



## *The Return of Alcibiade*

*The American state of Louisiana was a French colony until 1803, when America bought it in the 'Louisiana Purchase'. Kate Chopin was born in 1850. Her mother's family were Louisiana Creoles, which meant they had French ancestors.<sup>1</sup> When she wrote this story, French Creoles in Louisiana were still a separate social elite<sup>2</sup> with French language, culture, religion and cuisine.<sup>3</sup>*

*Louisiana also had poor French Creoles living strange lives in isolated cabins; native Americans; lots of English-speaking Americans; and Black ('coloured') people who had been slaves until the end of the American Civil War, only 20 years before this story. Freed slaves and their children made up about half the population of Louisiana.*

**M**r Fred Bartner of New Orleans was annoyed to find that the metal tire<sup>4</sup> was broken on one wheel of his buggy.<sup>5</sup> He was not sure what to do, because he was far from home and it was the morning of Christmas Day.

"If you want," said the young coloured man who was driving the buggy, "we can stop at old M'sié Jean Ba's and fix it. He's got the best blacksmith<sup>6</sup> in the Natchitoches area."

"Who in the world is old Monsieur Jean Ba?"<sup>7</sup> the young man asked.

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<sup>1</sup> **ancestors:** Grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, etc.

<sup>2</sup> **elite:** The top level of society, well educated and rich. From the French word. It's pronounced AYLEET.

<sup>3</sup> **cuisine:** Food, cooking. From the French word. It's pronounced KWIZEEN.

<sup>4</sup> **tire** (USA), **tyre** (GB): The part of a wheel that touches the road.

<sup>5</sup> **buggy:** A small vehicle pulled by one or two horses.

<sup>6</sup> **blacksmith:** A person who makes things from iron and steel.

<sup>7</sup> **Monsieur Jean Ba:** 'Monsieur' is a French word. He's Mr Jean-Baptiste Plochel.

"How come<sup>1</sup> you don't know old M'sié Jean-Baptiste Plochel, sir? He's very, very old. He's been sort of queer in the head<sup>2</sup> ever since his son M'sié Alcibiade got killed<sup>3</sup> in the war.<sup>4</sup> He lives just there, where you can see that Cherokee rose hedge<sup>5</sup> that takes up<sup>6</sup> half the road."

Until the railways finally linked the cities of New Orleans and Shreveport, people often travelled through miles of central Louisiana in a buggy. Fred Bartner, a young commission merchant,<sup>7</sup> was visiting customers<sup>8</sup> and potential customers who mainly lived in grand<sup>9</sup> *antebellum*<sup>10</sup> houses on their plantations.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **How come...?** 'Why ...?' or 'How is it that...?' (This is an example of *informal* or *idiomatic* English. In other words, it's normal, everyday English.)

<sup>2</sup> **queer in the head:** He means that Monsieur Jean Ba is old and confused.

<sup>3</sup> **got killed:** Was killed. This is an example of the 'passive voice' with 'to get'. It doesn't say who killed him. We use the passive when we don't know who did it, or we don't care who did it, or we don't want to say who did it, or it's obvious who did it. Use the 'get' passive when something bad happens: A person can **get killed**, get injured, get robbed, get put in prison, get fined, get sacked by their employer or get dumped by their partner; a thing can get broken, get damaged, get stolen, etc.

<sup>4</sup> **the war:** The American Civil War (1861 to 1865) was between the northern states of the United States, which wanted to end slavery, and the southern states, whose economy depended on Black slaves. When the South lost the war, it ended the luxurious lifestyle of many white people in the South.

<sup>5</sup> **hedge:** A **hedge** is like a wall but it's made of living plants. Cherokee rose (*Rosa laevigata*) makes a good hedge. It will grow up to 4 metres wide if not controlled, and up to 12 metres high if it has a tree to climb.

<sup>6</sup> **takes up:** Occupies. 'A big vehicle takes up a lot of space'; 'Her children take up all her time.'

<sup>7</sup> **commission merchant:** He put customers in contact with stores (in UK English, shops) that sold clothes, wine, agricultural supplies, etc. The stores paid him a **commission** of about 10% of the sale price.

<sup>8</sup> **customers:** Lawyers and luxury shops have 'clients'. Ordinary shops, agencies, banks, libraries, bars, etc have 'customers'.

<sup>9</sup> **grand:** Magnificent, splendid, impressive.

<sup>10</sup> **antebellum houses:** The big, luxurious houses of farmers who owned Black slaves before the Civil War. *Antebellum* means 'before the war'. These houses are often in gardens as large as a public park. Many are magnificent structures with complex architecture (tall pillars like an ancient temple; balconies with complex wooden railings) and ballrooms where a hundred visitors could dance.

<sup>11</sup> **plantation:** A big farm where cotton, sugar-cane and tobacco were grown.

From his home in New Orleans he had gone two hundred and fifty miles<sup>1</sup> in a week. He was now next to the Cane River, about fifteen miles from Natchitoches.

From the mouth of Cane River he had passed one plantation after another - large<sup>2</sup> ones and small ones. The last place they had gone through was the village of Cloutierville, at dawn.<sup>3</sup> "That's an old, old town, almost a hundred years old, they say. It looks to me a lot older than that," the driver had commented.

Although it was winter, the sun was warm<sup>4</sup> and the air was so soft and gentle that Bartner took off his light overcoat and put it across his knees. At the entrance to the plantation, he climbed down<sup>5</sup> from the buggy. The driver went on towards the blacksmith's workshop which stood at the edge of the field. Bartner walked towards the big house, along a long avenue of magnolia trees.

As he approached it, the house looked remarkably wide<sup>6</sup> in comparison with its height. It was a single-storey building with pale yellow stucco walls. Its huge wooden shutters<sup>7</sup> were a faded<sup>8</sup> green colour. All around the house there was

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<sup>1</sup> **two hundred and fifty miles:** 400 km.

<sup>2</sup> **large:** Big. (Large is a 'false friend' in some languages. It does not mean 'big in the side-to-side dimension'; that is *wide* or *broad*. Large is simply big. It's big in all dimensions.)

<sup>3</sup> **dawn:** The time when it first gets light in the morning. This may be half an hour before the sun rises. The equivalent time after sunset is called dusk. A day goes from dawn to dusk.

<sup>4</sup> **the sun was warm:** Warm is a nice, comfortable temperature between hot and cool.

<sup>5</sup> **climbed down:** He got down, he descended. Climb, climbed, have climbed. It's pronounced like *time*. 'To climb' is usually to go up something vertical, or almost vertical, using your hands as well as your feet. You can climb a tree or a mountain. By extension, you can climb the stairs to go to bed; or you can climb to the top of your profession.

<sup>6</sup> **remarkably:** It was interesting; special. The sort of thing you remember later.

<sup>7</sup> **shutters:** These are made of wood (or metal) and they cover windows at night.

<sup>8</sup> **faded:** To fade is to lose some colour. The green paint is less green than it was, because of many years of sun.

a wide veranda,<sup>1</sup> protected by a wide roof so that the owners and their guests<sup>2</sup> could walk or sit in comfort.

A very old man was standing on the veranda at the top of the stairs. He was small and shrunken,<sup>3</sup> and his hair was long and snow-white. He wore a wide, soft hat, and he had a brown wool shawl<sup>4</sup> across his shoulders.

A tall, graceful<sup>5</sup> girl with very fair skin<sup>6</sup> stood beside him; she was wearing a pale blue dress. It seemed that the old gentleman wanted to go down the stairs to meet the approaching visitor but the girl wanted to stop him.

Before Bartner had had time to do more than lift his hat, Monsieur Jean Ba had thrown his trembling<sup>7</sup> arms about the young man and was exclaiming: "*À la fin, mon fils! À la fin!*"<sup>8</sup>

Bartner saw tears come to the girl's eyes and she blushed<sup>9</sup> deep pink with embarrassment.<sup>10</sup> "Oh, excuse him, sir; please excuse him," she whispered,<sup>11</sup> while trying gently to get the old gentleman to release the astonished Bartner.

<sup>1</sup> **veranda**: A wooden floor or deck outside a house, where you can walk or sit. Verandas are typically 2 metres wide and 30-90 cm higher than the garden. They have a roof but no outer wall or windows. They are popular in countries that have a lot of hot weather.

<sup>2</sup> **our host**: A person who invites you to a party, a dinner or to stay for the weekend is your **host**, and you are their **guest**. The customers of a hotel are also 'guests'.

<sup>3</sup> **shrunken**: To shrink is to get smaller. Shrink, shrank, have shrunk. 'Shrunken' is the adjective. Very old people are usually shorter and thinner than young people.

<sup>4</sup> **shawl**: A large square of wool cloth that people put on their shoulders to keep warm.

<sup>5</sup> **graceful**: To be graceful is to stand and move well, like a dancer (she is probably slim).

<sup>6</sup> **very fair skin**: Very pale skin (she is probably blonde).

<sup>7</sup> **trembling**: Our hands tremble (they make constant small movements) if we feel strong emotion. This happens if you get a lot of adrenaline in your blood but you don't run or fight. A very old person's hands may tremble all the time.

<sup>8</sup> **À la fin, mon fils! À la fin!**: French: *At the end, my son! At the end!*

<sup>9</sup> **blushed**: If your face goes pink (pink = a bit red), you blush.

<sup>10</sup> **embarrassment**: When you are embarrassed, you may have a red face and feel very hot. You feel **embarrassed** if you feel bad because you (or a friend of yours) did something stupid; or somebody asks you very personal questions; or you drop food on your clothes or your trousers fall off; or you have to speak to a big group of people.

<sup>11</sup> **whispered**: A whisper is the quietest way to talk.

But then it seemed that Monsieur Jean Ba had a new thought. He let go of<sup>1</sup> Bartner and went quickly along the veranda. His feet slapped<sup>2</sup> the wood of the veranda like those of a young child, and his brown shawl flapped<sup>3</sup> in the gentle breeze.<sup>4</sup> He turned the corner and disappeared.

Bartner was left alone with the girl. After a moment, he introduced himself<sup>5</sup> and explained why he was there.

"Oh! Mr Fred Bartner of New Orleans? The commission merchant!" she exclaimed,<sup>6</sup> holding out her hand in a friendly way<sup>7</sup>. "So well known in Natchitoches parish.<sup>8</sup> Not *our* merchant, Mr Bartner," she added, naively,<sup>9</sup> "but just as welcome, all the same, at my grandfather's."

Bartner thought this was adorable. He felt like kissing her, but he only bowed,<sup>10</sup> without saying anything, and sat down in the big chair which she indicated to him. He wondered what was the longest time it could take to mend a buggy tire.

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<sup>1</sup> **let go of**: released. **To let go** is a phrasal verb.

<sup>2</sup> **slapped**: His feet landed flat on the floor and made a noise. (To slap something is to hit it quite hard, with your open, flat hand so that it makes a noise. Traditionally, a man might slap a horse's shoulder or a friend's back to say '*well done*' - or a woman might slap a man's face for insulting her.)

<sup>3</sup> **flapped**: This is the way a shirt moves if you put it on a washing-line on a windy day. Also, birds flap their wings (they move them up and down) when they fly.

<sup>4</sup> **breeze**: A fairly gentle wind.

<sup>5</sup> **introduced himself**: For example, "*Hello, my name is Fred Bartner. I'm pleased to meet you. Please excuse this intrusion, but one of the tires on my buggy has broken.*"

<sup>6</sup> **exclaimed**: She said it suddenly and quite loudly. 'Exclaim' is a literary word.

<sup>7</sup> **holding out her hand**: She offered her hand so he could shake hands with her.

<sup>8</sup> **parish**: A small administrative district in England and the USA. It usually has a church at the centre of it.

<sup>9</sup> **naively**: To be naive is to be innocent, to have little knowledge of the world or human nature. It's not diplomatic of her to say 'not our commission merchant' because it means 'we don't buy anything from you'. Naive is pronounced NI-EEV (the I sounds like *my* or *buy*).

<sup>10</sup> **bowed**: A silent, formal way for a man to say 'hello' or 'yes'. He made a bow (he bent forward from the waist). It's pronounced like *how* or *now*.

She sat on a chair facing him, with her hands modestly pressed down into her lap.<sup>1</sup> She was in a hurry to explain her grandfather's strange behaviour, and she did so as if Bartner was already a close friend. Bartner found the innocence of her manner extremely attractive.<sup>2</sup>

Years ago, it seemed, her uncle Alcibiade had gone off to fight in the war. With the cheerful<sup>3</sup> confidence<sup>4</sup> of youth, he had promised his father that he would return to eat Christmas dinner with him. He never returned.

In recent years Monsieur Jean Ba had begun to fail<sup>5</sup> in body and mind.<sup>6</sup> and that old, unspoken hope of long ago had come back to live again in his heart. Every Christmas Day he watched for the arrival of Alcibiade.

"Ah! If you knew, Mr Bartner, how I have tried to distract his mind from that thought! Weeks ago, I told all the servants, big and little<sup>7</sup>, 'If one of you dares to say the word 'Christmas' in the hearing of Monsieur Jean-Baptiste, you will have to answer to me.'<sup>8</sup>

In all his life, Bartner had never been so interested in a story.

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<sup>1</sup> **lap**: Your lap is the top of your legs when you're sitting down, from knee to stomach. It's a good place for cats, babies and books.

<sup>2</sup> **attractive**: A pretty girl, a handsome man, a cute kitten, a nice dinner, a glass of champagne, a lake on a hot day, the smell of grass that has just been cut, a comfortable chair, the latest toy - these things are attractive; they attract you. These things are unattractive: Bad manners, dirt, loud noises, bad smells, ugly buildings, etc.

<sup>3</sup> **cheerful**: Happy and optimistic.

<sup>4</sup> **confidence**: A feeling that things are going well; that things are alright; that everything is OK.

<sup>5</sup> **to fail**: To become weak. (The usual meaning of fail is 'lose; not succeed'. If you try to climb a mountain but don't, you fail. If a shop loses all its money and closes, it fails.)

<sup>6</sup> **mind**: Mind is intelligence, thinking, consciousness.

<sup>7</sup> **big and little**: adults and children. Small and little are the same size, but 'little' is usually affectionate. You could say that little is small + cute.

<sup>8</sup> **you will have to answer to me**: I will investigate and I may punish you.

"So last night, Mr Bartner, I said to my grandfather, '*Pépère*,<sup>1</sup> you know tomorrow will be the great feast of the Trinity<sup>2</sup>; we will read our litany<sup>3</sup> together in the morning and say a *chapelet*.' He did not answer a word; *il est malin, oui*.<sup>4</sup>

"But this morning at dawn he was on the back veranda, knocking<sup>5</sup> with his walking-stick,<sup>6</sup> calling together the servants. He asked them if they had forgotten it was Christmas Day, and told them a great dinner<sup>7</sup> must be prepared for his son Alcibiade, whom he was expecting!"

"So he has mistaken me for his son Alcibiade. It is very unfortunate," said Bartner, sympathetically.<sup>8</sup> He was a good-looking young man with an honest face.

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<sup>1</sup> '*Pépère*': Louisiana French - an affectionate way to say *grandpère*, which is grandfather.

<sup>2</sup> **feast of the Trinity**: This is not the ordinary 'feast' (with lots of food, drink and fun); it's the 'feast' that is a special day in the Christian calendar.

<sup>3</sup> **read our litany ... chapelet**. Christian rituals.

<sup>4</sup> '*Il est malin, oui*': French: '*He is crafty, yes*'. He is cunning. **Craft** is similar to art; it's about making useful things by hand (ceramics, textiles, etc) but crafty is very different. **Crafty** people are clever but not 100% open and honest. They see opportunities that other people do not. They are often criminals. The fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) is a crafty animal because it takes chickens from farms. However some crafty humans are heroes (Odysseus / Ulysses, Asterix, and Zorro which is Spanish for 'fox'); some are gods (Loki, Coyote / Raven); and some are popular characters (Nasreddin Hodja, Juha, Anansi in Africa, the kitsune and bake-danuki in Japan, etc).

<sup>5</sup> **knocking**: You knock on a door with your fingers, making a *nok nok nok* noise, to ask if you can enter.

<sup>6</sup> **walking-stick**. A **stick** is a long piece of wood from a tree. A **walking-stick** is a light stick, about 85cm long, with a handle at the top end. Old people often use them to walk.

<sup>7</sup> **great dinner**: A big, impressive dinner. **Big** and **great** are the same size or intensity, but there's something impressive or even magnificent about great. '*J.S. Bach was a great composer*'. Peter the Great, the Great Wall of China, the Great War.

<sup>8</sup> **sympathetically**: **Sympathy** means feeling sorry for another person because they have a problem. It's a temporary state. Here's somebody being sympathetic: '*You look a bit tired. Did you have a bad day at work? Sit down and relax while I make you a coffee, and you can tell me all about it.*' Sympathy is a 'false friend' in some languages, because to say that a person is **sympathetic** is not the same as saying they are nice, pleasant, fun or easy to talk to. A **sympathetic** person will be nice to you if you have a problem. If you never have a problem, you will never see them being sympathetic.



The girl rose from her chair, suddenly trembling as she had an inspired thought. She approached Bartner, and in her eagerness<sup>1</sup> she laid her hand on his arm.

"Oh, Mr Bartner, if you will do me a favour!<sup>2</sup> The greatest favour of my life!"

"Of course," he said, "anything."

"Let him believe,<sup>3</sup> just for this one Christmas Day, that you are his son. Let him have that Christmas dinner with Alcibiade. It is something he has wanted for so many years."

Bartner's conscience<sup>4</sup> was not puritanical,<sup>5</sup> but he had a habit as well as a principle of telling the truth, and he frowned.<sup>6</sup> "It seems to me it might be cruel to deceive<sup>7</sup> him; it would not be..." - he did not like to say "...right,"<sup>8</sup> but she guessed that he meant it.

<sup>1</sup> **eagerness:** To be eager is to be excited + to want something + to be impatient for it.

<sup>2</sup> **do me a favour:** Help me. You 'do somebody a favour' if you help them. A favour is usually a short, easy kind of help. For example, you **do somebody a favour** if you help them carry their shopping bags, or you sit with their baby for a few minutes. If you sit with their baby all weekend, that's a really big favour - a great favour. (US spelling: favor).

<sup>3</sup> **believe:** (a) You may **believe** that the Earth is a sphere or is flat; or that there is one God or eleven gods or no god; or that humans evolved (Darwin) or were created (Creationism). We get our **beliefs** from our parents, from friends and the media, and sometimes from logical thought.

(b) You may **believe** that a person is telling you the truth or you may not.

(c) By extension: '*I believe in going for a walk every day*' or '*Is it raining?*' '*Yes, I believe it is*'.

<sup>4</sup> **conscience:** Your conscience tells you if something you want to do is bad and wrong.

<sup>5</sup> **puritanical:** The Puritans were Christian religious fundamentalists who disliked nearly everything, including clothes that were not black or white; Christmas; music; and dancing.

<sup>6</sup> **frowned:** A frown is the expression on your face when you don't understand what somebody says, or you don't think it's true, or you disapprove.

<sup>7</sup> **to deceive him:** To make him believe something that is not true; to fool him; a **deception**. (Deceive and deception are 'false friends' in some languages; compare with *disappoint*).

<sup>8</sup> **... right:** Ethical, moral, good. ('*It's not right to read somebody else's private letter.*')

"Oh, as for that," she laughed, "your conscience can stay as white as snow, Mr Bartner. I will take all the sin<sup>1</sup> on my conscience. I take all the responsibility on my own shoulders."

"Esmée!" the old man called as he came back, "Esmée, my child," he said, "I have ordered the dinner. Go and make sure that everything in the dining-room is perfect."

The dining-room was at the end of the house. Its windows opened onto the side and back verandas. Above the fireplace there was a wooden mantelpiece<sup>2</sup> with simple carved<sup>3</sup> ornamentation. On top of the mantel was a wide, old-fashioned mirror that reflected the table and the diners.

The table was covered with fine food,<sup>4</sup> enough for a dozen guests. Monsieur Jean Ba sat at one end, Esmée at the other, and Bartner at one side.

Four coloured servants, of varying ages and both sexes, served them. There was a reserve force<sup>5</sup> of younger servants just outside, in case they were needed. Little black and bronze<sup>6</sup> faces kept appearing<sup>7</sup> above the window-sills.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **sin**: A **sin** is something your religion says is wrong, such as murder (killing somebody) and theft (stealing; taking other people's things without permission).

<sup>2</sup> **mantelpiece**: A horizontal surface above a fireplace where you can put a clock or a mirror.

<sup>3</sup> **carved**: To carve something is to cut it to shape (wood for a statue, stone for a sculpture, or a turkey for dinner).

<sup>4</sup> **fine**: Splendid, excellent, superb.

<sup>5</sup> **a reserve force**: Something is '**in reserve**' if you are not using it but it is ready for immediate use. 'Force' is usually power or violence, but '**a force**' is usually part of the military (e.g. the Royal Air Force) or part of the police (e.g. the Metropolitan Police force).

<sup>6</sup> **bronze**: Literally, bronze is a brown metal made from copper and tin. If a white person has a very good sun-tan, you can say they are 'tanned' or 'bronzed'.

<sup>7</sup> **kept appearing**: Continued to appear, very frequently. (If you fall in the sea, you have to **keep** swimming until you get to the beach. In a difficult situation, you try to **keep calm**. **Keep** working, the boss is looking.)

<sup>8</sup> **window-sill**: The bottom part of a window. A horizontal surface where you can put flowers, pens, books, drinks, etc.

The windows and doors were open, and a fire of large branches burned brightly in the fireplace.

Monsieur Jean Ba ate little, but greedily and rapidly. For much of the time he simply contemplated his guest with evident delight.

"You will notice, Alcibiade, the flavour of the turkey,"<sup>1</sup> he said. "It was cooked with pecan nuts;<sup>2</sup> those big ones from the tree down on the bayou.<sup>3</sup> I had them gathered specially."<sup>4</sup> The rich, delicate flavour of the nuts was indeed very evident.

Bartner felt as self-conscious<sup>5</sup> as if he was acting a role in a theatre play. He found he was behaving stiffly,<sup>6</sup> like an amateur actor.<sup>7</sup> From time to time he made an effort to be more natural. When he found that *Mademoiselle* Esmée<sup>8</sup> was taking the situation as seriously as her grandfather, it almost paralysed him.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **turkey:** Like a giant chicken. The turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) is a large bird from the forests of North America. It was first brought to Europe in the 1500s.

<sup>2</sup> **pecan nuts:** Like small walnuts. You can eat them individually or in pecan pie or ice-cream.

<sup>3</sup> **bayou:** Very flat land with marshes (wetlands), slow rivers and lakes. It's a Louisiana Creole word.

<sup>4</sup> **gathered:** Picked, collected, assembled. If you gather people, you bring them together in a group. If you gather information, you bring it to one place (your notebook). If you gather nuts or flowers, you pick them, and probably you take them home with you.

<sup>5</sup> **self-conscious:** When you feel as if everybody is looking at you, you are 'self-conscious'. (Your **conscious mind** makes intellectual decisions; your **unconscious** makes basic decisions such as '*Run away!*' or '*That smells nice*'. If something hits you on the head very hard, so that you fall to the ground with your eyes shut as if you were asleep, you are **unconscious**. In written English, **to be conscious** of a problem is to know that there is a problem.)

<sup>6</sup> **stiffly:** Stiff means rigid or semi-rigid. Literally, it's the opposite of flexible. Here, it's the opposite of relaxed. Because Bartner felt embarrassed, he moved in an unnatural way, without grace.

<sup>7</sup> **amateur actor:** Not professional. Amateur means either (1) doing a thing for fun, not for money - an amateur sportsman, astronomer, naturalist or musician may be very good - or (2) not competent. You don't want an amateur mechanic to work on your car, and amateur actors are usually very bad.

<sup>8</sup> **Mademoiselle Esmée:** French - '*Miss Esmée*'.

<sup>9</sup> **Mon dieu ... Mais...:** French - '*Good Lord ... But...*'

"*Mon Dieu!* Uncle Alcibiade, you are not eating! *Mais* where have you left your appetite?<sup>1</sup> Charles, fill your young master's glass. Doralise, you are neglecting Monsieur Alcibiade; he needs some more bread."

Monsieur Jean Ba's feeble intelligence<sup>2</sup> was not enough to let him question other people or himself. Whenever he heard Esmée say "Uncle Alcibiade," he smiled and nodded.<sup>3</sup>

While she made her grandfather's after-dinner *brûlot* - a piece of sugar<sup>4</sup> in a flaming teaspoonful of brandy, dropped into a tiny cup of black coffee - he reminded<sup>5</sup> her, "Your Uncle Alcibiade takes two pieces, Esmée. The young rogue!<sup>6</sup> He likes sweet things. Two or three pieces, Esmée."

Bartner would really have enjoyed his *brûlot*, prepared so gracefully by Esmée's skilful hands, except for that extra piece which made it a little too sweet.

After dinner, the girl arranged her grandfather comfortably in his big armchair on the veranda, where he loved to sit when the weather permitted. She put his shawl over his shoulders and laid a second one across his knees.<sup>7</sup> She shook up the pillow for his head, patted<sup>8</sup> his hollow<sup>1</sup> cheek and kissed his forehead<sup>2</sup> under the broad soft hat.

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<sup>1</sup> **appetite:** To have an appetite is to want to eat. We may start a meal by eating something small (an appetiser) to give us a good appetite. Part of a cook's job is to make the food look appetising. If you eat cake before dinner, you may spoil your appetite.

<sup>2</sup> **feeble:** Weak, not strong.

<sup>3</sup> **nodded:** To say yes, you can 'nod your head' (move it up and down). To say no, you can 'shake your head' (move it from side to side as if you are watching a game of tennis).

<sup>4</sup> **a piece of sugar:** You bought a big, solid 'loaf' of sugar and broke off small pieces.

<sup>5</sup> **reminded:** To remind somebody is to ask them to remember.

<sup>6</sup> **rogue:** (1) A criminal and/or (2) A man who likes to have fun.

<sup>7</sup> **laid:** Lay, laid, laid is to put something down carefully. For example, *She laid the baby on the bed.* Compare with *lie* (lie, lay, have lain).

<sup>8</sup> **patted:** To pat something is to touch it gently for a moment, usually two or three times. People often pat dogs and horses; we may also pat a hot surface to see if it's very hot.

She left him there, with the sun warming his feet and his old shrunken knees.

Esmée and Bartner walked together under the magnolias. They walked on violets that had escaped from the floral borders, and the delicate perfume of the crushed<sup>3</sup> flowers perfumed the air deliciously. They stopped and picked<sup>4</sup> handfuls of them.

They gathered roses, too, that were still in bloom against the warm south end of the house; and they chattered<sup>5</sup> and laughed like children. When they sat in the sun, to arrange the flowers on the low steps up to the veranda, Bartner's conscience began to worry him.

"You know," he said, "I can't stay here forever, although I would like to. I shall have to leave soon; then your grandfather will discover that we have been deceiving him - and you can see how cruel that will be."

"Mr Bartner," answered Esmée, holding a violet up to her pretty nose,<sup>6</sup> "When I woke up this morning and said my prayers,<sup>7</sup> I prayed to the good God that He would give one happy Christmas Day to my grandfather. He has answered my prayer; and He does not send his gifts incomplete.<sup>8</sup> He will provide.<sup>9</sup> Mr

<sup>1</sup> **hollow cheek:** Your cheeks are the soft sides of your mouth. A child or teenager has round, convex cheeks. Jean Ba has **hollow**, concave cheeks because he's very old and thin. A dinner plate is a hollow shape; so is a valley.

<sup>2</sup> **forehead:** Your forehead is above your eyes, but below your hair.

<sup>3</sup> **crushed:** To crush something is to press it so that it is flat and broken. We squash soft things (a banana, a tomato); we crush harder things (an apple, a box).

<sup>4</sup> **picked:** Lift, collect, take, acquire. If you drop your pen on the ground, you **pick it up**. When you're in the countryside, you can **pick** apples or mushrooms.

<sup>5</sup> **chattered:** To chatter is to have fun talking about nothing much.

<sup>6</sup> **pretty:** Of a woman or a delicate, feminine object such as a flower or a dress, it means 'a bit less than beautiful'. *'What a pretty dress!' 'Everybody thinks Sara is very pretty, but John thinks she's really beautiful.'*

<sup>7</sup> **prayers:** A prayer is when you ask God for something. Some prayers have standard words; every Christian knows a version of 'The Lord's Prayer' or 'Paternoster'.

<sup>8</sup> **gifts:** A gift or present is a thing that you give to somebody, perhaps for their birthday.

<sup>9</sup> **He will provide:** God will provide a solution. (This is a reference to an older version of the Bible.)

Bartner, this morning I agreed to take all responsibility on my own shoulders, you remember? Now, I place all that responsibility on the shoulders of the blessed<sup>1</sup> Virgin Mary."

Bartner was lost in admiration,<sup>2</sup> although whether he most admired this beautiful and consoling<sup>3</sup> faith<sup>4</sup> or the delightful young woman herself was not clear to him.

Every now and then Monsieur Jean Ba would call out<sup>5</sup> "Alcibiade, *mon fils!*" and Bartner would hurry to his side. Sometimes the old man had forgotten what he wanted to say. Once<sup>6</sup> it was to ask if he had enjoyed the salad, or if he would, perhaps, have preferred the turkey *aux truffes*.<sup>7</sup>

"Alcibiade, *mon fils!*" Again Bartner amiably answered the call. Monsieur Jean Ba took the young man's hands affectionately in his, but feebly, as children hold hands. Bartner's hands closed firmly<sup>8</sup> around those of the old man.

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<sup>1</sup> **blessed Virgin Mary:** To call a person or a thing 'blessed' is to say that you think they're wonderful, and important to God.

<sup>2</sup> **lost in admiration:** He thought she was wonderful.

<sup>3</sup> **consoling** means 'trying to make you feel better'. If you have a problem, it can be consoling to know that lots of other people have the same problem. If you have a house fire, it is some consolation to know that you have insurance.

<sup>4</sup> **faith:** Belief in something you cannot be sure about, especially belief that there is a God. See *believe*, above.

<sup>5</sup> **would call out:** used to call out. (This structure with 'would' often appears in stories about the past. For example, '*When they were young, they would often sit by the fire in the evenings*').

<sup>6</sup> **once:** On one occasion, as in '*Have you ever been to New Orleans?*' '*No, but I once went to Baton Rouge.*'

<sup>7</sup> **aux truffes:** French: with truffles. A truffle is a fungus that grows underground and has a wonderful taste. For example, *Tuber melanosporum*.

<sup>8</sup> **firmly:** **Firm** is between **soft** and **hard**. It isn't weak or soft or uncertain. It's definite and certain. **Firm ground** is safe to walk on; you won't need to take special care. If you do regular exercise, you will have **firm muscles**. You may like to sleep in a **firm bed**. By extension, when somebody is certain that they know the answer to a complex question (social, political, technical or business) they have a **firm opinion** about it.

"Alcibiade, I am going to have a little sleep now. If Robert McFarlane comes while I am sleeping, with more talk of wanting to buy young Sévérin, tell him I will not sell any of my slaves;<sup>1</sup> not even the smallest boy. Drive him away<sup>2</sup> from the place with the shotgun.<sup>3</sup> Don't be afraid to use the shotgun, Alcibiade - when I am asleep - if he comes."<sup>4</sup>

While the old man slept, there were no more calls of "Alcibiade, *mon fils!*" and Esmée and Bartner forgot that there was such a thing as time,<sup>5</sup> or that it was passing. As the sun sank lower and lower in the west, its light entered further and further beneath the wide roof of the veranda, illuminating Monsieur Jean Ba and his armchair. It lit his still, pale hands, folded so peacefully in his lap; it touched his shrunken body.

When the sunset reached his face,<sup>6</sup> another brightness had come there before it - the glory of a quiet and peaceful death.

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Bartner stayed overnight, of course, to give all the assistance<sup>7</sup> he could, in addition to that offered by kind neighbours.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **sell ... my slaves:** Monsieur Jean Ba is confused; all the slaves were freed in 1865. His former slaves are now his domestic servants and farm workers.

<sup>2</sup> **drive him away:** Make him leave, when he doesn't want to leave. It's a phrasal verb.

<sup>3</sup> **shotgun:** A long gun that fires (shoots) lots of small metal balls (shot) to kill birds and rabbits.

<sup>4</sup> **use the shotgun ... if he comes:** This is a '1st Conditional'. It uses a present tense to talk about a thing that may happen in future.

<sup>5</sup> **they forgot that there was such a thing as time:** They didn't think about the time, because they were so interested in each other.

<sup>6</sup> **reached his face:** Arrived at his face. To reach is to put out your hand so as to take something: '*It was time to go. She reached for her coat*' or '*You're tall, can you reach the books on the top shelf?*' By extension, it is to arrive at a place or level: '*How long until we reach New Orleans?*' or '*The water was quite deep. It reached his knees*' or '*in 1885, the population of Louisiana reached 1 million.*'

<sup>7</sup> **assistance:** Aid, help, support. ('Assist' is a 'false friend' in some languages. It never means to attend a concert, or to be present at an event.)

<sup>8</sup> **kind:** A kind or kindly person likes the people they meet, and wants them to be happy. The opposite is unkind or cruel. Kind sounds like *find* and *mind*.

In the early morning, before he left, he was permitted to see Esmée.<sup>1</sup> She was overcome with sorrow. Even with the deep sympathy which he felt, he could not offer her much comfort for the loss of her grandfather.

"May I be permitted to ask,<sup>2</sup> *mademoiselle*, what your plans for the future will be?"

"Oh," she moaned,<sup>3</sup> "I cannot stay on the old plantation any more; it would not be home<sup>4</sup> without *grandpère*. I suppose<sup>5</sup> I shall go to live in New Orleans with my *tante*<sup>6</sup> Clémentine." The last was spoken in the depths of her handkerchief. Bartner's heart jumped at this news, but it was clearly not the right moment<sup>7</sup> to say so. He pressed her other hand warmly,<sup>8</sup> and went away.

The sun was again shining brightly, but the morning was crisp<sup>9</sup> and cold; a thin layer<sup>1</sup> of ice covered what had yesterday been pools of water in the road.

<sup>1</sup> **he was permitted to see Esmée:** This is an example of the 'passive voice'. It doesn't say who permitted him to see her. We use the passive when we don't know who did it, or we don't care who did it, or we don't want to say who did it, or it's obvious who did it. Perhaps the woman from the neighbouring plantation asked Esmée if she wanted to speak to Mr Bartner, and then told him it was alright?

<sup>2</sup> **May I be permitted to ask...:** This is very indirect English, so it is extremely polite and respectful.

<sup>3</sup> **she moaned:** She made a noise as if she was in pain.

<sup>4</sup> **home:** A **house** is a building for people to live in; your **home** is the place where you live. A person's home is usually a house or an apartment but it could be a boat or a cave. A place is not 'home' unless you have a strong emotional connection with it.

<sup>5</sup> **I suppose:** I imagine; I think this is probably so.

<sup>6</sup> **tante:** A French word: aunt.

<sup>7</sup> **right:** Appropriate. It wasn't a good time for him to say romantic things.

<sup>8</sup> **warmly:** Lovingly, affectionately. Literally, warm is a temperature: Very hot, hot, **warm**, cool, cold, very cold. By extension, 'hot' can mean passionate or angry; 'warm' can mean 'friendly'; 'cool' can mean 'not friendly'; and cold can mean 'hostile'. A **warm** person is nice and affectionate.

<sup>9</sup> **crisp:** Something crisp makes a 'crunch' noise when you bite it (an apple, a breakfast cereal) or when you walk on it (dry autumn leaves, thin ice on the road). By extension, the air on a cold, dry winter's day is crisp.



Bartner buttoned his coat up to the neck. He could hear the whistles<sup>2</sup> of steam-powered cotton mills, here and there in the landscape.

One or two shivering<sup>3</sup> farm workers were in the empty fields, gathering a few last bags of cotton.

The horses were happy to be moving again. They snorted<sup>4</sup> with satisfaction, and their hoofs made a clear noise on the hard ground.

"Let the horses go<sup>5</sup>," Bartner said to the driver. "They've had a good rest and we want to press on to Natchitoches."

"You're right, sir.<sup>6</sup> Why, we've lost a whole day."<sup>7</sup>

"Why, so we have," said Bartner, "I hadn't thought of it."

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<sup>1</sup> **layer of ice:** When we paint a wall, we put on several layers of paint. In cold weather, we put on more layers of clothing. Onions have layers.

<sup>2</sup> **whistles:** To whistle is to make a musical noise by blowing through your lips. A steam engine can make a similar noise, as a signal.

<sup>3</sup> **shivering:** When you shiver, your entire body makes constant small movements. We shiver when we're very cold.

<sup>4</sup> **they snorted with satisfaction:** To snort is to breathe out hard through your nose, your mouth or both. Pigs snort all the time, horses snort sometimes, and humans may snort to show they disbelieve something.

<sup>5</sup> **Let the horses go:** Let them go as fast as they want.

<sup>6</sup> **sir:** You say *sir* (to a man) and *ma'am* (to a woman) if you talk to a social superior. They are pronounced SER and MARM. You can still hear this today in schools, the military, the police and the law courts.

<sup>7</sup> **Why:** 'Why' isn't a question word here; it's an exclamation of surprise.

