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CHARLOT TAYON.

It is curious to speculate on the infinite variety of causes which have influence in the formation of character; on the numerous diversities which are found under different circumstances; and the multiplicity of qualities, which, in their various combinations, make up each whole. What any man might have become under different training, or with different fortunes, it is vain even to conjecture. Yet we cannot refrain from *speculating* on the change which circumstances might have made in the characters and destinies of many, who "crawl from the cradle to the grave" unregarded and unknown.

Poor old Charlot Tayon! I have often puzzled myself to tell to what class of men he belonged by nature. Illiterate, uncultivated, ignorant, bred up on the outermost verge of civilized life, and spending all the prime of youth and manhood far beyond it, it was hard to tell

whether this rude training had encouraged or retarded the growth of those qualities which made him in my eyes a remarkable man.

A native of upper Louisiana, he had entered, in early youth, into the service of the king of Spain as a private soldier. His corps was one of those whose duties condemned them to pass their days in the wild prairies, which, extending from the neighborhood of the Mississippi to the Rio del Norte, serve rather as the range than the habitation of small but numerous bands of Indians. Such a life is of course a life of toil, hardship, and danger. The qualities which fit a man to encounter these, are, under other circumstances, rewarded by fame. Even in scenes so remote, they do not always fail of a reward, which to him who receives it seems like fame. His few companions are his world, and their applause is to him the applause of the world. He perils every thing to win it, and, having fought his way to the head of a company of rangers, is as proud, and with good reason, as Wellington himself of all his honors, purchased at less expense of hardship or danger. It is thus that I account for the unequalled pride of this poor old man, associated as it was in his uncultivated mind with all that lofty courtesy which so surely accompanies a just sense of unquestioned and unquestionable merit.

I have said that he began life as a common soldier. A campaign of hard service was rewarded by the rank of fourth corporal. Another gave him the third place among these humble but important officers. In eight years he rose, step by step, and year by year, to the rank of first sergeant. Three more placed him, by the like regular gradations, at the head of his company.

As this was an independent corps, serving at a distance from the settlements, and only returning to them at long intervals, his station was one of great responsibility. This he assumed boldly, and exercised freely. Incapable of fear, he was not easily withheld from danger by a distant authority, and, relying on the brave man's maxim, "that success in war justifies a breach of orders," he made little scruple of disregarding his, whenever an opportunity of striking a blow presented itself. On some such occasion he incurred the displeasure of his immediate superior, the commandant at St. Charles. To this worthy, the success which exposed the impolicy of his own cautious prudence, was by no means a justification for disobedience. He accordingly recalled Tayon, imprisoned him, and sent him in chains to New Orleans.

Here the history of his imputed offence was so credible to him, and the bearing of the rude soldier so forcibly struck the intendant, that his persecutor was deposed, and the prisoner returned in triumph, bearing with him a commission as commandant of the post.

This was, in his estimation, the acmé of greatness to a subject. Of the unapproachable majesty of the "King his master," as he delighted to call him, he might have formed some such conception as we have of angelic natures. But among mere men of common mould, he had seen nothing, until his forced journey to New Orleans, and had perhaps never imagined any thing above the dignity that encircled the commandant at St. Charles.

There is nothing strange in this. An officer at once judicial and executive, supreme in both capacities, al-

ways acting in person, and enforcing his authority by the summary processes of despotism, is an awful personage in his province. Though but a king of Lilliput, he is a king to Lilliputians, and especially to himself. Such was Charlot Tayon in his own estimation; he truly "bore him like a king," and when the throne of his power was removed from under him, he lost nothing of majesty in his fall. He was neither Dionysius at Corinth, nor Bonaparte at St. Helena. He was neither familiar, nor peevish, nor querulous, but sat himself down, in quiet poverty, in a cottage on the edge of the village over which he had reigned.

I saw him but seldom, but always delighted to converse with him. I found him uniformly affable, courteous and communicative. Though too self-respectful to talk gratuitously about himself, a little address alone was necessary to make him do so. He spoke not a word of English, but though illiterate, (for he could not read) his French was remarkably pure and euphonical. French has often seemed to me the appropriate language for monkeys. In his mouth it was the language of a man. Speaking slowly, deliberately, and calmly, in a strong, stern, sustained tone, with a countenance which bore no trace even of a by-gone smile, there was more to strike the ear, and awaken the imagination, in his manner, than in that of any man I ever saw. The *tout ensemble* spoke an ever present, deep, but proud and uncomplaining sense of wrong unutterable and irreparable. His figure, except on horseback, was awkward and ungainly. He was very old, and moved with difficulty. His short legs and arms, his broad bony hands, and his huge Roman nose, reminded me always of the legs, claws, and beak of a paroquet. His features, however, were not bad, though harsh. A deep-set dark grey eye surmounted by a shaggy brow, and a mouth firmly compressed and flat, were in perfect keeping with the rest of his face, and in character with the man. His dress was uniformly a blue cotton hunting shirt and trowsers, with moccasins on his feet, and a blue cotton handkerchief tied on his head in what is called the French fashion, with the ends hanging far down his back. In this garb his centaur figure, mounted on the back of a wild horse, was certainly one of the most picturesque I ever saw.

I once drew from him a sort of sketch of his life. It was little more than a confirmation of what I had heard from others. This I have already mentioned. But his manner, and the ideas which escaped from him, gave me more insight into his character. His was the first example I had ever seen of loyalty, not originating in personal attachment, wholly uninfluenced by personal considerations, adopted as a principle, but cherished into a passion. I doubt if he knew whether the king he served was king of France or of Spain, and am very sure that he knew no difference between Charles 3d, Charles 4th, and Ferdinand. Whoever he was, he was "*Le Roi mon maitre.*" As such he always spoke of him to the last, owning no other allegiance, acknowledging no other political obligation but the will and pleasure of the "king his master." Was he therefore malcontent?—just the reverse. "The king my master laid his commands upon me, to deliver up the post which he had done me the honor to place under my authority, to an officer appointed to receive it on behalf of the government of the United States; and I obeyed

him. He gave me me to understand at the same time that it was his pleasure that I and my people should submit to the authority of the United States, and conform to their laws, and I have obeyed him. You see me quietly acquiescing in the new order of things, and endeavoring in all things to regulate myself by your laws; and I do so, because the king my master has commanded it."

There was nothing in his manner of saying this, betokening that restiveness with which men submit to what they cannot help. He seemed merely to find a satisfaction in rehearsing the principles by which he had always professed to be governed, and contemplating the conformity between these and his actions.

At the time of the cession of Louisiana to the United States, the old man was in comfortable circumstances. The best house in the village was his, and he had slaves and several arpens in the common field.* But he had now fallen on evil days. He scorned to acquire any knowledge of the language, laws, and customs of the new masters of the country, and desired only to live in retirement and obscurity. But he could not help having some dealings with the world, and the management of these he committed to an only son, who had acquired a considerable proficiency both in our language and laws.

But if Master Louis excelled his father in these things, he was as much his inferior in every honorable and manly virtue. In short, a greater knave never breathed, as soon appeared by his so managing the old man's affairs as to reduce him to want. At the same time his craft, though sufficient to defraud his father, was no defence against the superior art of the adventurers who flocked to the country. He too was reduced to poverty, and spurned by his father, detested by his countrymen, and despised by the Anglo-Americans, his name was a by-word of scorn. But he still bustled about, trafficking in every thing he could lay his hands upon, negotiating bargains between new comers and the old inhabitants, and cheating both as often as he could. But the profits of his villainy were small, for he was too cautious to venture on any bold measure.

At length, however, the fiend he served seemed to have betrayed him into the hands of his enemies. At the opening of one of the terms of St. Charles' Court, I found his name on the criminal docket. I looked for the charge, and found it to be for stealing a slave. This was a capital offence, and I at once concluded that Louis' time was come. He had not a friend on earth. No witness could be expected to soften a word of testimony; no juror would do violence to his conscience for his sake, and he had therefore no hope but in innocence; and nothing could be more improbable than that.

The trial came on. In a corner of the room I observed a cluster of the poor peasantry of the village huddled together with looks of concern and awe, occasionally muttering in low and earnest tones. They are a good-natured people, and I was not surprised to see, as I supposed, some tokens of relenting toward poor

* An arpen is the French acre. In the sense in which the word is here used, it means an allotment of land, in the common field of a village, of an arpen in breadth, and usually forty arpens in length. Three or four of these contiguous to each other, enclosed by the common ring fence, and brought under the plough, were sufficient to supply as much of the necessaries and comforts of life as the simple peasantry of that country had any idea of.

Louis. But I was soon led to put a different construction on their manner, when I caught a glimpse of a figure sitting with the head bowed between the knees, which I at once recognized as that of the culprit's father.

As the cause proceeded, the excited interest of the old man came in aid of his pride, and he at length raised himself; made signs to those around him to stand aside, and thus sat full before me. He was pale and ghastly, and his eye was sunken, fixed, and rayless. With a countenance betokening stupor, like that of one just recovering from a stunning blow, he appeared to look on without seeing, and to listen without hearing.

It turned out that Louis' case was not so bad as I had apprehended. The prosecution was conceived in folly or malice, for the slave had been taken on a claim of property, by the advice of a lawyer. Of course I had but to say a few words to the jury, and he was acquitted.

This turn of the case was so sudden, that the poor Frenchmen, who understood only a word here and there, were unprepared for it, and began among themselves an eager jabbering, which at length awakened the faculties of the old man. He caught a few words, and then seemed, for the first time, to listen understandingly to what he heard. But whatever emotion he felt was either repressed by self-command, or buried in the depth of conscious abasement. He soon rose, and left the room, followed by the little party that had surrounded him.

The next morning I happened to be passing through the bar-room of the house I lodged in, and as I entered the door, I heard the bar-keeper say, "Here he is." I looked up. There was only one other person present, and his back was to me. Turning at the moment, I saw that it was old Charlot. I immediately approached him, accosting him with marked courtesy. He seemed not to hear me, but tottered toward me, looking up in my face with a dim lack-lustre eye, as if endeavoring to distinguish who I was. As I accosted him, extending my hand, he laid hold of it and drew himself forward, still gazing on me with the same fixed inquiring look. "*C'est Monsieur le Juge?*" asked he, in a subdued and tremulous voice. At the moment his eye found the answer to his question, and, before I could speak, he had fallen on his knees, and my hand was pressed to his lips, and bathed in tears which rained from his wintry eyes. I was inexpressibly shocked, and more humbled in his humiliation than at any other moment of my life.

I raised him with difficulty, and in a voice choked by tears, he tried to speak. I knew what he would say, and replied to his meaning. "You have no cause to thank me," said I. "Your son had done nothing for which he could lawfully be punished; his acquittal was inevitable, and he has merely received sheer justice at my hands." While I spoke, he recovered himself enough to speak. "Ah! Monsieur," said he, "that is true. But in the case of a poor wretch, hated and despised by all, who neither has, nor deserves to have a friend on earth, is not mere justice something to be thankful for? Bad as he is, he is my only son, and I must have leave to thank you."

I led the poor old man to a seat, and tried as soon as possible to change the conversation, and lead his mind

to the topics on which I had before heard him dwell with pleasure. A question about his friend and comrade, the famous Philip Nolan, effected my object. His dim eye for a moment flashed up like the last flickering of an expiring lamp, and he became eloquent in praise of the companion of his youth, his fellow in arms, and partner in innumerable dangers. The excitement soon died away, but it subsided into calmness and self-possession. He rose, and took his leave with recovered dignity of manner. He tottered to the door, and to his horse, a half-broken colt, which he mounted with difficulty. As he touched the saddle, he became a new creature. His infirmities had disappeared, and he was now a part of the vigorous and fiery animal he bestrode. There he sat, swaying with every motion of the prancing horse, restraining his impatience with a skill and grace too habitual to forsake him, and with an air which betokened a momentary flush of pride. He was like Conrad restored to the deck of his own ship. I could not see his face, but I had pleasure in thinking that the excitation of the moment might operate as a cordial to his drooping spirit. I looked after him as he passed up the street in a curvetting gallop, with his head-gear streaming on the wind, and bethought me that I might never see him again.

I was not mistaken. The blow that brought him to his knees before any but his God, or "the king his master," had crushed his heart. He never held up his head again, and was soon at rest. The prevalence of the Catholic religion among the French has preserved one spot sacred to the men and customs of other days, and there he lies.