

A young man whose whole appearance announced taste and elegance, came in hurriedly; he came up to Mme de Senneterre with the air of the most flattering attention, but without bowing to her. "Ah, here you are, my dear Count," she said, "at this time, your presence is more pleasant to me than ever; yes, you are going to help me do a good deed. My dear friend, you see me preoccupied with a very important thing; here, stay

over there, not so close to me. You are laughing, you do not believe me, you are not behaving, Sir, but I shall prove to you that I want to be serious. First, I forbid you to move from where you are; my dear, you know that I would be quite annoyed to be annoyed with you. Listen to me. Imagine the most interesting creature, a black woman as I did not know there were any, as I am happy to know there are some, a black woman victim of love, of faithfulness: what an example for us white women! A young black woman who did everything for a white man, who devoted her life to him, who called him her spouse, who loves this spouse as I would have loved mine...if mine had been a man; ah, what a wife I would have been to him then; you know it, Count, you know if ever..." "I know that you are adorable," answered the Count, kissing her hand softly, "but my dear Eugénie, what can I do for you on this occasion?" "You are going to figure it out yourself." Then she told him the story of Nelzi's sorrows, suggested to the Count the predicament of the young man. "Perhaps, she said, the fear of seeing poor Nelzi tormented by contempt, suffering, and poverty is the only reason for his decision to perjure himself." "I see what my Eugénie expects from me. My uncle is a minister in the government. He can do as he pleases; we shall have a job for your protégé, who will then be free to love his Nelzi all his life." While saying these words with intensity, the Count moved closer, and began playing with the beautiful blond curls which covered Eugénie's forehead. "Yes, my dear! she exclaimed, this is wonderful; oh, what a pleasure for us two to be able to perform a miracle, to ensure the happiness of a black woman! Ah, believe me, dear Count, a little good done by chance will hardly be compensation for all the evil we have heaped upon this unfortunate race! But are you no longer listening to me?" Then the Count was kissing Madame de Senneterre's pretty fingers, one by one. "You do know, my charming friend, that I cannot remain long in your presence without feeling distracted, but I heard you so well that I am only waiting for your order to inform our young friend who must have been brought near despair by his mistress's absence." "My dear, go there yourself." "I agree, right away, but won't I be rewarded for my obedience?" "You know that I reward you even when you disobey me."

The Count flew to Charles, who thought he had lost his life; Nelzi's flight had enlightened him; he blamed himself for his uncertainties; he was losing his mind; he called himself ungrateful, treacherous; he was not attempting to control his outbursts, on the contrary, in the excess of his sorrow, he threw himself at the feet of Madame Darbois, he apprized her of the oaths he had made to Nelzi, revealed to her the way he had lived with her until then, begged her to put all of her friends on the tracks of the beloved girl, adding that he would be a monster if he abandoned her, that he could not live without her, that he happily forswore his share of the inheritance, not having any other wish than to marry his friend, to go back to America with her or to use his talents, anywhere in the world, as long as he was with her, happy if she was happy, without crime nor remorse.

At the first sentence spoken by the Count, Charles threw his arms around him, rushed into the carriage, rushed into Madame de Senneterre's sitting room; there, however, respect held him back. His face displayed the strongest emotion; Madame de Senneterre smiled; she quite liked him.

"So I read you correctly, Sir? Count, I shall not forget your eagerness to please me; quickly arrange for him to have the position and I shall give him his friend."

While saying these words, the beautiful Eugénie opened a door, brought in Nelzi. "Do you forgive me?" asked Charles, kneeling in front of the tender-hearted black woman. "I am only too happy to still belong to you, as long as I am the only one to belong to you, Charles!" There was such a sensitive and passionate expression of jealousy in these few words that Charles was quite moved. "The man who possesses you, he said lovingly, cannot want anyone but you. Nelzi, there are no charms worth your tears!"

"Such is love, and love without blame, sighed Eugénie, whether white or black, how pretty that love is!"