

THE PLAYER QUEEN

ONE

Darkness, and the sound of rustling. The hiss of limelight, and here behind the curtain, indrawn breaths. Miranda Dardou stood waiting for her entrance at the Tivoli Theatre in New Orleans in 1861 and thought, I'm home. My God, I'm actually home. She closed her eyes and heard the distant sound of Southern voices coming from the stalls.

"The toast of Europe..."

"They say the Prince Consort once threw her a rose..."

"Proposed to by King Leopold of the Belgians!"

"And six grand dukes!"

"*La Premiere Etoile de Paris!* And she's actually here!"

"Places, everyone, places," the callboy hissed.

"Right, coming, move the farthingale, there's a luv..." Frederick Von Hirschberg pushed

past Deirdre Plauche and headed for the stage.

“Ooo,” Charlotte Newman whispered, “these shoes’ll be the death of me!”

“Shoes?” Roger Rathbone snorted. “Any more powder and this wig’ll be giving me sneezing fits!”

“You step on my lines again Phil,” Digby Dunnett told Philip Pendragon, “and I’ll knock you teeth out, just see if I don’t.”

“Prithee, why so reserved? Something has put you out of humor.”

“Not at all. I happen to be grave today, and you are gay, that’s all.”

The first few lines of *The Way of the World* were flung out over the audience like a handful of rose petals, and Arthur Blackstone, the fat, florid manager of the Tivoli Theatre, whispered, “Ready, Miss Dardou?”

“Yes, thank you.” Her voice was memorable even when soft, a rich contralto capable of every variation of sweetness from molasses to crystal. The manager thought of syrup and peaches, pralines and candy, every delectable thing he’d ever known in his life spun into one.

“Um, do you--do you need anything? I mean anything else?”

“Some silence would be nice.”

“Oh, of course! I know, all these dreadful people backstage...”

“I meant you, Mr. Blackstone. Please put your mind at ease. You’ve done all you can here. Now it’s my job.”

Miranda smiled her most radiant smile and privately thought, *God save me from this infernal idiot*. Twenty years ago she’d left New Orleans as a gawky girl, leaving her widowed father to start a new life in Paris, but Europe or America, the managers were all the same, and

officials pests every one of them. *La Dardou*, famed for her performances in *Mignon* and *La Dame Aux Camelias*, had endured cold trains, bare dressing rooms, balky mules and a shoot-out in Deadwood on this trip to America, so she supposed she could endure Arthur Blackstone. She swept onstage in her costume as Mrs. Millamant and the actor playing Mirabell proclaimed, “*Here she comes, i’faith, full sail, with her fan spread and her streamers out, and a shoal of fools for tenders!*”

Zepherine Alsace, Miranda’s quadron maid, retired to the dressing room for a well-earned smoke. Being back in New Orleans frankly set her teeth on edge. She filched one of Miranda’s cigarettes and opened the *New Orleans Bee*, flicking past stories of secession and politics to the real meat and potatoes of any city as far as she was concerned, the classified ads. It was a sobering experience. “Ran Away on the 20th inst., a Negro boy, aged 16, when last seen had on a short fustian coat”...“For Sale, experienced wet-nurse, price 600 dollars or best offer...”

She balled up the newspaper and thrust it into the grate, lighting it with the end of her cigarette. It was alright, Miranda never read anything but theatrical notices anyway, and that only when she had a rival onstage.

Zepherine stretched out on the chaise longue and enjoyed the tobacco which her mistress, who was also her best friend and her half-sister, had purchased in quantity in Bond Street before their trip. Six months, she’d said, six months, which had already become a year, although Zepherine hadn’t been in any mood to complain when they’d first started. Her own life had become complicated enough in London that she’d welcomed the chance for a change of scene. A minor baronet had proposed to her, and his mother had become so outraged at the prospect of a dusky daughter-in-law that she’d swallowed prussic acid and nearly died. The newspapers had

taken her up as “the ebony Lucretia”, and while Miranda had pronounced it all so funny she’d kept a scrapbook, Zepherine had finally put her foot down.

If Mr. Barnum could make millions bringing Jenny Lind to America, then they should go too, and be damned to the Fugitive Slave Law. “I’m not a slave, I was born free and my mother was too, so what can they do? Besides,” she’d told Miranda, “you’re the one who’s *incognito*. You’d better get your story straight before we head south of the Mason-Dixon line.”

It hadn’t helped her temper any that Miranda had simply laughed. “Or what? They’ll find out I’m an American? Zephie, don’t you remember anything? Americans are the most chauvinistic people on earth! They’ll probably be tickled to death!”

And of course she was right. It had all been a lark for a while, playing cat-and-mouse with the press. It was only when they’d swung south that the interviews had become more pointed. Was the young woman who served Miranda her slave, or her employee? What did *La Dardou* think about the “peculiar institution”? Was she more in sympathy with the Secessionists or the Unionists? “It’s all talk,” her business manager Gerald Polycarp had assured her, pouring whisky and hot milk for her after a performance in Atlanta. “What else do you expect? You’re news, pumpkin! Don’t you remember the immortal words of the late Edmund Kean, ‘the only bad publicity is no publicity’? Sweetness, angel, gumdrop, have you seen the advances? They’re eating you up down here in the South!”

So New Orleans had been a foregone conclusion. The Tivoli Theatre had booked them for three weeks, an unprecedented run for a touring star, her choice of vehicle, all expenses paid and a full supporting cast (“the finest stock thespians ever to appear in this or any other city”).

Zepherine had said, “Couldn’t you have played in Mobile? Or Natchez? I hear they have some

wonderful theaters..." but she had resigned herself. The problem had come with Miranda's decision, foregone as well, to visit their father.

"You could come too," she'd said. "Zephie, don't you want to see him?"

"Ha!" Zepherine's dark eyes had flashed even more brightly than usual. "As what, his embarrassment? No, no, you go, he'll only get more nostalgic if he sees me. He kept Charles--" Zepherine's black brother, who'd remained in New Orleans and now kept a wine shop on Chartres Street. "He can afford one lost pickaninny. Go on, talk to him. I've had enough words."

And in fact the dinner hadn't gone particularly well, too much history and too much of the past combining to reduce both Alcide Rouzin and his daughter to virtual strangers. She'd kissed him, rubbed his cheek, reminded him to get a shave, and given him a pass to the show. But he hadn't come that night, and Zepherine for one was relieved. She lay back now blowing smoke and considered. Miranda was a sentimentalist, but as far as she was concerned, the sooner they got out of this town the better.

She put out her cigarette as she heard the crash of applause, and stood up just as Miranda strode into the room saying, "Lemonade, please, I'm parched, and stop stealing all my Turkish Orientals! God, that was fun! Do we have anymore biscuits? Never mind, I'm not really hungry. Is my hair coming down in back? It feels all wispy. Light one of those blessed things for me, would you, Zephie, I'm desperate for a puff."

Zepherine patted and smoothed and brought lemonade and a fresh cigarette, and Miranda sailed back onstage with the line, *Sure, never was anything so unbred as that odious man!* The performance was a sensation, and for the moment all was well. The audience cheered loud and long, and *La Dardou* smiled and dimpled and accepted a bouquet of roses. Finally fled back to

her dressing room where she pulled off her wig and flung herself into an armchair and said, “Well, thank God that’s over with!”

Zepherine handed her a fresh cigarette and a glass of champagne. “It’s lucky your audience doesn’t realize how perfectly wretched acting makes you. One wonders why you bother?”

“Oh, nonsense, nonsense. First night! First night!” Miranda waved her hand. “There’s always the chance something awful’s going to happen, and these ninnies haven’t got the improvisatory skills God gave a cat. At least I feel reasonably sure now they know their lines!”

She drained her glass and held it out mutely for a refill, and just then there came a knock on the door and Arthur Blackstone said, “Excuse me, Madame, I know you said you weren’t to be disturbed, but there’s a gentleman here who says he must see you!”

“I’m sure he must,” Miranda said shutting her eyes. “Tell him to go play with...himself. I’ve given him good value for his money tonight, and I’m finished. He can buy a ticket for tomorrow if he’s still unsatisfied.”

“I can’t imagine you leaving anyone unsatisfied,” a dry voice remarked through the door, “unfortunately I’ve just arrived. And I’m afraid it’s your maid I need to speak to, Miss Dardou. Is Zepherine Alsace there? You can tell her it’s about a legal matter, if you like.”

Zepherine and Miranda glanced at one another, and the latter raised her eyebrows and stifled a laugh.

“Quick, Zephie, it’s the baronet! Out the window and down the drainpipe, I’ll stall him till you grab a cab!”

“Oh, stop it.”

“You’re charms have undone you! The British peerage is out for blood! Quick, you haven’t got much time!”

“You’re disgusting,” Zepherine said, and opened the door. The gentleman standing in the hallway was tall and slender, of a certain age, with graying dark hair and piercing dark eyes, and a long, mobile mouth, that looked like it could handle scorn and humor in equal measure. He was dressed formally but not, to Zepherine’s eye, for the theater, his frock coat and dark trousers suggestive rather of mourning. And in fact, when he saw her his face changed, betraying a shadow of concern as he said, “Excuse me, but are you Zepherine Alsace by any chance?”

“Yes massa, I sho’ nuff is,” she said, bobbing a curtsy since it didn’t hurt to obey the rules, at least in Louisiana. “Was you lookin’ for me, suh?”

“Yes, I...excuse me, you don’t have to adopt the slave *patois*, it really isn’t necessary. It’s just that I, well, you remind me of someone I know, that’s all. The resemblance is quite uncanny, actually. Do you mind if I come in?”

“Well suh...”

“Oh, show him in or send him away, Zephie! I’m freezing, that draft’s going right through and through me! I can’t afford to catch a cold just to encourage your grubby little *amours*. And besides, since he already knows you’re not a complete cretin, what’s the harm?”

“No harm at all,” the man said, smiling as he stepped over the threshold and turned to greet the famous actress. And then he stopped short.

Oh my word...” He recovered quickly, but not before Miranda’s limpid brown eyes, as wide as pools and as observant as cameras, had taken him in completely. She noticed his height and his graceful hands, his well-cut clothes and the suggestion of dissipation, or was it mere

sensuality? around his lips, and she also watched him lose the thread of what he'd been about to say and felt the familiar glow in the pit of her stomach. No matter how many men she had, no matter how many conquests, meeting a new one and leaving them stunned into silence was always rewarding--especially when the man was as attractive as this one. And yet she felt something else. Somehow, she thought, he knows me. He knows who I am, who I really am, and how could he know that? She felt like she'd been stripped naked, and it was an alarming sensation.

“What is it?” she asked after just the barest pause, although she already knew.

“I'm sorry, madame, I've made a great mistake.” He handed her his card. “My name is Adam Vreeland, I'm a lawyer in town, but I should never have intruded. I...thought you were someone else, that's all. I'll come back and speak to you some other time...”

“You'd better come in,” Miranda sighed, reaching for the champagne bottle. “Would you like a drink, Mister Vreeland? Because I assure you I'm going to have one.”

Adam Vreeland came in and sat down, with the discreet air of one still willing to withdraw. Zepherine shut the door and sat down next to her sister, and there it was of course, beyond the shadow of a doubt. The same bone structure, the same strong nose and jaw, the face a little too thin for classical beauty, perhaps, but all the more charming and fascinating for that. It felt odd, he thought, to think he'd looked at that face a hundred times before, across café tables and banquet halls and most recently lying dead in a parlor. But of course he didn't say that.

“You're both Alcide Rouzin's children, aren't you?” he said after a moment. “I thought only Miss Zepherine was. I'm so sorry.”

Miranda turned away towards her dressing table and methodically put the pot of lip rouge and sponges, the unused cotton wool and powder and kohl, the tin of black wax for lengthening

her eyelashes, and the Prepared Whiting for lightening her bosom back into her make-up box. A place for everything and everything in its place, especially when you were touring. What had John Drew said, he ran out of burnt umber in Baltimore once and had to use hog's fat and crushed raspberries instead? She said after a moment, when she could control her voice, "I see."

"I scarcely think--"

"He's dead, isn't he?"

"I--" He hesitated, trying to think of some way to spare this lovely, intelligent woman, but not finding any. "I'm sorry," he finally said again. "Yes. Excuse me, but how did you guess?"

"Well..." She picked up a jar of coconut oil and began wiping Mrs. Millimant's pretty flushed face off her own paler one. Sallow really, that was the word. A yellowish tint beneath the pink, the curse of all brunettes, of course color was easily remedied but you still had to look at your own bare self unadorned at times, even if nobody else did. She got up and went to the washbasin to sponge the whole mess off.

"Well, you know of our connection. At least you do now." Soap and water and vigorous scrubbing. "You came to see my half-sister, and you recognized her at once, so you must have known our father well enough to see the family resemblance." She wiped away excess water and patted her cheeks dry with a towel. Voice steady? Well, more or less. "Your demeanor suggests the seriousness of your errand, and you said it was regarding a legal matter, which can only mean one of two things. Either our father's dead, or he's been arrested. So which is it? Inheritance? Funeral arrangements? Assumption of his debts? What other earthly reason could you have for coming here?"

"It's alright," Adam said, quietly. "I liked Alcide too. It's not necessary for you to be

quite so businesslike about it.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” She sat down with a flourish and poured herself another brimming glass of champagne. She’d have to send out for another bottle at this rate, but never mind. Her hand shook, but she still managed to bring the glass to her lips. “May I ask how you found Zepherine anyway? It’s not something she advertises either.”

“It’s Charles,” Zepherine said lighting a fresh Turkish Oriental and handing the box to Adam. “He must have spilled the beans. He always was an open book. Unlike some people.”

Adam hesitated, and then nodded. Charles Rouzin had indeed told him the truth about his family, at least as regarded his full sister. He said, searching for words, “Miss Dardou, please forgive me, but you hadn’t spoken to your father in some time, I take it?”

“No, actually, I saw him two days ago.” There seemed no point in lying about it. “We dined together on the night before last. We parted on...well, I suppose you could call it excellent terms. He...” She swallowed. “He said he’d be here tonight, but well...” She shut her eyes. “All things considered, he seems to have had quite a good excuse!”

She knew she was perilously close to tears, and turning away she said, “Mr. Vreeland, what do you want?”

“Miss Dardou, I assure you, I never meant to cause you any pain.” Adam’s expression wasn’t exactly demonstrative, but she thought she could see some pity there, or perhaps it was simply discomfort. Either way, it was the best medicine. She jerked her head up and said, “Well, you managed! Now what about telling me what’s up?”

“Ah. Well.” He hesitated. “I take it you weren’t aware of your father’s politics?”

“Well, no, as a matter of fact, I try never to pay the slightest attention to politics. It’s

wonderful in a play, of course, but in real life one rather gets one's fill."

"Well, I can see how some people might feel that." He shook his head and seemed to be biting back the desire to tell her she was a ninny. "But in this case..."

"Yes?"

"Excuse me, Miss Dardou, but you must realize that America right now is in a state of crisis. Since Mr. Lincoln's election, half the states in the Union are ready to secede, and to my personal shame, Louisiana is one of them. A week ago, we broke our formal connection to Washington and declared our independence. Under the circumstance--"

"You think my father's death may have had something to do with that?"

"It's possible. He was among a small party of us, all New Orleans citizens, who opposed the move. We feel, well, felt, now, that discretion was the better part of suicide. The South can't survive a war of secession, but that hasn't stopped any number of self-deluded patriots from proposing one. Given the current resolution...I'm sorry, Miss Dardou, but there's no easier way of putting it. Do you have any idea of anyone who might have wished your father harm?"

"Harm?" She felt it in her throat then, the tight precursor of fear, but she ignored it. Fanny Kemble had played Shakespeare with a cancer in her breast. She could do no less.

"Yes," Adam said finally. "Anybody who might have wanted to kill him."

He didn't want to feel himself observing the two women then, but of course that was exactly what he was doing. You never had a second chance to see people's first reactions, especially to bad news. If they over-reacted, it meant they were lying. If they reacted too calmly, you could tell it wasn't a surprise at all. Of course, judging an actress presented its own pitfalls, but he still thought he could manage it.

“You see,” he said slowly, trusting his own carefully trained voice to carry just the barest hint of a warning, “I’m afraid your father met his end in something less than quiet repose. As a matter of fact he was stabbed to death and then scalped. There’s evidence there might have been a political motive, or a financial one, or it may in fact have been a race crime. In any event, the main clue the police found is a bit of voodoo magic, a charm, left by the murderer. A fetish.”

He took something out of his pocket and held it out at arm’s length, as though reluctant to touch it any more than he had to. It was a nosegay of three or four black chicken feathers, held together with red string onto which had been dripped a few drops of wax. If he was expecting shock on their parts, he was disappointed: they merely stared at it with interest. He continued, “All of this is completely inconclusive, of course, but I’m afraid the police have reacted in this case with unprecedented alacrity. Miss Dardou... Miss Alsace...” He fixed them both with his best stare, a lawyer’s trick, but still a good one. “I regret to have to inform you that the person they have in custody is your brother, Charles Rouzin. He was arrested at his wine shop on Chartres Street at five o’clock today, and he’s already engaged me to represent him in his defense.”