

# THE KING OF HONEY ISLAND

A NOVEL OF AMERICAN LIFE DURING THE WAR OF 1812,

BY MAURICE THOMPSON.

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## CHAPTER IV. CONTINUED.

The writer of this story has become the owner of a curious and singularly interesting collection of papers, labeled "The Pearl River Records," and it is from these and from Dick Becket's stories that he has obtained the main facts in connection with Rev. Max Burns's sojourn in the region of Honey Island. The information is meager enough touching the old man's motive; but this lack naturally came of his reticence and caution in communicating with the people who treated him so kindly. Supplementing the fiddler's reminiscences and the "Records"—most of which have to do with the exploits of various outlaws, from Rameau, Lafitte, Murrell and Copeland, down to Rube Burrow and Ergeue Bunch—the recollections of Orlando Farre, a very old half-breed Indian, who died some fifteen years ago, have been relied upon; but, after all, the facts are meager and scattering. Indeed, what has already been told in the present chapter cannot be added to. The further adventures of Max Burns, in so far as they will be found of importance in this story, will be looked for at another stage of our progress.

We must now return to the bay of Saint Louis, where we left Vasseur and Fairfax enduring as best they could a situation at once awkward and trying in the extreme. To be bound and gagged could be borne after a fashion, so long as the evil was enforced by an irresistible enemy; moreover, since every moment added the torture of cruelly tight-drawn cords to wrists and ankles, the first part of the ordeal was much milder than the latter part; but when it came to lying prone, stiff and speechless while a great fire raged almost over them it was the unbearable that had to be borne; it was torture too exasperating for even the temper of Fairfax. He too gave way to violent "paroxysms of silence," as he afterward expressed it.

When Vasseur was at length released, he was too weak and benumbed by the pressure of the bonds and by the exhaustive wrath-passion that he had indulged in for his cuffs to do much harm; but he distributed both with unstinted liberality as he limped and hopped wildly about amongst the negroes.

The house and nearly everything in it were burned to ashes in an incredibly short time. Fairfax could not repress a smile when he found that his traveling-bag containing his clothes had been saved, while his sketches and his weapons—his pistols and his gun, a rifle of great value—had been overlooked and left to be destroyed. As for Vasseur, his mind, what little of it was presently available, raged with the memory of his lost treasure of jewels. He screamed in French, he screeched in Italian, and through it all ran something about having been betrayed and robbed by an individual who owed him an eternal debt of gratitude. All this, considering that the man was still in his night-clothes, of which a red night-cap was a most conspicuous garment, would have been highly amusing at any other time; and even now, at its worst, it was weirdly, almost demoniacally, comical.

Fairfax dressed himself forthwith, and then stood, with his hands in his pockets, staring at the scene, as one does when one feels especially perplexed and helpless in the midst of sudden disaster. He turned quickly, however, when Vasseur came near. The little fellow could scarcely speak intelligibly, and the froth of excitement was clotted on his lips.

"It was zat Pierre Rameau!" he cried, not forgetting to air his English even in this extremity. "Zat villain, zat robbaire! He steal evertime! He burn my maison; he care of my propriety!"

Usually it was not hard for Fairfax to find words; but now he could frame no suitable comment on this occasion. He stood looking at his swarthy little host, and smiling half mechanically, without moving his lips to make him a response. There was pathos as well as comedy in the situation.

The negroes, men, women and children, gathered in awe-struck groups to gaze on the fire, making their remarks in undertones, the women crying and the little ones clinging to the skirts of their mothers. "Ah! Ze villain! Ze scoundrel! Ze robbaire! Oh! Ah! Ah! My jewels! My pretty jewels!" still wailed Vasseur, after the house was white ashes and the sun had come up from the sea like a great round flower of flame. "My precious stones! My beautiful cross! My money! Zey are all gone—gone! He took zem! Oh! Ze perdition vachonne!"

When Fairfax had pulled himself together sufficiently to consider the situation calmly, his first effort was toward reducing Vasseur to a rational state of mind, a task by no means easy to accomplish. He succeeded in a measure at length, and when the poor little man had found some clothes and a pipe, the whole matter was talked over; and so it happened that Fairfax heard a strange story.

Eight years prior to the robbery at Vasseur's, the two men, Vasseur and Rameau, had been comrades and equal

sharers in the dangers and the profits of a daring piece of piracy done in the far East. In dividing the spoils, Vasseur gladly accepted a large quantity of jewels, some of them the personal property of Rameau, in lieu of their value in money, his passion for precious stones controlling his greed for gold; but a goodly pile of money fell to his share also, and he abandoned the sea forthwith to settle himself on a plantation in San Domingo, whence, when disturbances came, he fled to his present abode on the beautiful bluffs of the bay of Saint Louis.

Vasseur gave the details of his story without reserve. He was boiling over with indignation, and his passion made him recklessly communicative; indeed, he was almost crazed, and seemed to find vent for his overcharge of nervous excitement in laying bare the innermost secrets of his past experience.

Under ordinary circumstances and in a normal mood, Fairfax most probably would have refused to hear these terrible confessions; and yet they were of a kind to enthrall the imagination of a young man, himself passionately fond of adventure; and when he was told that the daring and villainous act just perpetrated by the riders from Honey Island had been directed by Pierre Rameau in person, he felt that, no matter what had been Vasseur's crimes, the little man was justifiable in considering himself atrociously betrayed and outraged by his former partner in felony.

It was a revelation to Fairfax thus to find himself the companion and comrade in misfortune of a whilom pirate; but, strange as it may seem, he did not recoil from the discovery. Doubtless he recognized it as a necessary part of the life around him; at all events, he found a certain exhilaration possessing him, and as he walked up to the Vernon place that same morning he could not cast off a sense of the link which connected him with some great chain of picturesque events past, present and to come.

When he neared the house he heard the noisy mocking-birds in the oaks and magnolias, and the first person he saw was Mlle. Pauline Vernon standing, tall, bright and beautiful, on the veranda under the vines. Something in her form and face sent a tender thrill through him, and in a moment he was strangely happy. Youth casts out the evil spirit of misfortune so easily in the worse case; and, after all, what had happened to Fairfax was no more than a stimulating bit of experience in the rougher current of the wild life into which he had voluntarily thrown himself. He had seen Pierre Rameau in one of his most picturesque attitudes, and the apparition was of itself worth all that he had paid for in submitting to the gag and to imminent danger of being roasted alive. The artist within him was complacently happy over the whole affair. In truth, he could not have denied that the robber's face had its fascination. Some day he would paint it from memory, or maybe he might yet see those strange, terrible, magnetic eyes again.

## CHAPTER V.

A BREAKFAST AT VERNON PLACE.

As Fairfax approached the veranda, Mr. Vernon came out of the hall, booted as if for a ride; at the same time a servant led a horse around from the rear of the house. Father and daughter both smiled at the sight of the young man, and Mr. Vernon welcomed him with a hearty, loud "Good morning," his voice ringing out pleasantly:

"Glad to see you, my boy—glad to see you. Hope you slept well last night. It was a grand night for sound, refreshing sleep!"

Fairfax lifted his hat and shook hands with them both. For the single moment that his fingers closed over those of Mlle. Pauline he looked into her shy but friendly eyes and forgot all that had passed during the night.

"And how are they down at Vasseur's?" continued Mr. Vernon. "Is my little neighbor well?"

He always spoke of Vasseur in the diminutive.

The inquiry caused Fairfax to start perceptibly. It was a rude transition from the mood of the moment to a thought of what had come to pass during the night. At first he had no words ready. Like an abashed boy, he stood looking now at Mlle. Pauline and then at her father. There was little enough of shyness or hesitation in his nature; but somehow the question threw him into confusion. Just then the subject called up was not welcome to him; it would have been so much pleasanter could he have been left alone with Mlle. Pauline to forget that there ever was a Vasseur. He hesitated but a moment, however, seeing that his change of countenance had stirred up some sort of uneasiness in the mind of Mr. Vernon, who had observed it.

"Vasseur was robbed last night," he bluntly said, "and his house was burned."

"Robbed! Burned!" exclaimed Mr. Vernon, whose turn was now to be taken by surprise.

"What do you mean to say, Mr. Fairfax?"

Mlle. Pauline grew close to her stalwart, shaggy father, and put an arm over his immense shoulder. The blood had left her face, so that it was as white as a lily petal.

It did not give Fairfax any pleasure to tell the story. Perhaps, being a very young man, he was aware that his part in the affair had been neither heroic nor picturesque, and that he must of best appear to have been an easy victim to a bold assault. This was an exhilarating consciousness.

Mr. Vernon's brow grew dark as he listened, and he combed his beard with his fingers.

"I will ride down and see Vasseur," he said. "It may be that I can be of service to him. Go in, Mr. Fairfax; the ladies will ask you a thousand questions; I will return immediately."

"But it is dreadful! It is dangerous! You will be killed!" cried Pauline, clinging to him, nervously. "Don't go, father! Please, don't."

He kissed her, laughing meantime to pooh-pooh her fears, then went down the steps and vaulted with a superb show of muscular energy into the saddle. Before he rode away, he sat for a time stroking the glossy neck of his horse, while the groom fetched a pair of heavy holster pistols and hung them at the pommel of the saddle; then his gun was also handed to him.

Mrs. Vernon made her appearance at this point. She saw forthwith that something unusual had happened, and began to ask questions, growing excited as she proceeded. The groom stood listening with open mouth and rolling eyes.

"Mr. Fairfax will tell you everything," said Mr. Vernon; "it's nothing so terrible, after all. The danger is past, if there ever was any, and I'm only going down to console poor little Vasseur."

"And, say, dear," he turned and added to his wife, after he had ridden to some distance, "ask Mr. Fairfax to have some breakfast; I don't think he has taken any this morning. I may return in time to have coffee with you; but don't wait."

Mrs. Vernon made a gesture of despair and began to cry hysterically.

"I will not stay in this terrible place any longer!" she exclaimed with vehemence. "We must go back to the city at once. Oh, but this is unbearable! Robbers down there—only a mile or so away! What if—if—that if they had come here!"

This was addressed to Mr. Vernon, but he did not hear; his horse was already galloping briskly away. The three, Mrs. Vernon, Pauline and Fairfax, stood looking after him until he had passed out of sight amid the fringe of trees along the bluff of the bay shore. What to them was a reality, quite in keeping with the time and the place, must appear to us, at this distance and with our surroundings, like an illustration torn from some old novel. Even in that day, however, when every inhabitant of the gulf coast was more or less familiar with lawlessness and violence in their most picturesque forms, there was something startling in each new phase of the reckless life that throbbed along the old creole borders. It is impossible for men and women to live in the midst of romance and not realize it in some degree.

"He ought to have lived in the days of Richard the Lionheart," said Fairfax, turning his gaze from where Mr. Vernon had disappeared in the wood to the pale face of Pauline. "He would have been a knight of iron with that frame of his." He spoke lightly, more to break up the situation and call the ladies back to themselves than to give expression to the fancy of the moment, suggested by the superb horsemanship just witnessed.

"But the robbers! They will kill him!" insisted Mrs. Vernon. "He is going right to them!"

"Never fear, madam," said Fairfax with an assuring smile; "there isn't the slightest danger. Those gallant knights of the road are many miles from here at present. It appears they knew too much about Vasseur's treasure, and so planned a successful raid on it. There is no more danger from them; they are gone."

"But we have jewels, too," said Mrs. Vernon with a quick look at Pauline. "They might want our diamonds."

Fairfax laughed outright, and the ladies joined him timidly, as if under protest.

"If I may speak of it," he said, "you are forgetting to make further mention of breakfast. I am preposterously hungry after my night's adventures."

"A thousand pardons!" exclaimed Mrs. Vernon. "We will go in at once."

The appeal to her hospitality was with her, as it has always been with the Southern hostess, sufficient to drive almost anything else from her mind. Pauline led the way to the breakfast-room, where the table was spread near a rude alcove in the soft light of vine-colored windows.

Although he felt it necessary to hide from the ladies every doubt he might have as to their perfect security, to know that his presence gave them a sense of safety. It now seemed to him inexplicable that Mr. Vernon should have brought his wife and daughter to this lonely and exposed place. If the bay of Saint Louis is a secluded, dreamy, far-withdrawn spot even now, what was it at the beginning of our century?

"I shall insist on going back to our house in New Orleans at once," said Mrs. Vernon, as they took their places at the table, and she signaled for a servant. "I am not willing to live here any longer."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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