

Men's Way

I couldn't sleep that night for worrying over that horse. If I shut my eyes a second I saw him standing there in the corral. If I kept them shut any link of time I saw him throwing Joe against that fence. A cowboy to fall is no disgrace, but I had dreamed of this horse even before I saw him, and that did worry my mind.

The next day I made pretend I was sick and I asked them to let me go see the doctor. Joe wanted to drive me in town, but I told him it wasn't that bad. He told me to take Ella, ^{with me,} ~~the oldest girl,~~ but I told him I wanted to go by myself. Because it wasn't the doctor, it was the hoo-doo in town I wanted to see. I didn't believe in hoo-doo, I never have, but nobody else wanted to listen to me. I wanted to find out if I was dreaming this just because I wanted Joe to stop riding, or if I was dreaming this because it was go'n happen.

The hoo-doo lived on a narrow little street called Dettie Street, and the little town where she lived was called Grady. She had flower bushes all over the yard, but no flowers, because it was Winter. She had bottles stuck upside down round all the flower bushes, and two rows of bottle side the walk from the gate up to the house. Bottles every color you can mention.

She had scrubbed the gallery that morning, and she had sprinkled red brick over the gallery and the steps. She must ^{1a1} have heard me stop the wagon before the gate because she answered the door soon as I knocked. She was a big mulatto woman, and had come from New Orleans. At least, that was her story. She had left New Orleans because she was a rival of Marie Laveau. Marie Laveau was the Queen then, you know, and nobody dare rival Marie Laveau. Neither Marie Laveau mama, neither Marie Laveau daughter who followed her. Some people said the two Maries was the same one, but, of course, that was people talk. Said the first Marie never died, she just turned younger in her later years. Well, from all I've heard, Marie Laveau was powerful, helped and hurt lot of people, but I don't think even she was that powerful.

This one name was Madame Gautier. Her name was Eloise Gautier, but everybody called her Madame Gautier. She wore a purple satin dress, and a gold color head rag. Two big earrings like the creole people wear in her ears. She told me to come in. When she heard I had come there for special business she told me to follow her to another room. It was Winter and it was cold and she had a fire in the firehalf. She had candles burning in ever corner of the room, and she had seven on the mantlepiece. She had another candle burning under a little statue on a little table by the window. She had Saint pictures hanging on the wall with crepe paper round

each picture. She nodded for me to sit down. After she had put another piece of wood on the fire she sat down cross from me. I had felt a little scared of her till I saw her put the piece of wood in the fire. Then I told myself, "Well, she can get cold just like anybody else at least."

After I told her why I was there, she asked me why hadn't I stopped Joe in my dream from getting on that horse. I told her I couldn't stop him in real life, how could she ~~stop~~^{expect} me to stop him in a dream.

"You ever tried?" she asked.

I told her yes I had tried, but he never heard me. It was too dusty or too dark or too much noise was going on or he was too far away or too something else.

"Wait," she said, "before you go another step farther. How many children you done gived to this man Joe Pittman?"

"I am barren," I said. And I told her what the doctor had said.

"Ah," she said. "Slavery has made you barren. But that is it."

"That's why he ride them horses?" I asked her.

"That's why you can't stop him," she said. "He probably rides for many reasons. That's man's way. To prove something. Day in, day out he must prove he is a man. Poor fool."

"Joe is good to me," I said.

"Sure he is, my dear," she said. "But man is foolish. And he's always proving how foolish he is. Some go after lions, some run after every woman he sees, some ride wild horses."

"That horse go'n kill him?" I asked her.

"Mon sha," she said.

I looked ~~him~~ at her, waiting.

"You want the answer?" she said.

"If it's good," I said.

"There's just one answer," she said.

I looked in her face a long time to see what the answer was, but her face wouldn't show it. It was quiet, quiet in the room. So quiet you could almost hear them candles burning. Not quite, but almost. The fire popped so loud in the firehalf it made me jump. Now I was scared of the answer, and I was sorry I had come there.

"You can go if you want," she said.

"I want to know," I said.

"You brave, my dear?" she asked.

"That mean he go'n kill him?" I asked.

"I didn't say that," she said.

"But that's the answer?" I said.

"Oui," she said.

"And you absolutely sure?" I asked.

"I don't give nothing but sure answers," she said. "I am Madame Eloise Gautier, formerly of New Orleans, and that's why she got me out."

"Nothing can stop it?" I asked.

"Nothing can stop death, mon sha," she said. "Death comes. A black horse. Lightning. Guns. And you have grippe."

"Grippe?" I said. "What's grippe?"

"Grippe is grippe," she said. "Nothing like it."

"Can I kill that horse?" I said.

"Can you kill death?" Madame Gautier said. "Your Pittman will stand between you and death."

"When's it go'n happen?" I asked her.

"Mon sha," she said. "Don't you know too much already?"

"No," I said.

"When he falls three times," she said.

"He go'n fall three times?" I said. "How do you know that?"

"I am Madame Eloise Gautier, formerly of New Orleans," she said.

"If he don't get up after he fall the first time?" I said.

"He will," she said. "Chief--and don't get up? He will. Even if he must fall ninety times. Chief? he must."

"Can't you give me something to put in his food?" I asked her. She had a little cabinet against the wall, and she had all kinds of bottles and jars in the cabinet. "Some powder

or something to make him sick?" I said. "If he's sick he can't ride."

"You go'n keep him sick?" she asked.

"Till somebody else break that horse," I said.

"Mon sha, mon sha, mon sha, mon sha," she said. "I have ^{ed} to you the horse is just one. If not the horse, then the lion, if not the lion, then the woman, if not the woman, then the war, then the politic, then the whiskey. Men must always search somewhere to prove himself. He don't know everything is already inside him."

"Then he want die?" I asked her. "Because I can't give him the child?"

"No, he want to live," she said. "And not just because you barren. Many reasons. Many. Many. But it's in here, mon sha," she said, touching her bosom.

"But don't he know that horse can kill him?" I said.

"He don't know that," she said. "And he wouldn't believe any man on earth who told him so. He believes a horse is made to be broken. All horses made to be broken, true, but not every man can break every horse. This horse your Pittman will not break. Your Pittman has got old now, ^{and fat} Not the man he think he is."

"He's all right," I said.

"Ah, mon sha," she said.

"I know what I'm saying," I said. "And you can ask anybody else."

"We talking about breaking horses, mon sha," she said. "Your Pittman will not break this horse. Another man will have to do it. If he is true he will be destroyed by some other horse himself. If he's not true, then something else will take him. It could be grippe."

"Grippe again," I said.

"Grippe can do it," she said. "Mon sha, man is put here to die. From the day he is born him and death take off for that red string. But he never wins, he don't even tie. So the next best thing, do what you can with the little time the Lord spares you. Most men feel they ought to spend them few years proving they men. They choose the foolish ways to do it."

"Joe said he wouldn't mind farming if the white people let him farm in peace."

"I know, mon sha, I know," she said. "That'll be a dollar if you don't mind."

"I want some powder, too," I said. "I don't want nothing too strong--just to keep him off that horse."

"Give me a dollar and a quarter," she said.

While I was getting the money out of my handkerchief she went to the cabinet. I saw her opening one of the bottles and dumping the powder on a piece of paper. She looked at how much she already had on the paper, then she added a little bit more.

"When do they break the horses?" she asked me

"Saturday," I said.

"Early or late?"

"Late. When the people get there."

"When the cock crow Saturday morning, get up and sprinkle some of this on the floor so Pittman will have to cross it," she said. "His side of the bed is best. Go to the corral gate and sprinkle some there while the cock is still crowing."

"And that'll keep him from riding the horse?" I asked.

"He will not ride him, my dear."

I paid her and left. My powder in my handkerchief, I felt good. All day I felt good. That night I didn't sleep, but it was just because I felt good. But the next day I felt shaky. How did I know that powder was go'n work? Maybe she had just gived it to me because I was worrying her so much. She didn't take time to pick a bottle, she just grabbed the first one she came to. Matter of fact I wanted some powder out of that little green bottle, not that red one. I got more and more shaky. Joe asked me if I was all right.

"Sure, I'm all right," I said. "What you got to be asking me that for?"

"Just asked you," he said.

At the house Miss Clare asked me the same thing.

"Something the matter with you, Jane?"

"Just tired," I said.

"Go home and come back tomorrow," Miss Clare said.

That was Thursday. Thursday night I didn't sleep at all. The next day I felt even worse.

"Go back home, Jane," Miss Clare said.

Joe went hunting that day, and I sat round the house by myself. If I laid down on the bed and shut my eyes a second I saw that black devil standing in the corral. That night we went to bed early because the next day was Saturday, the day they broke the horses. Joe was tired from hunting and went right off to sleep. The two girls was asleep in their bed. I was the only one laying there awake. Probably the only one awake on that whole place.

I knowed I never would get any sleep that night, and I got up and put on some clothes. I was go'n sit at the fire-half, but the next thing I know I was outside. It was freezing out there, and the night clear as day. I didn't know why I had come out there. I knowed when I got up that was not in my mind. Now, out there, I found myself headed toward the corral.

All the other horses was standing together to stay warm, all but him. He walking round inside the corral like he was some kind of majesty. When he got a whiff of my scent he stopped walking and looked up. I stood there looking at him, my arms folded because it was near freezing. The next thing I knowed I had opened the gate and I was in the corral trying to get him out.

I was in the corral, waving my arms, going "Shoo, shoo, shoo," but he would ^{not} go near that gate till Joe came there. Soon as he caught sight of Joe they started for the gate at the same time. He won by a foot and lit out cross the field. The ground was frozen and you could hear him pounding that hard ground a mile. Joe came in there and knocked me down, then he picked me up and threwed me over the ~~Kskk~~ fence. I laid down there numb a while, and when I got up I saw that he had swung upon his own horse and was going after the stallion. I started hollering and running after him. "Don't get back on him, don't get back on him, don't get back on him, Joe." The people came out to see what ~~hsk~~ was the matter. When they heard the stallion was loose they saddled their own horses and went after him. I ran after Joe till I came up to the swamps, then I turned around and came on back home. I sat by the firehalf all night waiting for them to come back.

Early the next morning they came back with the stallion and with Joe tied to his own horse. They said Joe had cornered and roped the stallion, but with no saddle to tie the ~~hsk~~ rope on, the stallion had jecked him off his horse and had dragged him through the swamps. When they found him he was tangled in the rope, already dead. The horse still had the rope round his neck, eating leaves off a bush to the side.

They waked Joe Pittman that night and buried him that Sunday, and the rodeo went on that next Saturday. Before it

started they toned the bell one minute for Joe Pittman. Every man took off his hat. The ladies bowed their heads. Soon as the minute was up a young boy called Gable got on the stallion. The stallion threwed him, but he got back on. The stallion throwed him again and he got back on him again. He kept getting back on till the stallion couldn't throw him no more. Not long after that him and Ella got married and moved to Texas. They took Clara with them.

When Joe Pittman was killed a part of me went with him to his grave. No man would ever take his place, and that's why I carry his name to this day. I have knowed two or three other men, but none took the place of Joe Pittman. I let them know that from the start.

A couple years after Joe Pittman was killed I met a man called Felton Burkes who was a fisherman on the seine boat. Felton and his crew was moving to the St. Charles River and I followed him here. That's how I got to this part of the State. Me and Felton lived together about three years, then one day he was gone. Didn't say a word. I didn't know he was gone for good till he didn't come back for a month. But that didn't bother me none; not long after he left, Ned showed up with his family.