

THE SLAVE TRADER¹

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Leon had taken from his studies, from his social relationships, and from his family, some liberal and philosophical ideas. His joy, his tenderness, and the goodness of his character made his company desirable; however, his principles were not strong. Leon had not studied mankind or reflected enough about the immutable laws of justice to resist the often cruel prejudices of the world.

Leon, orphaned at the age of twenty and having inherited a large sum of money, wanted to invest his capital in Nantes, his birthplace. But will I even mention what sector of commerce was suggested to the ambitious young man? Slave trading! This infamous traffic was suggested to be the fastest and the surest method to become wealthy. Leon hesitated at first, an internal doubt was bothering him; it was his conscience. Buying and selling men!! What a way of to make a fortune! To destroy, for these people, the joys of the land; to rip them from those who the very ones that connected them to life; to become rich at the expense of their sorrows and their tears; what criminal and weighty riches!!

A ship captain ready to set sail forced Leon's decision. This man had the reputation of being very fortunate in his business dealings. He had voyaged ten times to Africa's coasts, and his fortune was already immense. "Come with me," he said to Leon; who is keeping you here? A childish fantasy. These blacks that we are going to get, do you believe them to be men?! no, they do not feel, they vegetate, like our animals; and further, my friend, if we take them, it is for their own good as much as it is for ours. They barely have enough to eat in *their* Africa, we take them to the colonies to work, it is true, but they are also fed. At first they feel out of place, saddened, but sooner they become attached to their masters. Look at our dogs, once they are trained, would they change their condition? Finally, my friend, I doubt these people to have souls, but, if they do, well, we will convert it!"

Leon was outraged by these bizarre statements in spite of himself; however, he wanted to be rich. He promised himself to be human; he left.

We have nothing to fear the captain would say rubbing his hands together, we have *honorary assurances*. After a favorable crossing, the barbarians, ready to become *thieves of men*, approach the African coast. It's there that they will work actively on their cargo of black slave slaves. Most of the unfortunate blacks crammed into the vessel were found in the forests. Tied up for a long time to the trees, their limbs are already bloodied by the shackles some French town had forged for them! "Look at these ebony machines," said the captain to his young companion who was surprised by all the things he was witnessing and even more surprised by the captain's coldness, "is there any resemblance between them and us? Are these men?" Leon

¹ One generally uses this term to indicate a slave ship; I thought it possible to use it in reference to the person that trades slaves.

didn't answer, he didn't even dare respond to himself as his conscience was whispering against this blaspheme.

In a space of two to three feet high, two hundred blacks are piled up where fifty would barely fit. Without air, deprived of movement, these unfortunates would cry out, horrified, desperate, raging. Criminal habits harden a man to the spectacle of human sufferings. At first, Leon shivers thinking of the hardships that burden the blacks, but little by little he becomes accustomed to contemplating them without trembling. It is for the law to reprimand such doings; man's heart doesn't know how to sustain a pure sense of justice and too often he imposes silence on the touching voice of pity.

A storm is brewing. The criminal ship amidst the foaming plains gives in to the fury of the angry waves. A frightening night envelops the horizon. The poor blacks are locked up in the hold, and a piece of cloth, drenched in tar, covers the hatchway in order to stop the water. Will these poor souls be able to breath? it doesn't really matter!...

The ship is too full and it must be immediately lightened. "What should we do?," asks Leon.- "We have no more bundles of merchandise to throw into the sea," answers the captain,"we can only throw men; come on, we must get rid of a few blacks." In accordance with the captain's orders, thirty are thrown into the water!...

The storm dies down, the sky clears up, the sea settles, and calm is reborn on the ship; a little air is returned to the victims...But a great many were not able to withstand such cruel torture and ceased to exist. "Such a waste," exclaims the captain; "get rid of them, we will nonetheless sell the others." Many of the unfortunates, in their excessive frenzy, bloodied each other and their condition was alarming. "We may as well get rid of them immediately," said the barbarian, and the sea received them into her bosom.

The ship sails in an area that is dangerous for slave ships; the sailors notice a boat that might belong to an observation fleet. It does not wave its flag to signal the guilty ship. Whatever its origin, the flag that defends men's freedom is honorable. The slave ship quickly distances itself. They notice being pursued, but succeed in escaping the watchers. Soon, the captain commands the dropping of the anchor. "I know this region well," he says, "we will find protection and safety."

Crime rules this area, the trade boldly takes place here despite the fact that this region neighbors a free country under the protection of England's laws. But here, chaos, theft, abduction, and violence spread in a frightening manner. Leon is lead by his new friend to the home of a rich land owner who owes all his wealth to the slave trade. Leon is introduced as someone who is on the verge of becoming rich, and since the land owner knows perfectly well the trade that will make Leon wealthy, he welcomes the young man with flattering alacrity, and congratulates in advance on his future success. Leon blushes at the compliment, looks away, and meets the eyes of a charming girl. She also blushes and then walks away with an air of sadness and discontent.

Laure was the only daughter of the travelers' host. Along with her naive charm, she had a strong soul, a profound sensibility; she had been raised by her mother and had a soft and gentle understanding of religion, tolerant and philanthropic beliefs, a love for justice and freedom. She was never able to accept the terrible trade that had made her father wealthy; she was daily outraged by the evils inflicted upon the slaves. Several times her father had wanted to marry her off, but it had always been to one of his fellow slave traders, and Laure had always refused. She had promised herself that she would only marry the man who would alleviate, as much as possible, the sufferings that she had witnessed so many blacks endure.

"Yet another slave trader," Laure said, after having left the room where Leon had just been introduced; "isn't that too bad? with such an attractive face!... A slave trader should always be very ugly and horrify the rest of the world!"

Laura's father asked Leon to stay at his house while the captain would take the blacks to the next colony. "Upon his return," he added, "if you consent to it, we can do some business together. I know a skilled man, a very able 'hunter;' we can put our money together to make some good catches, and we'll sell without a problem because the captain will be able to find some serious buyers." Leon agrees to everything.

At the end of the beautiful day, Leon breathed with pleasure the air scented with the scent of flowers. He daydreamt for a few moments, then picked up his guitar, feeling the need to express the emotions from deep within his soul. A thousand confused desires troubled him and a certain tenderness and melancholy caused him indefinable pain. Leon started singing, his tone gentle and penetrating; his big blue eyes became more and more expressive, and his face, a little pale, appeared to be the unmistakable sign of his sincerity.

Laure heard him, she stopped to listen. He sings so well she thought, such a soft and pure voice! Is it truly the voice of a slave trader? She approached and saw Leon through the foliage. A strong emotion made her heart beat faster. Is it possible? Heavens! is this truly the face of a slave trader!?

The young girl saw Leon on a daily basis and she found him charming. His conversation being diverse and well-developed, he spoke considerably well about the arts. Laure lost track of time next to he who asked nothing more than to forget everything else when near her. But her father arrived and took Leon away to speak to him of nothing but the advantages of the slave trade. Leon gave the old man his undivided attention, so the nice young girl fled from her cruel friend to the other side of the house where she would try hard to find his many faults. She hated him... or at least she wanted to. If my father was going to offer me Leon as a husband, she sometimes thought, I would refuse him, oh, without a doubt and very quickly. Leon is barbarian; Leon, why are you so guilty?

Laure had a little dog and an imprudent person crushed the animal's paw while wheeling a load and the house was filled with the dog's cries. His compassionate mistress took him in her arms, spoiled him with many caresses and cried over his sufferings. Leon quickly kneeled before Laure, took the dog's paw, and bandaged it. After having bemoaned considerably the unlucky mishap with an deep air of sincerity, he began to kiss alternately the animal's head and his mistress's hand. So! whispered softly the young girl, Leon isn't at all mean, he can't stand watching a dog suffer! But those poor blacks!...

One day Laure, filled with pain, hurried into the room where her father and Leon were sitting; she held the hand of a young black girl about ten years of age. "Father," she said with outrage, "father, look at this unlucky child, I never want to abandon her. Like me she had a father, but some barbarians just stole him away from her. He was a rich colonist from the neighboring country who had come here to buy goods. In the middle of the countryside, some bandits attacked him, and now, without a doubt, a treacherous ship is keeping him hidden from sight. His daughter, this poor creature, frightened, started running aimlessly and shouting for help; I had gone out and found her on my way, when she told me her story, and I promised to help her. Father, is there any way of saving this child's father? You aren't saying anything, he is certainly lost forever then! Come little unfortunate child, I will be your friend, your sister, come, you are already dear to me, and I want to relieve your pains. Near me you will defy those monsters; no slave trader will ever be able to tear you away from me."

Laure burst into tears, her father was embarrassed, and Leon was violently moved. A new and wrenching emotion caused him to feel an uneasiness he had not felt before.

“So!, went on the young girl, still trembling with rage, “can you comprehend, father, can you really comprehend the dreadful torture of that poor man? He lost his fortune and his freedom; he lost his sweet wife who is calling out for him, and perhaps will he die of fear and pain! He has forever lost the kisses of his little children and the hope of seeing his peaceful fields again. In an instant he lost everything; his remaining refuge is death! Father, look at the crimes you protect! Leon these are the heartaches you cause!!...”

Leon shivered; it was not the first time he felt remorse, but now, and henceforth, this remorse would always haunt him.

The captain, Leon's travel companion, returned from the colonies, and was taking care of a new load of slaves; it was for this very reason that he had accepted a partnership with Leon and Laure's father. Laure's father, who thought that Leon had a good road ahead of him, and also liked his character, planned on uniting him with his own daughter.

“Leon,” he said to him, “our investments are prosperous, let us not part ways. I love you like a son and there is a way of making our bond even stronger, I have but one daughter...” Here Leon leapt to the old man’s neck. “Be my father,” he cried out with an effusive and unexpected joy, “I would be forever indebted to you!”

But when the proposal was made to Laure, she said: “no, father, I don't want to marry Leon. --You hate him, my daughter? --No, no, father, sometimes it seems to me that I love him with all my soul, but I will never marry him.”

Her father was quite astonished, but Laure’s remained steadfast, and Leon quite hopeless.

One day Leon approached the one he loved; his eyes were full of tears, his charming face had been altered by worry and chagrin. The young girl noticed it and suffered... “Miss,” said Leon, “I could have been the happiest of men, but you didn't desire it, I could have had an adored wife, but you didn't desire it. A man that gives himself to you, who will live for you alone, will he never be able to touch your soul? Miss, will you hate me forever? -- Leon, answered Laure, I don't hate you, I said that to my father. You are mistaken and don't know me well. I don't want to hide it from you, I do love you, but I will never ever be the wife of a slave trader. Leon, how could appreciate the beauty of love when you can't respect the love of these unfortunate blacks? How could you cherish a spouse when you, without pity, rip black men from their spouses? How could you become a gentle father when you daily kidnap innocent children from those who gave them life? No, you will always be a treacherous friend, an unfaithful lover, a barbarous spouse, an unnatural father; and you want me to be yours!... I do love you, it is true, despite myself, a feeling independent of my will leads my heart to you, but my reason refuses you, and I obey my reason.”

Leon was troubled, he didn't know what to bring himself to do, he sought in vain a victorious solution, an eloquent prayer. “Laure,” he said, with a trembling voice, “you know that my fortune depends upon this business that you curse; if to please you and to obey your heart's desires I were to give up this commerce, what other means will I find to become wealthy? What would I do with all my investments? At this very moment we have access to an advantageous opportunity and your father wants me to invest all that I have. I promised to do as he wishes and if suddenly he saw me sacrificing a certain fortune to...what he would call your prejudice, would he not accuse me of extravagance? and would he still consent to call me his son-in-law?”

“But,” Laure said emotionally, “then I will love you more than anyone in the world and I will tell you every hour of every day that I love you.”

“But,” said Leon, “then your father will never consent to me becoming your spouse.”

Laure sighed, but regaining her energy, she cried out: “well then! sir, be the father's friend, but forget about his daughter; do you hear me, sir, forget about his daughter!”

The slave ship was about to set sail; the cries of pain strangled in its bosom would soon be lost in the open sea; the land of a colony was about to receive some new victims. The captain, Leon, and Laure's father awaited happy results of the rich cargo they were about to ship out.

Laure, tormented by her chagrin, her indignation, her love, could not sleep. She awakens before sunrise, descends to the garden and encounters Leon, who was also walking there, equally restless.

“Oh, Leon,” said the young girl, “look at how much you have made me suffer! What an awful dream you gave me! I saw you being chased, despised, abandoned by everyone, rejected like a ferocious bandit would be: infamous and called a cruel slave trader everywhere. Leon, how you changed! You no longer had this sweet face, this touching expression, this penetrating stare that hardly correspond to your job. How much did I suffer because of you!! But now, I see you again, and, well, I still shiver. Leon, this ship about to leave, it is the accumulation of the curses that will weigh upon you. A great many of these poor moaning souls owe their misfortune to you, it is you that delivers them to torture. Leon, listen to me one last time, you are building between us a wall too high to breach. My friend, there is still time. Free your slaves. We will send them through a free land, the neighboring country, under the protection of English laws, enjoys peace and independence; they will find an asylum and the means to settle. Leon, this redemptive sacrifice will bring peace back into your heart. Don't turn a deaf ear to the voice of she who would like to be able to live for you. --But your father? --My father will give in to my prayers by my tears, have no doubts upon that; but if this expectation meets with disappointment and my father refuses a lover who had become worthy of me, and refuses to call him his son, Leon, I hereby swear to you that I will follow you anywhere. I will consecrate my life to you.”

Leon is at her feet. “Is it possible, my beloved,” he said? “What if I lost everything, you would give me everything, you would leave your family, your homeland!!! --Leon, yes, I will do it all for you, my tenderness will compensate your losses, and proud of having restored virtue to heart so deserving of it, I will only concern myself with your happiness. Heaven will accept our wishes and bless our union. But, don't lose a minute, come, the oppressed are calling you.”

Leon finally gave in to the orders of his mistress; the powerful voice of love obligates him to be honorable. He is going to free his prisoners and give them the means to go to the neighboring country. Amongst these was the father of the little girl whom Laure had taken in; he is returned to his daughter; his gratitude is touching, Laure was cries tears of joy and Leon applauds this bliss he had never before experienced.

One must explain everything to the old man, before whom Leon dares not show himself; but, Laure is his daughter and has a virtuous soul and a conscience beyond reproach. She runs and throws herself into the arms of her father to persuade him of noble sentiments, this father for whom she is ready to show the greatest proofs of a daughter's love. She tells him of what she had convinced Leon. “You are rich, father, she added, you wanted me to marry Leon, but I could not accept the hand of a slave trader. He is no longer a slave trader, and I beg you to unite us. He is now without a fortune, but admire the good deed he has done! Oh! my joy and my happiness will solely depend on him now.”

The father, enraged, and scolding her again and again, accuses her of being stubborn and foolish, says that he will ban Leon from his house forever.

“Father, Laure answers firmly, I love you and respect you, but I have sworn to give myself to Leon if he were to follow heaven's will, I will keep my promise. If you prevent me from doing so, if you deprive me of my spouse by force, then you shall have another victim, and this time she will be white. After the death of so many, you will be responsible for the death of your own daughter, and may such an innocent and devoted victim redeem your crimes and appease all those that rise up against you!”

Hearing those words, a pale fear covered the face of her father, all his limbs trembled. “My daughter!” he said in a choked voice...then he opened his arms to her and to Leon.