

The Soul of Rose Dédé

M.E.M. Davis

Table of Contents

<u>The Soul of Rose Dédé</u>	1
<u>M.E.M. Davis</u>	2

The Soul of Rose Dédé

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.
<http://www.blackmask.com>

His progress was slow, for he stopped — his forehead gravely puckered, his finger in his mouth — to listen to the clear whistle of a mocking-bird in the live-oak above his head; he watched the heavy flight of a white night-moth from one jimsonweed trumpet to another; he strayed aside to pick a bit of shining punk from the sloughing bark of a rotten log; he held this in his closed palm as he came at last into the open space where the others were.

"Holà, 'Tit-Pierre!" said André, who was half reclining on a mildewed marble slab, with his long black cloak floating loosely from his shoulders, and his hands clasped about his knees. "Holà! Must thou needs be ever a-searching! Have I not told thee, little Hard-Head, that she hath long forgotten thee?"

His voice was mocking, but his dark eyes were quizzically kind.

The child's under lip quivered, and he turned slowly about. But Père Lebas, sitting just across the narrow footway, laid a caressing hand on his curly head. "Nay, go thy way, 'Tit Pierre," he said, gently; "André does but tease. A mother hath never yet forgot her child."

"Do you indeed think he will find her?" asked André, arching his black brows incredulously.

"He will not find her," returned the priest. "Margot Caillion was in a far country when I saw her last, and even then her grandchildren were playing about her knees. But it harms not the child to seek her."

They spoke a soft provincial French, and the familiar thou betokened an unwonted intimacy between the hollow-cheeked old priest and his companion, whose forehead wore the frankness of early youth.

"I would the child could talk!" cried the young man, gayly. "Then might he tell us somewhat of the women that ever come and go in yonder great house."

The priest shuddered, crossing himself, and drew his cowl over his face.

'Tit-Pierre, his gown gathered in his arm, had gone on his way. Nathan Pilger, hunched up on a low, irregular hummock against the picket-fence, made a speaking-trumpet of his two horny hands, and pretended to hail him as he passed. 'Tit-Pierre nodded brightly at the old man, and waved his own chubby fist.

The gate sagged a little on its hinges, so that he had some difficulty in moving it. But he squeezed through a narrow opening, and passed between the prim flower beds to the house.

It was a lofty mansion, with vast wings on either side, and wide galleries, which were upheld by fluted columns. It faced the bay, and a covered arcade ran from the entrance across the lawn to a gay little wooden kiosk, which hung on the bluff over the water's edge. A flight of stone steps led up to the house. 'Tit-Pierre climbed these laboriously. The great carved doors were closed, but a blind of one of the long French windows in the west wing stood slightly ajar. 'Tit-Pierre pushed this open. The bedchamber into which he peered was large and luxuriously furnished. A lamp with a crimson shade burned on its claw-footed gilt pedestal in a corner; the low light diffused a rosy radiance about the room. The filmy curtains at the windows waved to and fro softly in the June night wind. The huge old-fashioned, four-posted bed, overhung by a baldachin of carved wood with satin linings, occupied a deep alcove. A woman was sleeping there beneath, the lace netting. The snow-white bedlinen followed the contours of her rounded limbs, giving her the look of a recumbent marble statue. Her black hair, loosed from its heavy coil, spread over the pillow. One exquisite bare arm lay across her forehead, partly concealing her face. Her measured breathing rose and fell rhythmically on the air. A robe of pale silk that hung across a chair, dainty lace-edged garments tossed carelessly on an antique lounge — these seemed instinct still with the nameless, subtle grace of her who had but now put them off.

On a table by the window, upon whose threshold the child stood atiptoe, was set a large crystal bowl filled with water-lilies. Their white petals were folded; the round, red-lined green leaves glistened in the lamp light. One long bud, rolled tightly in its green and brown sheath, hung over the fluted edge of the bowl, swaying gently on its flexible stem. 'Tit-Pierre gazed at it intently, frowning a little, then put out a small forefinger and touched

The Soul of Rose Dédé

it. A quick thrill ran along the stem; the bud moved lightly from side to side and burst suddenly into bloom; the slim white petals quivered; a tremulous, sighing, whispering sound issued from the heart of gold. The child listened, holding the fragrant disk to his pink ear, and laughed softly.

He moved about the room, examining with infantile curiosity the costly objects scattered upon small tables and ranged upon the low, many-shelved mantel.

Presently he pushed a chair against the foot of the bed, climbed upon it, lifted the netting, and crept cautiously to the sleeper's side. He sat for a moment regarding her. Her lips were parted in a half-smile; the long lashes which swept her cheeks were wet, as if a happy tear had just trembled there. 'Tit-Pierre laid his hand on her smooth wrist, and touched timidly the snowy globes that gleamed beneath the openwork of her night-dress. She threw up her arm, turning her face full upon him, unclosed her large, luminous eyes, smiled, and slept again.

With a sigh, which seemed rather of resignation than of disappointment, the child crept away and clambered again to the floor.

. . . . Outside the fog was thickening. The dark waters of the bay lapped the foot of the low bluff; their soft, monotonous moan was rising by imperceptible degrees to a higher key. The scrubby cedars, leaning at all angles over the water, were shaken at intervals by heavy puffs of wind, which drove the mist in white, ragged masses across the shelled road, over the weedy neutral ground, and out into the tops of the sombre pines. The red lights in a row of sloops at anchor over against Cat Island had dwindled to faintly glimmering sparks. The watery flash of the revolving light in the light-house off the point of the island showed a black wedge-shaped cloud stretching up the seaward sky.

Nathan Pilger screwed up his eye and watched the cloud critically. André followed the direction of his gaze with idle interest, then turned to look again at the woman who sat on a grassy barrow a few paces beyond Père Lebas.

"She has never been here before," he said to himself, his heart stirring curiously. "I would I could see her face!"

Her back was towards the little group; her elbow was on her knee, her chin in her hand. Her figure was slight and girlish; her white gown gleamed ghost-like in the wan light.

"Naw, I bain't complainin', nor nothin'," said the old sailor, dropping the cloud, as it were, and taking up a broken thread of talk; "hows'ever, it's tarnation wearyin' a-settin' here so studdy year in an' year out. Leas'ways," he added, shifting his seat to another part of the low mound, "fer an old sailor sech as I be."

"If one could but quit his place and move about, like 'Tit-Pierre yonder," said André, musingly, "it would not be so bad. For myself, I would not want ——"

"The child is free to come and go because his soul is white. There is no stain upon 'Tit-Pierre. The child hath not sinned." It was the priest who spoke. His voice was harsh and forbidding. His deep-set eyes were fixed upon the tall spire of Our Lady of the Gulf, dimly outlined against the sky beyond an intervening reach of clustering roofs and shaded gardens.

André stared at him wonderingly, and glanced half furtively at the stranger, as if in her presence, perchance, might be found an explanation of the speaker's unwonted bitterness of tone. She had not moved. "I would I could see her face!" he muttered, under his breath. "For myself," he went on, lifting his voice, "I am sure I would not want to wander far. I fain would walk once more on the road along the curve of the bay; or under the pines, where little white patches of moonlight fall between the straight, tall tree trunks. And I would go sometimes, if I might, and kneel before the altar of Our Lady of the Gulf."

Nathan Pilger grunted contemptuously. "What a lan'lubber ye be, Andry!" he said, his strong nasal English contrasting oddly with the smooth foreign speech of the others. "What a lan'lubber ye be! Ye bain't no sailor, like your father afore ye. Tony Dewdonny hed as good a pair o' sealegs as ever I see. Lord! if there wa'n't no diffickulties in the way, Nathan Pilger 'd ship fer some port a leetle more furrin than the shadder of Our Lady yunder! Many's the deck I've walked," he continued, his husky voice growing more and more animated, "an' many's the vige I've made to outlandish places. Why, you'd oughter see Arkangel, Andry. Here's the north coast o' Rooshy" — he leaned over and traced with his forefinger the rude outlines of a map on the ground; the wind lifted his long, gray locks and tossed them over his wrinkled forehead; "here's the White Sea; and here, off the mouth of the Dewiny River, is Arkangel. The Rooshan men in that there town, Andry, wears petticoats like women; whilse down here, in the South Pacific, at Taheety, the folks don't wear no clo'es at all to speak of! You'd oughter see

The Soul of Rose Dédé

Taheety, Andry. An' here, off Guinea ——"

"All those places are fine, no doubt," interrupted his listener, "Arkangel and Taheetee and Guinee" — his tongue tripped a little over the unfamiliar names — "but, for myself, I do not care to see them. I find it well on the bay shore here, where I can see the sloops come sailing in through the pass, with the sun on their white sails. And the little boats that rock on the water! Do you remember, Silvain," he cried, turning to the priest, "how we used to steal away before sunrise in my father's little fishing-boat, when we were boys, and come back at night with our backs blistered by the sun and our arms aching, hein? That was before you went away to France to study for the priesthood. Ah, but those were good times!" He threw back his head and laughed joyously. His dark hair, wet with the mist, lay in loose rings on his forehead; his fine young face, beardless but manly, seemed almost lustrous in the pale darkness. "Do you remember, Silvain? Right where the big house stands, there was Jacques Caillion's steep-roofed cottage, with the garden in front full of pinks and mignonette and sweet herbs; and the vine-hung porch where Tit-Pierre used to play, and where Margot Caillion used to stand shading her eyes with her arm, and looking out for her man to come home from sea."

"Jack Caillion," said Nathan Pilger, "was washed overboard from the Suzanne in a storm off Hatteras in 'll — him and Dunc Cook and Ba'tist' Roux."

"The old church of Our Lady of the Gulf," the young man continued, "was just a stone's-throw this side of where the new one was built; back a little is our cottage, and your father's, Silvain; and in the hollow beyond Justin Roux has his blacksmith's forge."

He paused, his voice dying away almost to a whisper. The waves were beating more noisily against the bluff, filling the silence with a sort of hoarse plaint; the fog — gray, soft, impenetrable — rested on them like a cloud. The moisture fell in an audible drip-drop from the leaves and the long, pendent moss of the live-oaks. A mare, with her colt beside her, came trotting around the bend of the road. She approached within a few feet of the girl, reared violently, snorting, and dashed away, followed by the whinnying colt. The clatter of their feet echoed on the muffled air. The girl, in her white dress, sat rigidly motionless, with her face turned seaward.

André lifted his head and went on, dreamily: "I mind me, most of all, of one day when all the girls and boys of the village walked over to Bayou Galère to gather water-lilies. Margot Caillion, with Tit-Pierre in her hand, came along to mind the girls. You had but just come back from France in your priest's frock, Silvain. You were in the church door when we passed, with your book in your hand." A smothered groan escaped the priest, and he threw up his arm as if to ward off a blow. "And you were there when we came back at sunset. The smell of the pines that day was like balm. The lilies were white on the dark breast of the winding bayou. Rose Dédé's arms were heaped so full of lilies that you could only see her laughing black eyes above them. But Lorange would only take a few buds. She said it was a kind of sin to take them away from the water where they grew. Lorange was ever ——"

The girl had dropped her hands in her lap, and was listening. At the sound of her own name she turned her face towards the speaker.

"Lorange!" gasped André. "Is it truly you, Lorange?"

"Yes, it is I, André Dieudonné," she replied, quietly. Her pale girlish face, with its delicate outlines, was crowned with an aureole of bright hair, which hung in two thick braids to her waist; her soft brown eyes were a little sunken, as if she had wept overmuch. But her voice was strangely cold and passionless.

"But . . . when did you . . . come, Lorange?" André demanded, breathlessly.

"I came," she said, in the same calm, measured tone, "but a little after you, André Dieudonné. First Tit-Pierre, then you, and then myself."

"Why, then ——" he began. He rose abruptly, gathering his mantle about him, and leaned over the marble slab where he had been sitting. "Sacred to the memory of André Antoine Marie Dieudonné," he read, slowly, slipping his finger along the mouldy French lettering, "'who died at this place August 20th, 1809. In the 22d year of his age.' Eighty years and more ago I came!" he cried. "And you have been here all these years, Lorange, and I have not known! Why, then, did you never come up?"

She did not answer at once. "I was tired," she said, presently, "and I rested well down there in the cool, dark silence. And I was not lonely . . . at first, for I heard Margot Caillion passing about, putting flowers above Tit-Pierre and you and me. My mother and yours often came and wept with her for us all — and my father, and your little brothers. The sound of their weeping comforted me. Then . . . after a while . . . no one seemed to

The Soul of Rose Dédé

remember us any more."

"Margot Caillion," said Nathan Pilger, "went back, when her man was drowned, to the place in France where she was born. The others be all layin' in the old church-yard yander on the hill . . . all but Silvann Leebaw an' me."

She looked at the old man and smiled gravely. "A long time passed," she went on, slowly. "I could sometimes hear you speak to 'Tit-Pierre, André Dieudonné; . . . and at last some men came and dug quite near me; and as they pushed their spades through the moist turf they talked about the good Père Lebas; and then I knew that Silvain was coming." The priest's head fell upon his breast; he covered his face with his hands and rocked to and fro on his low seat. "Not long after, Nathan Pilger came. Down there in my narrow chamber I have heard above me, year after year, the murmur of your voices on St. John's eve, and ever the feet of 'Tit-Pierre, as he goes back and forth seeking his mother. But I cared not to leave my place. For why should I wish to look upon your face, André Dieudonné, and mark there the memory of your love for Rose Dédé?"

Her voice shook with a sudden passion as she uttered the last words. The hands lying in her lap were twisted together convulsively; a flush leaped into her pale cheeks.

"Rose Dédé!" echoed André, amazedly. "Nay, Lorance, but I never loved Rose Dédé! If she perchance cared for me ——"

"Silence, fool!" cried the priest, sternly. He had thrown back his cowl; his eyes glowed like coals in his white face; he lifted his hand menacingly. "Thou wert ever a vain puppet, André Dieudonné. It was not for such as thou that Rose Dédé sinned away her soul! Was it thou she came at midnight to meet in the lone shadows of these very live-oaks? Hast thou ever worn the garments of a priest? . . . They shunned Rose Dédé in the village . . . but the priest said mass at the altar of Our Lady of the Gulf, . . . and the wail of the babe was sharp in the hut under the pines, . . . and it ceased to breathe, . . . and the mother turned her face to the wall and died, . . . and my heart was cold in my breast as I looked on the dead faces of the mother and the child. . . . They lie under the pine-trees by Bayou Galère. But the priest lived to old age; . . . and when he died, he durst not sleep in consecrated ground, but fain would lie in the shadows of the live-oaks, where the dark eyes of Rose Dédé looked love into his."

His wild talk fell upon unheeding ears. 'Tit-Pierre had come out of the house. He was nestling against Nathan Pilger's knee. He held a lily-bud in one hand, and with the other he caressed the sailor's weather-beaten cheek.

"'Tit-Pierre," whispered the old man, "that is Lorance Baudrot. Do you remember her, 'Tit-Pierre?" The child smiled intelligently. "Lorance was but a slip of a girl when I come down here from Cape Cod — cabin-boy aboard the Mary Ann. She was the pretties' lass on all the bay shore. An' I — I loved her, 'Tit-Pierre. But I wa'n't no match agin Andry Dewdonny; an' I know'd it from the fust. Andry was the likelies' lad hereabout, an' the harnsomes'. I see that Lorance loved him. An' when the yaller fever took him, I see her a-droopin' an' a-droopin' tell she died, an' she never even know'd I loved her. Her an' Andry was laid here young, 'Tit-Pierre, 'longside o' you. I lived ter be pretty tol'able old; but when I hed made my last vige, an' was about fetchin' my las' breath, I give orders ter be laid in this here old buryin'-groun' some'er's clost ter the grave o' Lorance Baudrot."

His voice was overborne by André's exultant tones. "Lorance!" he cried, "did you indeed love me? — me!"

Her dark eyes met his frankly, and she smiled.

"Ah, if I had only known!" he sighed — "if had only known, Lorance, I would surely have lived! We would have walked one morning to Our Lady of the Gulf, with all the village-folk about us, and Silvain — the good Père Lebas — would have joined our hands. . . . My father would have given us a little plot of ground; . . . you would have planted flowers about the door of our cottage; . . . our children would have played in the sand under the bluff. . . ."

A sudden gust of wind blew the fog aside, and a zigzag of flame tore the wedge-shaped cloud in two. A greenish light played for an instant over the weed-grown spot. The mocking-bird, long silent in the heart of the live-oak, began to sing.

"All these years you have been near me," he murmured, reproachfully, "and I did not know." Then, as if struck by a breathless thought, he stretched out his arms imploringly. "I love you, Lorance," he said. "I have always loved you. Will you not be my wife now? Silvain will say the words, and 'Tit-Pierre, who can go back and forth, will put this ring, which was my mother's, upon your finger, and he will bring me a curl of your soft hair to twist about mine. I cannot come to you, Lorance; I cannot even touch your hand. But when I go down into my dark place I can be content dreaming of you. And on the blessed St. John's eves I will know you are mine, as you sit

The Soul of Rose Dédé

there in your white gown."

As he ceased speaking, Père Lebas, with his head upon his breast, began murmuring, as if mechanically, the words which preface the holy sacrament of marriage. His voice faltered, he raised his head, and a cry of wonder burst from his lips. For André had moved away from the mouldy gravestone and stood just in front of him. Lorange, as if upborne on invisible wings, was floating lightly across the intervening space. Her shroud enveloped her like a cloud, her arms were extended, her lips were parted in a rapt smile. Nathan Pilger, with Tit-Pierre in his arms, had limped forward. He halted beside André, and as the young man folded the girl to his breast, the child reached over and laid an open lily on her down-drooped head.

The priest stared wildly at them, and struggled to rise, but could not. As he sank panting back upon the crumbling tomb, his anguish overcame him. "My God!" he groaned hoarsely, "I, only I, cannot move from my place. The soul of Rose Dédé hangs like a millstone about my neck!"

Even as he spoke, the cloud broke with a roar. The storm — black, heavy, thunderous — came rushing across the bay. It blotted out, in a lightning's flash, the mansion which stands on the site of Jacques Caillion's hut, and the weed-grown, ancient, forgotten graveyard in its shadow.

. . . And a bell in the steeple of Our Lady of the Gulf rang out the hour.