

THE OCTOROON

A STORY OF SLAVERY DAYS.

BY MISS M. E. BRADDON.

CHAPTER III.



ORAS' father, Gerald Leslie, was the owner of an estate upon the banks of a lake about two miles out of New Orleans, and also of a handsome house in that city. It is in this story that we introduce him to the reader. Gerald Leslie was in the very prime of life. Scarcely yet forty-five years of age, time had set no mark upon his thick chestnut hair or his handsome face. Save a few almost imperceptible wrinkles which the course of two or two had drawn in rigid lines about his well-shaped mouth.

His features were massive and regular; the brow broad and intellectual; the large hazel eyes bright but yet thoughtful; and there was a shade of melancholy in the general expression of the countenance which lent a peculiar charm to the face of Gerald Leslie.

It was the face of one who had suffered. It was the face of one who found himself a lonely man in the very prime of life; in that hour of all other hours in which a man yearns for the smiles of loving eyes, the warm and friendly hand. It was the face of one who had discovered too late that he had sacrificed the happiness of his life to a mistaken principle.

While the good ship Virginia is sailing away from the blue shores of the fading English coast, bearing Mrs. Mortimer, her nephew and niece and Cora Leslie, to their far Southern home, let us enter the planter's luxuriously furnished study, and watch him as he bends over his desk.

The burning Southern sun is banished from the apartment by means of Venetian shutters; the floor is covered with a cool matting woven from Indian reeds; and the faint splash of a fountain in a small garden at the back of the house is heard through one of the open windows. It is not a pleasant task which occupies the planter. His brow contracts as he examines the papers, pausing every now and then to jot down two or three figures against a long row of accounts which look terribly formidable even to the uninitiated. At last he throws down a heap of documents with a weary sigh, and leaning his head back in his chair, abandons himself to gloomy thought.

"Yes, the truth is out at last," he muttered; "no hope of a settlement in England; no chance of a happy home on the other side of the blue Atlantic with my dear old mother, my dear old father, but the weary struggle of a ruined man with difficulties so gigantic that, struggle as I may, they must close in upon me and crush me at the last. Oh, Phillip Trevorton, but for the cruel deception you practiced upon me, I should not be in this position."

Phillip Trevorton was Gerald Leslie's late partner. He had been shot a twelve-month before the opening of our story, in a sanguinary duel with a young Frenchman, but had insulted him in a gaming-house. But the two men had been more than partners; they had been friends; true and sincere friends. Gerald Leslie no more doubted the honor of his friend, Phillip Trevorton, than he would have doubted his own.

Amongst the debts owed by the two planters, there was one of no less than one hundred thousand dollars due to a lawyer and usurer, one Silas Craig, a man who was both disliked and feared in New Orleans; for he was known to be a hard unscrupulous underplotter, as to the means by which he enriched himself, pitiless to those who were backward in paying him.

In an evil hour Gerald Leslie and Phillip Trevorton had had recourse to this man, and borrowed from him at a cruelly heavy rate of interest, the sum above mentioned. Trevorton thought, as he had done, that he should be repaid at any sacrifice. He gathered together the money before leaving New Orleans to visit his daughter in England, and entrusted the sum to his partner, Trevorton, with special directions that it should be paid immediately to Silas Craig.

Gerald Leslie knew that his partner was a gambler, but he firmly believed him to be one of the most honorable of men, and he had ever found him strictly just in all their commercial dealings. He departed, therefore, happy in the thought that the debt was paid, and that Silas Craig, the usurer, could no longer rub his fat, greasy hands, and brag about the thought of his power over the haughty planter, Gerald Leslie. He departed happy in the thought that his next voyage would be to convey him to an English home, where the tyranny of prejudice could never oppress his beloved and lovely child.

The first intelligence which greeted him on his return to New Orleans, was the death of his friend and partner. Phillip Trevorton had died a week before Gerald Leslie landed. He had died at midnight in a wretched chamber at a gambling-house. There was a mystery about his death, but his last hours were shrouded in the darkness of the silent secrets of the night. None knew who had watched beside him in his dying moments. The murderer had escaped; the mutilated body of the murdered man was found in the waters of the Mississippi.

Phillip Trevorton's death was a sad blow to his survivor, Gerald Leslie. The two men had been associates for years; both thorough gentlemen, intellectual, highly educated, they had been united in the bonds of a sincere and heartfelt friendship.

What then were Gerald Leslie's feelings when he heard that his friend, his partner, his associate, the man whom he had fully trusted, had deceived him; and that the money left by him in Trevorton's hands had never been paid to Silas Craig?

In vain did he search amongst his friend's papers for the receipt; in vain did he not memorandums, not one scrap of paper containing any mention of the one hundred thousand dollars; and a week after Gerald Leslie's return, he received a visit from the usurer, who came to claim his debt. The planter gave him an interest for that period fearfully increasing the debt. This bill came due on the very day on which we have introduced Gerald Leslie to the reader, and he was now every moment expecting to hear the usurer announced.

He was still without funds to meet his

more concern, win lose. Two months hence that same property will, for certain commercial reasons known as well to you as to me, realize a much larger amount. Besides which, I have friends in the North who may come forward in the meantime to save me from ruin. Renew your bill at two months from today, and for those two months I will give you double the enormous interest I have been already paying—a ruinous bargain for me, and as valuable one for you. But no favor; remember that I do you accept? "I do," said Silas, after a few moments' deliberation. "The interest ought to be trebled, though."

The planter laughed bitterly. "I have offered you the uttermost farthing I mean to offer," he said. "I accept it," answered Silas. "Give me pen, ink and paper, and I'll draw up the document."

CHAPTER IV.

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Cruelty leered out of the small rat-like gray eyes, hypocrisy and sensuality alike were visible in the thick lips and wide animal mouth. The usurer's hair, of a reddish yellow, was worn long, parted in the middle, and pushed behind his ears, giving a sanctimonious expression to his face. For it must be known to the reader that Silas Craig had always contrived to preserve a character for great sanctity. His voice was loudest in praising his own and the backslidings of others; his presence was unfeignedly the most frequented places of worship; and men who knew that the usurer would strip the widow or the orphan of the utmost farthing, or the last rag of clothing, beheld him drop his dollars into the plate at the close of every charitable sermon.

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"Charming," answered Gerald absently. "I trust I see you well, my dear friend," murmured Silas Craig, in the fat, oily voice peculiar to him, "and yet, he added, almost affectionately, "I do not think you are looking well; no, decidedly not. You look a little harassed; a little careworn, as if the business of this life was pressing too much upon you."

"I have good need to look harassed and care-worn," answered Gerald Leslie impatiently. "Come, Mr. Craig, do not let us waste time upon fine speeches and sympathy which we cannot either of us expect to feel—I know that you have come here for, and you know that I know it, so why beat about the bush? You have my acceptance, due today in your pocket, and you come to claim payment." "You are as proud as ever, Mr. Leslie," said the usurer, an angry gleam shooting out of his small eyes, in spite of the affected smile upon his lips. "Why should I be less proud than you?" answered the planter, haughtily. "If you call a contempt for falsehood, and a loathing of hypocrisy pride, I am certainly amongst the proudest."

Gerald Leslie knew that every word he uttered was calculated to infuriate Silas Craig, and that, at the moment when he had to ask a favor of him; but the haughty spirit of the planter could less brook to stoop now than ever—the very fact of having to ask this favor stung him to the quick, and urged him on to show his contempt of the man from whom he had to ask it.

The usurer sat for some few moments in silence, rubbing his hands slowly one over the other, and looking furtively at Gerald. "You may ask me why you should be less proud today than ever, Mr. Leslie," he said, with a malicious grin. "Shall I tell you why? Because the tables are turned since the day when you passed Silas Craig in the streets of New Orleans as if he had been one of the slaves on your plantation; when you spurned him as if he had been the dirt beneath your feet. I know what you said of me in those days; I came by my money by crooked ways; I was a rogue; an usurer; my ill-gotten wealth would bring me to the gallows some day. These are the sort of things you said, and I took them just as I ought; for I am of a patient disposition, and I knew my turn would come. It has come. The times are changed since then. My wealth was ill-gotten, was it? You were glad enough to borrow a hundred thousand dollars of it, ill-gotten as it was; and now when I come today to ask you for the payment of that money, you take such a high tone that I can only believe you have it ready for me in your cash-box yonder."

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The planter sat for some minutes in perfect silence, as if he were revolving some plan in his mind. Presently he looked up, and, without any alteration of his former manner, addressed the usurer thus: "Silas Craig, sooner than ask a favor of you, I would see every scrap of property I possess sold in the public sale-room, and would leave my native land a beggar. I do not ask you a favor, then; I offer you a bargain. If my property is sold today, it will be sold at a loss. You will be paid, it is true, but others, for whom—pardon me—I feel a great deal

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The planter laughed bitterly. "I have offered you the uttermost farthing I mean to offer," he said. "I accept it," answered Silas. "Give me pen, ink and paper, and I'll draw up the document."

W HILE the difficulties of the planter were becoming every day more painful to encounter, and more perilous to his future prospects of happiness, the good ship Virginia reached her destination, early in due time. Mrs. Mortimer and her two fair charges arrived at New Orleans. Cora Leslie had given her father no warning of her coming. It had pleased the loving girl to think that she should creep to his side when he least expected her, and that the happy surprise of her arrival should cause the close observer and the physiognomist to shrink from him with instinctive abhorrence.

Cruelty leered out of the small rat-like gray eyes, hypocrisy and sensuality alike were visible in the thick lips and wide animal mouth. The usurer's hair, of a reddish yellow, was worn long, parted in the middle, and pushed behind his ears, giving a sanctimonious expression to his face. For it must be known to the reader that Silas Craig had always contrived to preserve a character for great sanctity. His voice was loudest in praising his own and the backslidings of others; his presence was unfeignedly the most frequented places of worship; and men who knew that the usurer would strip the widow or the orphan of the utmost farthing, or the last rag of clothing, beheld him drop his dollars into the plate at the close of every charitable sermon.

By such pitiful artifices as these the world is duped, and Silas Craig was universally respected in New Orleans; respected in outward seeming by men who in their inmost soul loathed and execrated him.

With a bland smile, he obeyed Gerald Leslie's gesture, and seated himself in a low rocking-chair opposite the planter. "Charming weather, Mr. Leslie," he said.

"Charming," answered Gerald absently. "I trust I see you well, my dear friend," murmured Silas Craig, in the fat, oily voice peculiar to him, "and yet, he added, almost affectionately, "I do not think you are looking well; no, decidedly not. You look a little harassed; a little careworn, as if the business of this life was pressing too much upon you."

"I have good need to look harassed and care-worn," answered Gerald Leslie impatiently. "Come, Mr. Craig, do not let us waste time upon fine speeches and sympathy which we cannot either of us expect to feel—I know that you have come here for, and you know that I know it, so why beat about the bush? You have my acceptance, due today in your pocket, and you come to claim payment." "You are as proud as ever, Mr. Leslie," said the usurer, an angry gleam shooting out of his small eyes, in spite of the affected smile upon his lips. "Why should I be less proud than you?" answered the planter, haughtily. "If you call a contempt for falsehood, and a loathing of hypocrisy pride, I am certainly amongst the proudest."

Gerald Leslie knew that every word he uttered was calculated to infuriate Silas Craig, and that, at the moment when he had to ask a favor of him; but the haughty spirit of the planter could less brook to stoop now than ever—the very fact of having to ask this favor stung him to the quick, and urged him on to show his contempt of the man from whom he had to ask it.

The usurer sat for some few moments in silence, rubbing his hands slowly one over the other, and looking furtively at Gerald. "You may ask me why you should be less proud today than ever, Mr. Leslie," he said, with a malicious grin. "Shall I tell you why? Because the tables are turned since the day when you passed Silas Craig in the streets of New Orleans as if he had been one of the slaves on your plantation; when you spurned him as if he had been the dirt beneath your feet. I know what you said of me in those days; I came by my money by crooked ways; I was a rogue; an usurer; my ill-gotten wealth would bring me to the gallows some day. These are the sort of things you said, and I took them just as I ought; for I am of a patient disposition, and I knew my turn would come. It has come. The times are changed since then. My wealth was ill-gotten, was it? You were glad enough to borrow a hundred thousand dollars of it, ill-gotten as it was; and now when I come today to ask you for the payment of that money, you take such a high tone that I can only believe you have it ready for me in your cash-box yonder."

It was with a malicious chuckle that he uttered these concluding words; for the crafty wretch well knew the nature of Gerald Leslie, and he had suspected from the first that the money was not forthcoming. "Not one penny of it!" cried the planter; "not one penny of it, Mr. Craig."

"Indeed!" said Silas. "Then I'm extremely sorry to hear it; as, of course, under those circumstances I can no longer delay putting an execution upon your property, and sending the Leslie plantation and your valuable lot of niggers to the auctioneer's hammer."

Having uttered this threat, he sat for some little time with his hands on his knees, and a smile of triumph upon his face, watching the countenance of the planter.

Gerald Leslie's was a gloomy face to look upon in that moment; but it neither expressed grief nor humiliation, and his enemy was