CLASSICS TO GO

AT FAULT

KATE CHOPIN

At Fault

Kate Chopin

PART I

I

The Mistress of Place-du-Bois.

When Jérôme Lafirme died, his neighbors awaited the results of his sudden taking off with indolent watchfulness. It was a matter of unusual interest to them that a plantation of four thousand acres had been left unincumbered to the disposal of a handsome, inconsolable, childless Creole widow of thirty. A *bêtise* of some sort might safely be looked for. But time passing, the anticipated folly failed to reveal itself; and the only wonder was that Thérèse Lafirme so successfully followed the methods of her departed husband.

Of course Thérèse had wanted to die with her Jérôme, feeling that life without him held nothing that could reconcile her to its further endurance. For days she lived alone with her grief; shutting out the appeals that came to her from the demoralized “hands,” and unmindful of the disorder that gathered about her. Till Uncle Hiram came one day with a respectful tender of sympathy, offered in the guise of a reckless misquoting of Scripture—and with a grievance.

“Mistuss,” he said, “I ’lowed ’twar best to come to de house an’ tell you; fur Massa he alluz did say ‘Hi’urm, I counts on you to keep a eye open endurin’ my appersunce;’ you ricollic, marm?” addressing an expanse of black

bordered cambric that veiled the features of his mistress. “Things is a goin’ wrong; dat dey is. I don’t wants to name no names ’doubt I’se ’bleeged to; but dey done start a kiarrin’ de cotton seed off de place, and dats how.”

If Hiram’s information had confined itself to the bare statement of things “goin’ wrong,” such intimation, of its nature vague and susceptible of uncertain interpretation, might have failed to rouse Thérèse from her lethargy of grief. But that wrong doing presented as a tangible abuse and defiance of authority, served to move her to action. She felt at once the weight and sacredness of a trust, whose acceptance brought consolation and awakened unsuspected powers of doing.

In spite of Uncle Hiram’s parting prediction “de cotton ’ll be a goin’ naxt” no more seed was hauled under cover of darkness from Place-du-Bois.

The short length of this Louisiana plantation stretched along Cane River, meeting the water when that stream was at its highest, with a thick growth of cotton-wood trees; save where a narrow convenient opening had been cut into their midst, and where further down the pine hills started in abrupt prominence from the water and the dead level of land on either side of them. These hills extended in a long line of gradual descent far back to the wooded borders of Lac du Bois; and within the circuit which they formed on the one side, and the irregular half circle of a sluggish bayou on the other, lay the cultivated open ground of the plantation—rich in its exhaustless powers of reproduction.

Among changes which the railroad brought soon after Jérôme Lafirme’s death, and which were viewed by many as of questionable benefit, was one which drove Thérèse to seek another domicile. The old homestead that nestled to

the hill side and close to the water’s edge, had been abandoned to the inroads of progressive civilization; and Mrs. Lafirme had rebuilt many rods away from the river and beyond sight of the mutilated dwelling, converted now into a section house. In building, she avoided the temptations offered by modern architectural innovations, and clung to the simplicity of large rooms and broad verandas: a style whose merits had stood the test of easy-going and comfort-loving generations.

The negro quarters were scattered at wide intervals over the land, breaking with picturesque irregularity into the systematic division of field from field; and in the early spring-time gleaming in their new coat of whitewash against the tender green of the sprouting cotton and corn.

Thérèse loved to walk the length of the wide verandas, armed with her field-glass, and to view her surrounding possessions with comfortable satisfaction. Then her gaze swept from cabin to cabin; from patch to patch; up to the pine-capped hills, and down to the station which squatted a brown and ugly intruder within her fair domain.

She had made pouting resistance to this change at first, opposing it step by step with a conservatism that yielded only to the resistless. She pictured a visionary troop of evils coming in the wake of the railroad, which, in her eyes no conceivable benefits could mitigate. The occasional tramp, she foresaw as an army; and the travelers whom chance deposited at the store that adjoined the station, she dreaded as an endless procession of intruders forcing themselves upon her privacy.

Grégoire, the young nephew of Mrs. Lafirme, whose duty on the plantation was comprehended in doing as he was bid, qualified by a propensity for doing as he liked, rode up

from the store one day in the reckless fashion peculiar to Southern youth, breathless with the information that a stranger was there wishing audience with her.

Thérèse at once bristled with objections. Here was a confirmation of her worst dread. But encouraged by Grégoire's reiteration "he 'pear to me like a nice sort o' person," she yielded a grudging assent to the interview.

She sat within the wide hall-way beyond the glare and heat that were beating mercilessly down upon the world out of doors, engaged in a light work not so exacting as to keep her thoughts and glance from wandering. Looking through the wide open back doors, the picture which she saw was a section of the perfect lawn that encircled the house for an acre around, and from which Hiram was slowly raking the leaves cast from a clump of tall magnolias. Beneath the spreading shade of an umbrella-China tree, lay the burly Hector, but half awake to the possible nearness of tramps; and Betsy, a piece of youthful ebony in blue cottonade, was crossing leisurely on her way to the poultry yard; unheeding the scorching sun-rays that she thought were sufficiently parried by the pan of chick feed that she balanced adroitly on her bushy black head.

At the front, the view at certain seasons would have been clear and unbroken: to the station, the store, and out-lying hills. But now she could see beyond the lawn only a quivering curtain of rich green which the growing corn spread before the level landscape, and above whose swaying heads appeared occasionally the top of an advancing white sun-shade.

Thérèse was of a roundness of figure suggesting a future of excessive fullness if not judiciously guarded; and she was fair, with a warm whiteness that a passing thought could

deepen into color. The waving blonde hair, gathered in an abundant coil on top of her head, grew away with a pretty sweep from the temples, the low forehead and nape of the white neck that showed above a frill of soft lace. Her eyes were blue, as certain gems are; that deep blue that lights, and glows, and tells things of the soul. When David Hosmer presented himself, they were intense only with expectancy and the color was in her cheek like the blush in a shell.

He was a tall individual of perhaps forty; thin and sallow. His black hair was streaked abundantly with grey, and his face marked with premature lines; left there by care, no doubt, and, by a too close attention to what men are pleased to call the main chances of life.

“A serious one,” was Thérèse’s first thought in looking at him. “A man who has never learned to laugh or who has forgotten how.” Though plainly feeling the effects of the heat, he did not seem to appreciate the relief offered by the grateful change into this shadowy, sweet smelling, cool retreat; used as he was to ignore the comforting things of life when presented to him as irrelevant to that dominant main chance. He accepted under protest a glass of ice water from the wide-eyed Betsy, and suffered a fan to be thrust into his hand, seemingly to save his time or his timidity by its possibly unheeded rejection.

“Lor’-zee folks,” exclaimed the observant Betsy on re-entering the kitchen, “dey’se a man in yonda, look like he gwine eat somebody up. I was fur gittin’ ’way quick me.”

It can be readily imagined that Hosmer lost little time in preliminary small talk. He introduced himself vaguely as from the West; then perceiving the need of being more specific as from Saint Louis. She had guessed he was no Southerner. He had come to Mrs. Lafirme on the part of

himself and others with a moneyed offer for the privilege of cutting timber from her land for a given number of years. The amount named was alluring, but here was proposed another change and she felt plainly called on for resistance.

The company which he represented had in view the erection of a sawmill some two miles back in the woods, close beside the bayou and at a convenient distance from the lake. He was not wordy, nor was he eager in urging his plans; only in a quiet way insistent in showing points to be considered in her own favor which she would be likely herself to overlook.

Mrs. Lafirme, a clever enough business woman, was moved by no undue haste to give her answer. She begged for time to think the matter over, which Hosmer readily agreed to; expressing a hope that a favorable answer be sent to him at Natchitoches, where he would await her convenience. Then resisting rather than declining all further hospitality, he again took his way through the scorching fields.

Thérèse wanted but time to become familiar with this further change. Alone she went out to her beloved woods, and at the hush of mid-day, bade a tearful farewell to the silence.

II

At the Mill.

David Hosmer sat alone in his little office of roughly fashioned pine board. So small a place, that with his desk and his clerk's desk, a narrow bed in one corner, and two chairs, there was scant room for a man to more than turn himself comfortably about. He had just dispatched his clerk with the daily bundle of letters to the post-office, two miles away in the Lafirme store, and he now turned with the air of a man who had well earned his moment of leisure, to the questionable relaxation of adding columns and columns of figures.

The mill's unceasing buzz made pleasant music to his ears and stirred reflections of a most agreeable nature. A year had gone by since Mrs. Lafirme had consented to Hosmer's proposal; and already the business more than gave promise of justifying the venture. Orders came in from the North and West more rapidly than they could be filled. That "Cypresse Funerall" which stands in grim majesty through the dense forests of Louisiana had already won its just recognition; and Hosmer's appreciation of a successful business venture was showing itself in a little more pronounced stoop of shoulder, a deepening of pre-occupation and a few additional lines about mouth and forehead.

Hardly had the clerk gone with his letters than a light footstep sounded on the narrow porch; the quick tap of a parasol was heard on the door-sill; a pleasant voice asking, "Any admission except on business?" and Thérèse crossed

the small room and seated herself beside Hosmer’s desk before giving him time to arise.

She laid her hand and arm,—bare to the elbow—across his work, and said, looking at him reproachfully:—

“Is this the way you keep a promise?”

“A promise?” he questioned, smiling awkwardly and looking furtively at the white arm, then very earnestly at the ink-stand beyond.

“Yes. Didn’t you promise to do no work after five o’clock?”

“But this is merely pastime,” he said, touching the paper, yet leaving it undisturbed beneath the fair weight that was pressing it down. “My work is finished: you must have met Henry with the letters.”

“No, I suppose he went through the woods; we came on the hand-car. Oh, dear! It’s an ungrateful task, this one of reform,” and she leaned back, fanning leisurely, whilst he proceeded to throw the contents of his desk into hopeless disorder by pretended efforts at arrangement.

“My husband used sometimes to say, and no doubt with reason,” she continued, “that in my eagerness for the rest of mankind to do right, I was often in danger of losing sight of such necessity for myself.”

“Oh, there could be no fear of that,” said Hosmer with a short laugh. There was no further pretext for continued occupation with his pens and pencils and rulers, so he turned towards Thérèse, rested an arm on the desk, pulled absently at his black moustache, and crossing his knee, gazed with deep concern at the toe of his boot, and set of his trouser about the ankle.

“You are not what my friend Homeyer would call an individualist,” he ventured, “since you don’t grant a man the right to follow the promptings of his character.”

“No, I’m no individualist, if to be one is to permit men to fall into hurtful habits without offering protest against it. I’m losing faith in that friend Homeyer, who I strongly suspect is a mythical apology for your own short-comings.”

“Indeed he’s no myth; but a friend who is fond of going into such things and allows me the benefit of his deeper perceptions.”

“You having no time, well understood. But if his influence has had the merit of drawing your thoughts from business once in a while we won’t quarrel with it.”

“Mrs. Lafirme,” said Hosmer, seeming moved to pursue the subject, and addressing the spray of white blossoms that adorned Thérèse’s black hat, “you admit, I suppose, that in urging your views upon me, you have in mind the advancement of my happiness?”

“Well understood.”

“Then why wish to substitute some other form of enjoyment for the one which I find in following my inclinations?”

“Because there is an unsuspected selfishness in your inclinations that works harm to yourself and to those around you. I want you to know,” she continued warmly, “the good things of life that cheer and warm, that are always at hand.”

“Do you think the happiness of Melicent or—or others could be materially lessened by my fondness for money getting?” he asked dryly, with a faint elevation of eyebrow.

“Yes, in proportion as it deprives them of a charm which any man’s society loses, when pursuing one object in life, he grows insensible to every other. But I’ll not scold any more. I’ve made myself troublesome enough for one day. You haven’t asked about Melicent. It’s true,” she laughed, “I haven’t given you much chance. She’s out on the lake with Grégoire.”

“Ah?”

“Yes, in the pirogue. A dangerous little craft, I’m afraid; but she tells me she can swim. I suppose it’s all right.”

“Oh, Melicent will look after herself.”

Hosmer had great faith in his sister Melicent’s ability to look after herself; and it must be granted that the young lady fully justified his belief in her.

“She enjoys her visit more than I thought she would,” he said.

“Melicent’s a dear girl,” replied Thérèse cordially, “and a wise one too in guarding herself against a somber influence that I know,” with a meaning glance at Hosmer, who was preparing to close his desk.

She suddenly perceived the picture of a handsome boy, far back in one of the pigeon-holes, and with the familiarity born of country intercourse, she looked intently at it, remarking upon the boy’s beauty.

“A child whom I loved very much,” said Hosmer. “He’s dead,” and he closed the desk, turning the key in the lock with a sharp click which seemed to add—“and buried.”

Thérèse then approached the open door, leaned her back against its casing, and turned her pretty profile towards Hosmer, who, it need not be supposed, was averse to looking at it—only to being caught in the act.

“I want to look in at the mill before work closes,” she said; and not waiting for an answer she went on to ask—moved by some association of ideas:—

“How is Joçint doing?”

“Always unruly, the foreman tells me. I don’t believe we shall be able to keep him.”

Hosmer then spoke a few words through the telephone which connected with the agent’s desk at the station, put on his great slouch hat, and thrusting keys and hands into his pocket, joined Thérèse in the door-way.

Quitting the office and making a sharp turn to the left, they came in direct sight of the great mill. She quickly made her way past the huge piles of sawed timber, not waiting for her companion, who loitered at each step of the way, with observant watchfulness. Then mounting the steep stairs that led to the upper portions of the mill, she went at once to her favorite spot, quite on the edge of the open platform that overhung the dam. Here she watched with fascinated delight the great logs hauled dripping from the water, following each till it had changed to the clean symmetry of sawed planks. The unending work made her giddy. For no one was there a moment of rest, and she could well understand the open revolt of the surly Joçint; for he rode the day long on that narrow car, back and forth, back and forth, with his heart in the pine hills and knowing that his little Creole pony was roaming the woods in vicious idleness

and his rifle gathering an unsightly rust on the cabin wall at home.

The boy gave but ugly acknowledgment to Thérèse’s amiable nod; for he thought she was one upon whom partly rested the fault of this intrusive Industry which had come to fire the souls of indolent fathers with a greedy ambition for gain, at the sore expense of revolting youth.

III

In the Pirogue.

“You got to set mighty still in this pirogue,” said Grégoire, as with a long oar-stroke he pulled out into mid stream.

“Yes, I know,” answered Melicent complacently, arranging herself opposite him in the long narrow boat: all sense of danger which the situation might arouse being dulled by the attractiveness of a new experience.

Her resemblance to Hosmer ended with height and slenderness of figure, olive tinted skin, and eyes and hair which were of that dark brown often miscalled black; but unlike his, her face was awake with an eagerness to know and test the novelty and depth of unaccustomed sensation. She had thus far lived an unstable existence, free from the weight of responsibilities, with a notion lying somewhere deep in her consciousness that the world must one day be taken seriously; but that contingency was yet too far away to disturb the harmony of her days.

She had eagerly responded to her brother’s suggestion of spending a summer with him in Louisiana. Hitherto, having passed her summers North, West, or East as alternating caprice prompted, she was ready at a word to fit her humor to the novelty of a season at the South. She enjoyed in advance the startling effect which her announced intention produced upon her intimate circle at home; thinking that her whim deserved the distinction of eccentricity with which they chose to invest it. But Melicent was chiefly moved by the prospect of an uninterrupted sojourn with her brother,

whom she loved blindly, and to whom she attributed qualities of mind and heart which she thought the world had discovered to use against him.

“You got to set mighty still in this pirogue.”

“Yes, I know; you told me so before,” and she laughed.

“W’at are you laughin’ at?” asked Grégoire with amused but uncertain expectancy.

“Laughing at you, Grégoire; how can I help it?” laughing again.

“Betta wait tell I do somethin’ funny, I reckon. Ain’t this a putty sight?” he added, referring to the dense canopy of an overarching tree, beneath which they were gliding, and whose extreme branches dipped quite into the slow moving water.

The scene had not attracted Melicent. For she had been engaged in observing her companion rather closely; his personality holding her with a certain imaginative interest.

The young man whom she so closely scrutinized was slightly undersized, but of close and brawny build. His hands were not so refinedly white as those of certain office bred young men of her acquaintance, yet they were not coarsened by undue toil: it being somewhat an axiom with him to do nothing that an available “nigger” might do for him.

Close fitting, high-heeled boots of fine quality incased his feet, in whose shapeliness he felt a pardonable pride; for a young man’s excellence was often measured in the circle which he had frequented, by the possession of such a foot. A peculiar grace in the dance and a talent for bold repartee

were further characteristics which had made Grégoire's departure keenly felt among certain belles of upper Red River. His features were handsome, of sharp and refined cut; and his eyes black and brilliant as eyes of an alert and intelligent animal sometimes are. Melicent could not reconcile his voice to her liking; it was too softly low and feminine, and carried a note of pleading or pathos, unless he argued with his horse, his dog, or a "nigger," at which times, though not unduly raised, it acquired a biting quality that served the purpose of relieving him from further form of insistence.

He pulled rapidly and in silence down the bayou, that was now so entirely sheltered from the open light of the sky by the meeting branches above, as to seem a dim leafy tunnel fashioned by man's ingenuity. There were no perceptible banks, for the water spread out on either side of them, further than they could follow its flashings through the rank underbrush. The dull plash of some object falling into the water, or the wild call of a lonely bird were the only sounds that broke upon the stillness, beside the monotonous dipping of the oars and the occasional low undertones of their own voices. When Grégoire called the girl's attention to an object near by, she fancied it was the protruding stump of a decaying tree; but reaching for his revolver and taking quiet aim, he drove a ball into the black upturned nozzle that sent it below the surface with an angry splash.

"Will he follow us?" she asked, mildly agitated.

"Oh no; he's glad 'nough to git out o' the way. You betta put down yo' veil," he added a moment later.

Before she could ask a reason—for it was not her fashion to obey at word of command—the air was filled with the

doleful hum of a gray swarm of mosquitoes, which attacked them fiercely.

“You didn’t tell me the bayou was the refuge of such savage creatures,” she said, fastening her veil closely about face and neck, but not before she had felt the sharpness of their angry sting.

“I reckoned you’d ’a knowed all about it: seems like you know everything.” After a short interval he added, “you betta take yo’ veil off.”

She was amused at Grégoire’s authoritative tone and she said to him laughing, yet obeying his suggestion, which carried a note of command: “you shall tell me always, why I should do things.”

“All right,” he replied; “because they ain’t any mo’ mosquitoes; because I want you to see somethin’ worth seein’ afta while; and because I like to look at you,” which he was doing, with the innocent boldness of a forward child. “Ain’t that ’nough reasons?”

“More than enough,” she replied shortly.

The rank and clustering vegetation had become denser as they went on, forming an impenetrable tangle on either side, and pressing so closely above that they often needed to lower their heads to avoid the blow of some drooping branch. Then a sudden and unlooked for turn in the bayou carried them out upon the far-spreading waters of the lake, with the broad canopy of the open sky above them.

“Oh,” cried Melicent, in surprise. Her exclamation was like a sigh of relief which comes at the removal of some pressure from body or brain.

The wildness of the scene caught upon her erratic fancy, speeding it for a quick moment into the realms of romance. She was an Indian maiden of the far past, fleeing and seeking with her dusky lover some wild and solitary retreat on the borders of this lake, which offered them no seeming foot-hold save such as they would hew themselves with axe or tomahawk. Here and there, a grim cypress lifted its head above the water, and spread wide its moss covered arms inviting refuge to the great black-winged buzzards that circled over and about it in mid-air. Nameless voices—weird sounds that awake in a Southern forest at twilight's approach,—were crying a sinister welcome to the settling gloom.

"This is a place thet can make a man sad, I tell you," said Grégoire, resting his oars, and wiping the moisture from his forehead. "I wouldn't want to be yere alone, not fur any money."

"It is an awful place," replied Melicent with a little appreciative shudder; adding "do you consider me a bodily protection?" and feebly smiling into his face.

"Oh; I ain't 'fraid o' any thing I can see an on'erstan'. I can han'le mos' any thing thet's got a body. But they do tell some mighty queer tales 'bout this lake an' the pine hills yonda."

"Queer—how?"

"W'y, ole McFarlane's buried up there on the hill; an' they's folks 'round yere says he walks about o' nights; can't res' in his grave fur the niggas he's killed."

"Gracious! and who was old McFarlane?"

“The meanest w’ite man thet ever lived, seems like. Used to own this place long befo’ the Lafirmes got it. They say he’s the person that Mrs. W’at’s her name wrote about in Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

“Legree? I wonder if it could be true?” Melicent asked with interest.

“Thet’s w’at they all say: ask any body.”

“You’ll take me to his grave, won’t you Grégoire,” she entreated.

“Well, not this evenin’—I reckon not. It’ll have to be broad day, an’ the sun shinin’ mighty bright w’en I take you to ole McFarlane’s grave.”

They had retraced their course and again entered the bayou, from which the light had now nearly vanished, making it needful that they watch carefully to escape the hewn logs that floated in numbers upon the water.

“I didn’t suppose you were ever sad, Grégoire,” Melicent said gently.

“Oh my! yes;” with frank acknowledgment. “You ain’t ever seen me w’en I was real lonesome. ’Tain’t so bad sence you come. But times w’en I git to thinkin’ ’bout home, I’m boun’ to cry—seems like I can’t he’p it.”

“Why did you ever leave home?” she asked sympathetically.

“You see w’en father died, fo’ year ago, mother she went back to France, t’her folks there; she never could stan’ this country—an’ lef’ us boys to manage the place. Hec, he took charge the firs’ year an’ run it in debt. Placide an’ me did’n’

have no betta luck the naxt year. Then the creditors come up from New Orleans an’ took holt. That’s the time I packed my duds an’ lef’.”

“And you came here?”

“No, not at firs’. You see the Santien boys had a putty hard name in the country. Aunt Thérèse, she’d fallen out with father years ago ’bout the way, she said, he was bringin’ us up. Father, he wasn’t the man to take nothin’ from nobody. Never ’lowed any of us to come down yere. I was in Texas, goin’ to the devil I reckon, w’en she sent for me, an’ yere I am.”

“And here you ought to stay, Grégoire.”

“Oh, they ain’t no betta woman in the worl’ then Aunt Thérèse, w’en you do like she wants. See ’em yonda waitin’ fur us? Reckon they thought we was drowned.”

IV

A Small Interruption.

When Melicent came to visit her brother, Mrs. Lafirme persuaded him to abandon his uncomfortable quarters at the mill and take up his residence in the cottage, which stood just beyond the lawn of the big house. This cottage had been furnished *de pied en cap* many years before, in readiness against an excess of visitors, which in days gone by was not of infrequent occurrence at Place-du-Bois. It was Melicent's delighted intention to keep house here. And she foresaw no obstacle in the way of procuring the needed domestic aid in a place which was clearly swarming with idle women and children.

"Got a cook yet, Mel?" was Hosmer's daily enquiry on returning home, to which Melicent was as often forced to admit that she had no cook, but was not without abundant hope of procuring one.

Betsy's Aunt Cynthy had promised with a sincerity which admitted not of doubt, that "de Lord willin' " she would "be on han' Monday, time to make de mornin' coffee." Which assurance had afforded Melicent a Sunday free of disturbing doubts concerning the future of her undertaking. But who may know what the morrow will bring forth? Cynthy had been "tuck sick in de night." So ran the statement of the wee pickaninny who appeared at Melicent's gate many hours later than morning coffee time: delivering his message in a high voice of complaint, and disappearing like a vision without further word.