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The Warrior's Belt:
Memoirs of
Jean Baptiste Pointe
DuSable

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Jean Baptiste Pointe
DuSable

A Novel
by

Warren W. Holmes



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In Memory

Of My Parents

Quintus and Juanita Holmes

Contents

Prologue

A Granddaughter's Introduction	1
Greetings from DuSable	6

Chapters

Chapter 1: On Education	8
Chapter 2: On Travel	18
Chapter 3: On Meeting Different Cultures	38
Chapter 4: On the Length of Life	67
Chapter 5: On Making One's Own Place in the World	91
Chapter 6: On the Power of Love	126
Chapter 7: On the Consequences of Politics	147
Chapter 8: On Appreciating Longtime Friends	182
Chapter 9: On Dealing with Adversity	197
Chapter 10: On Retirement	228

Epilogue

Apologia	257
A Granddaughter's Postscript	269
Translator's Note	277

Appendices

Map of DuSable Territory	290
Chronology	291



A Granddaughter's Introduction

Granddaddy became a man the day his mother died. He was barely ten years old.

The Spanish had invaded Saint-Domingue again. And although Grandpa knew all the stories about evil galleons bringing death to Haiti, in his first decade of life they'd not come as in the past to plunder, rape, and murder while tearing up the rich soil in search of gold. Until now.

But among adventures my grandfather told time and again when I was a little girl, of this day in late August 1755 he rarely uttered a word. I think because he'd been unable to rescue his mother from the marauders, though his bravery saved the entire French colony. Yet, images of the butchery became etched in my brain because of pain coming to his face the few quiet times Grandma and I coaxed him to tell of the raid.

That afternoon, having outgrown duties of tending the garden and chickens with his mother, young Jean Baptiste was helping Pierre Hallard in the old man's tobacco field when they heard screams rising from thinly protected Port de Paix. At first Jean thought the noises were cries of excitement at his father's ship being sighted off shore. But as he began running from the field he realized they were not happy shouts. They were full of terror. Besides, *La Moutte Noire* wasn't expected till next day.

His sprint through rows of tobacco crops quickened as he hurtled home, leaving Old Hallard in his wake. Muffled thundering sounds temporarily smothered human shrieks coming from the

Holmes



distant port. Already Jean recognized Spaniards were following up their cannonade from three men-of-war with a hurried foray on the town.

Out of breath, he reached his coastal cottage. But not before the Spanish. A din of hollering rose from every house and from the narrow streets. Before his eyes three soldiers battered down his mother's door. Inside, Suzanne awaited her attackers with her husband's flintlock pistol. But they didn't take the beautiful woman seriously as they rushed her. So, steadying the gun with both hands, she fired each barrel, felling one of the devils and grazing another at the temple. Enraged, the wounded man dropped his musket and drew his sword, cleaving Suzanne's shoulder with a powerful blow. The third man, surprised by Jean's terrified scream, turned and knocked the boy to the ground with the butt of his weapon.

Groggy, Jean regained consciousness some time later, finding the invaders gone and his mother motionless in a pool of her own blood. Fire raged all about him, engulfing the cabin in smoke. With every ounce of energy he could muster, he carried Suzanne from the inferno into the devastation outside, where Port de Paix lay in ruins as its aggressors slashed toward the interior.

Immediately, young Jean sized up his situation. It was too late for his mother. But if he escaped to his father's ship Saint-Domingue could be rescued from the brutal conquistadors.

However, by daybreak the Port crouched along the seashore like a whipped dog. In the harbor nothing stirred but thin lines of smoke above the rubble of yesterday's buildings. From a cliff, where he'd been hiding all night, Jean realized that those on *La Moutte Noire*



wouldn't recognize what had befallen the town until they were snared in the galleons' trap. Therefore, the big Spanish guns could then easily subdue the unsuspecting privateer, and all on board would be captured and hanged.

Swallowing hard with the memory of Suzanne lying murdered in the front yard of their smoldering house, Jean peered out to sea from his hiding place, desperate for sign of his father's brig. After some time, where gray sky dipped to greet Atlantic's rolling waters, he sighted a bobbing white speck. It was a sail. Gradually, the ship took shape, climbing over the sea toward La Tortuga, a rocky mass off Haiti where his father often docked before returning home. Fearing the danger, Jean sank to his knees. If *La Moutte Noire* tried to anchor on La Tortuga, all would be lost. The galleons could bottle her between the main island and the rock's crags.

His relief at seeing the brigantine turn toward Port de Paix, however, was short lived. Now his father was heading straight for the galleons and would be surprised by the massive men-of-war. So throwing off his clothes, Jean stood naked, watching waves dash the ragged rocks below while measuring the distance to his father's ship. Suddenly, like an arrow darting through sky, Jean Baptiste dove into the swelling sea.

The young boy was near death when the crew of Frenchmen, Italians, Senegalese, Greeks, and Portuguese aboard his father's privateer spotted him. Deftly, a West African harpooned a shark closing on Jean, perhaps drawn to blood trickling from his head wound. And Pointe DuSable was amazed that it was his own son he was hauling onto the brig.

Holmes



“You!” was all Captain DuSable exclaimed before smacking the boy to recirculate blood in his chilled veins. Then the captain ordered blankets.

Barely taking note that he was on his father’s ship for the first time, Jean quickly told what had happened at Port de Paix. Without ceremony, *La Moutte Noire* swung to starboard in order to intercept a French fleet sailing toward St. Marc. Next day Pointe Dusable stormed the port at the head of the fleet and routed the invaders before they could carry the inhabitants of King Louis’ colony into slavery and establish headquarters to recapture Haiti for the Spanish Crown.

Granddaddy’s precocious initiation into the adult world, therefore, set a pattern that would follow him all his life. From that day I think he felt he was destined to do great things. And, of course, everyone knows about the three pivotal points in his biography—his attempts to achieve Chief Pontiac’s dream of peace for the North American continent; his establishment of the permanent trading center in the heart of the Americas, linking the Mississippi River to the Atlantic Ocean, thus joining all of Europe to the New World’s interior; and his securing the Northwest Territory for General George Washington during the American War for Independence. But while recognizing his courage, strength, and foresight, few comprehend that he bequeathed a legacy having less to do with geography than with spirit.

Certainly, the same nimble-mindedness and guts that had rescued Saint-Domingue in 1755 are characteristics needed for the bold pioneering my grandfather made in later years. But he discovered a

The Warrior's Belt



deeper lesson in that fateful event. He learned that loss brings new horizons. And his life's journey continued to teach him variations on the theme that in losing one thing we gain others. He thus was a paradigm of finding treasures and giving them away. This was, however, more a product of wise generosity than of circumstance.

When you read the journal Grandpa left, I believe you'll understand what I mean, because you'll see beneath the man of action to the pensive soul that made him possible. With each reading, I realize more deeply that in his reconciliation with personal melancholia he has bequeathed lessons for us all.

Eulalia Pelletier De Roi
August 29, 1819
St. Charles, Missouri

Holmes



Ecrier: Faire: Etre

Translated from the French

Dear Reader:

You have here a book whose faith can be trusted, a book that warns from the start that I've set myself no other end but a family one. I've not been concerned to serve you or my reputation: my powers are inadequate for such design. Instead, I've dedicated this book to the private benefit of my friends and kinsmen so that, having lost me (as they must do soon), they can find here again some traits of my character and of my humors. They'll thus keep their knowledge of me more full, more alive. If my intention had been to seek the favor of the world, I'd have decked myself in bought beauties, or would have tensed and braced myself in my best posture. But here I want to be seen in my simple, natural, everyday fashion, without study or artifice: for it's my own self I'm painting.

Yet, I paint with a borrowed brush, offered by my tutor, Montaigne, whom I swallowed whole as a schoolboy. He gave me permission in telling of the *centos* he much admired. Therefore, I've stolen his style and often his words in filling this canvas that is myself. So if the writing gets tedious, blame him.

But be aware all the while that the story of my invention of me is, for the most part, my responsibility. Surely, the world gives certain materials with which to build yourself, and it gives and takes

The Warrior's Belt



away certain tools, but it's up to you to pick and choose what you'll use.

For my own part, they call me a discoverer of sorts. And though I've lost more than I've found, I'm fuller for both. Out of that fullness I can share with you. The giving makes my cup complete.

And so, Reader, I myself am the subject of my book: it's not reasonable you should employ your leisure on a topic so frivolous and so vain. But if you choose, drink a round with me.

Therefore, Hail or Farewell!

From DuSable

23 December 1800

Peoria, Illinois

Chapter 1 On Education

Ah! You decided to come along for a while. Welcome! It's a pleasure to share.

First let's get some preliminaries out of the way. On 27 July 1745 I was born in St. Marc, Haiti. They say Christopher Columbus first set foot in the New World on this island paradise. For Haiti's idyllic nature, I can vouch. But Columbus is another matter. He's credited with discovering the place. Yet, that's always seemed odd to me since the Arawacs who owned it saved his life with food and shelter when he arrived.

However, be that as it may, people from all over began streaming into the Caribbean after that, and my mother and father met there some two and a half centuries later. I suspect my father's people found the islands more a paradise than my mother's.

So I must explain some things about world politics and about my father. You see, this Columbus fellow made everything very complicated. Before his "discovery" people were content to keep their little enmities at home. Perhaps, I shouldn't say "content," but "constrained." Nevertheless, Columbus' "discovery" gave the Europeans freedom to move about and start trouble everywhere.

Kings and princes began carving up this "New World" even before they knew its dimensions. Spain, England, and France, having the heftier navies, took the lion's share of the continents, but the islands were fair game for anyone with so much as a skiff.



Naturally, the whole area was fallow field for all to transplant their European wars.

Now my father was a prudent pirate. Don't laugh. I do not play with you in that. When he took something, he intended to keep it. So after stealing my mother from a Danish sugar field in St. Croix, he didn't want to risk having his cottage at St. Marc violated by her owner. Therefore, he returned to the plantation where he'd often spied upon her bathing in a sky-blue pool and hunted down Suzanne's former master, paying him a good price for what he called his "ebony treasure." Then he made her his wife.

My mother was practical, too. She certainly appreciated escaping the Dane's sugar fields, but after I was born she had no desire to live alone at St. Marc while her husband conducted business at sea and at the buccaneer haven, La Tortuga.

"Suzanne! I cannot have my pretty wife up there among the cutthroats." I heard Pointe DuSable tell her that many times. And in her beguiling Danish accent she always had the same answer.

"So find a place near your cutthroat friends where we can all live together."

"There is no safe place."

Those words of my father always ended their gentle disputes, until one day she asked: "What about Port de Paix?"

Pointe DuSable could find no argument for her sly research. Port de Paix was almost as beautiful as St. Marc, and since the town was so close to the Isle de la Tortuga, where French pirates made their headquarters, it was in little danger of attack by the Spanish or English, who were the captain's perennial enemies.

Holmes



So when I was seven we moved there. My father could never resist what Suzanne wanted. Nor could I. If you'd ever known her, you'd understand why. But her insistence to be near her husband is what killed her. Ironically, my father was right about Haiti: "There is no safe place."

In time I may tell you about the day my mother died. But, pardon me: I cannot bring myself to it now. Suffice it to say that after her murder my father didn't want me growing up in danger, and he certainly didn't want the pirate's perilous life for me. Thus, at eleven years of age I was shipped off to school in far away France. Sailing there with Pa was a great adventure, and I learned much about the seafaring life on my journey.

But uppermost in Dad's scheme was getting me a good education. He knew of an academy outside Paris. So we went to talk to the priests at St. Cloud who ran L'Ecole de Saint Thomas. Framed in gray overcast, this place looked like a foreboding prison on a hill as we approached in January's bleak cold, and I suspected they wouldn't welcome an island boy from the distant Caribbean. Yet, to my surprise Father Michel registered me immediately.

"My son needs a good education to make his way in the world," Pa impressed upon the priest.

"Certainly, Monsieur DuSable," Father Michel agreed. "What are you called, my son?"

Right away I liked that the priest talked directly to me.

"Jean Baptiste, Father."

"You will take care of him well?" my father questioned.

"The boy will have all he requires."



The priest accepted a bag of gold coins from Papa and escorted us from his office back into the damp courtyard.

“There will be more money when needed,” my father said.

“God bless you, my son,” Father Michel said. “Have no fear. Jean will get on well here.”

At the huge iron gate, Dad extended one hand to me and placed his other on my shoulder.

“Mind your manners, eh?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“*Au revoir*, Jean,” Pointe DuSable said, clanking the big gate behind him.

Blinking back tears, I looked into the ruddy face of the man who'd taken my father's place. Searching through his massive red beard, I met Father Michel's stern eyes and was not afraid.

“Come.”

Brown robed brothers were unrestrained in welcoming me as we reached the courtyard's edge. Like them, the pupils in the dining hall were excited, too. And Father Michel made a special point of introducing one boy who stood aloof.

“Jacques Clemorgan!” the big priest's voice boomed. “This is Jean Baptiste DuSable. He is from St. Domingue. Not far from your own Martinique, eh?”

The older boy squirmed. He wasn't happy to see me. But under the priest's intent glare he was compelled to make greeting.

This blond fellow seemed not unlike the other boys, until he spoke. It was obvious he said as little as possible because of his accent. But for me his inflection provided a touch of home in this

Holmes



alien country, and I liked him right away. The feeling wasn't mutual. As soon as he could, this Jacques Clemorgan escaped Father Michel and me.

Yet, the first few days at L'Ecole de St. Thomas weren't all bad. The brothers were strict but fair. Certainly, lessons were different from those at the mission school where my mother had sent me to be instructed by Father Le Mons. But I caught on fast. Soon the boys in the form in which I'd been placed became more fascinated by what they called my "phenomenal memory" than by my dark skin or by my being *étranger*. And that I could remember things easily was particularly pleasing to Brother Marcel, who taught grammar, logic, and rhetoric as well as history. This, along with confidence I'd gained while sailing with my father on *La Moutte Noire*, increased my self-reliance.

However, when snow came it brought deep homesickness. With this unfamiliar whiteness, a heavy chill settled over everything. Loneliness more than cold racked my body, and nights were worse than days. Everyone recognized that I was shrinking inside myself, but no one understood why. Except Jacques Clemorgan. I could tell he shared my longing for the Caribbean's hot sunshine by the way he looked at me whenever we chanced to pass in the dank hallways or the wind-whipped courtyard.

Father Michel must have been keeping silent watch on me, too; for I felt him enter my room the night I stuffed the sheet in my mouth to muffle sobs and coughing. As he sat on the edge of my meager cot, his huge hand warmed my chilled shoulder. In that



instant I heard rustling in the hall as candlelight carried shadow into my dark cubicle.

“Why aren’t you asleep at this hour, Jacques?” Father Michel whispered in his gruff voice.

The tall, blond boy with the taper in his hand drew himself up.

“I heard this fellow groaning,” Jacques Clemorgan answered defensively.

“Are you ill, Jean Baptiste?” the priest asked.

“No, Father,” I said weakly when Father Michel tested my forehead with the back of his hand.

“Sir,” said Jacques Clemorgan. “Perhaps the new boy can share my room.”

“You, Jacques, seek a partner?”

“Just till winter breaks, Father.” Jacques Clemorgan tried to adopt the priest’s stern tone.

“And you, Jean Baptiste. Do you choose to room with this lad?”

“Oh, yes, Father!”

“Then gather your things.”

From that night Jacques and I were fast friends. I forgot my melancholia while trying to figure out why he brooded all the time. My learning resumed its rapid pace, and by summer I was able to skip the next form. Everyone attributed this success to my “phenomenal memory,” and I was teased until the other boys went home at midyear recess. Only Jacques and I and a few others remained among the brothers who tried to keep us busy with chores.

In truth, it was a sad time until Papa arrived just before my birthday. My heart leapt when he announced he’d take me home on

Holmes

his return trip, even though we could only stay in Haiti a few days. But immediately I grieved at leaving Jacques alone.

“Papa, I have a friend who will be very unhappy if I go without him. Can we take Jacques with us?”

“Eh, who is this Jacques?”

“Jacques Clemorgan, Papa. He is from Martinique. No one ever comes to visit him. And he receives no letters.”

“Jean, I cannot carry this boy across the sea without his parents’ consent. What are you thinking? It is impossible.”

Looking down at my shoes, I mumbled, “Then I cannot go either.”

As the words slipped from my lips, I knew I’d better look up real fast. I’d never defied my father. In an instant his face contorted in anger then dulled with disappointment.

“Son, this might be my last trip in a long time. I am giving up the sea and *La Moutte Noire*. I intend to buy a coffee plantation near St. Marc. This will keep me very busy and I do not know when I can return to you. Are you sure you do not wish to see home?”

“Of course I long for Saint-Dominique, Papa, and I am sorry for displeasing you. But I cannot abandon Jacques.”

Suddenly my father’s eyes danced with an idea.

“Such loyalty deserves reward, Jean. How about the three of us taking in Paris? You need some culture. Perhaps, I can postpone setting sail for a week.”

“Great, Dad!”

“You find this Jacques Clemorgan! I will ask Father Michel for permission and meet in your room.”



When I told Jacques of my father's plan, his reaction was quite strange—at least for the solemn Clemorgan.

"I'm going to Paris with you and your dad!" He sprang from his cot and danced a weird jig, pulling me into his wild celebration. It was the silliest thing, but he swept me up in it despite myself. And Papa and Jacques got on well from the start. Indeed, it was as if I had a brother. But after our week's vacation, as soon as Pointe DuSable was returning to Haiti, Jacques sank back into his mysterious gloom. Realizing his heartbreak at having no contact from home, I attempted to brighten his spirits by extolling the academy's wonders.

"Papa says what we learn here will open a world of opportunities," I told him.

"Sure," Jacques said bitterly. "They're making us proper little Frenchmen."

His lack of excitement was reasonable, I suppose. While the challenging routine was new to me, Jacques had already been locked away at L'Ecole for two years. For example, he found the study of Latin particularly tedious, while to me it was an adventure. I was helping him with conjugations and declensions even though he was at least a year ahead of me. And by my third year at St. Cloud, I was put in Jacques' form.

This brought me face to face with a new side of Father Michel; for now I was in his philosophy class, which he taught entirely in the language of Virgil and Marcus Aurelius. And Father Michel was a stern teacher who felt his role as prefect included being principal instructor. His class grounded me in the wisdom of the ancients.

Holmes



However, we didn't worry about Greek—we had Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato in their Latin translations. Yet, Father Michel encouraged facility in languages, which would be invaluable to me later.

But Jacques had an entirely different view, as usual.

“See what your great memory has done for you,” he said one night when we were having a tough time with our philosophy homework. “You could have put this torture off a year or two if not for it.”

“It's not the memory that has placed me here,” I told him. “If memory were all, you wouldn't have to help me with science and math. It's the interest.”

“It is the memory,” Jacques insisted.

“Memory is only the means we use to hold things we seemingly have lost,” I tossed at him to keep from arguing back and forth.

“Oh, you're a philosopher, too, eh, Monsieur Memory Man,” Jacques said. “Just put that in Latin and Father will love it.”

“Don't fool yourself,” I told him. “Father Michel is a rigorous scholar.”

The last puzzled Jacques just enough to get us back to work. Nevertheless, my estimation of the priest was correct. He was a clever man who taught us more than we thought we had learned, and he could easily judge when another's statement had been facile rather than tested.

Since my father didn't return for four years, it had become my habit when the other boys were on holiday or recess to keep Father Michel's office and library in order. One day he caught me reading one of his volumes of Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*.



“Ah, so you like sitting behind the desk,” the huge priest said, seeming not to eye the book I’d clumsily closed.

During the next three years, Father Michel acted most ingeniously. Pretending not to notice what I was reading, he sharpened my appetite by leaving advanced books purposely in my way, while gently requiring me to do my duty by texts he prescribed in class.

After seven years, when it was time to leave L’Ecole de St. Thomas, Father Michel pulled me aside.

“I am sorry you will not take my offer to stay and teach, Jean Baptiste,” he said. “But I am sure you will remember that learning is a great ornament and a useful instrument of wondrous service.” Unceremoniously he presented me with three bound volumes of Montaigne. “Take care of that Jacques Clemorgan. He has gained many useful things here, like keeping ledgers and stuff like that. But he needs looking after.”

“*Au revoir*, Father,” I said.

“*Adieu*, Jean Baptiste.”

As Pointe DuSable ushered Jacques and me aboard *Le Roi* for our voyage back to the New World, I carried the carefully packed books Father Michel had given me along with the journal I’d begun keeping. These were my prized possessions. But more precious were things the priest had taught in letting me follow my natural bent. For he’d subtly irrigated my mind to know myself, and to know how to die...and to live.

Chapter 2 On Travel

Once home I discovered my education hadn't ended but was continuing as apprenticeship. If there's truly a Law of Nature, I'd say that following fast on concern for self-preservation and avoidance of whatever's harmful there comes second the love the begetter feels for the begotten. In short, Pointe DuSable had forsaken the sea to start his coffee and hardwood plantation in order to teach me the virtues of hard work.

With each swing of the ax at my new home in St. Marc, I saw more clearly my father's design. When my daily labors had properly strengthened my body, he intended to open a shop selling our wares to sharpen my mind in the ways of conducting business. He'd spent the last four years of my time at St. Cloud devising this torture. Surely I was loved.

But one day in early June a surprise interrupted my toil. Stripped to the waist to facilitate the proper hacking of trees, I leaned on my tool's handle looking back toward our house, surveying acreage we'd cleared, when my father approached with another man nearly as tall as he. Squinting through streams of sweat, I recognized the man with Pointe DuSable as Jacques. Even while I waved, he started that crazy jig he'd perfected at L'Ecole and ran toward me. And I, caught in the frenzy of seeing him after long months, whooped, joining the jig. Dad stood in amazement as we displayed our insane dance.

"What are you doing in Saint-Dominque?" I questioned, gasping for breath.



“This is where my friends are!” Jacques exclaimed. Then his blue eyes dulled. “Besides, I don’t fit in at home. I guess I’ve been gone too long.”

“Eh, well, you are welcome here,” Pointe DuSable said. “You are a grown man now, and there is plenty of work to go around.”

Jacques looked at the ground in seeming embarrassment.

“Thank you, sir,” he said awkwardly.

Dad put out his hand and clasped Jacques with his free arm. I sensed my father knew something I did not. It was as though Pa and my best friend shared something they were shielding from me, and I wondered what that could be. I wouldn’t find out until years later.

“So, how’d you get here?” I tried to fill the uncomfortable silence.

“Aboard the schooner *La Mer!*” Jacques’ excitement returned. “I worked my way!”

“Ah, ha! Many such ships, and bigger ones, shall make port at Cap Saint Marc. And when they pull out they will be burdened with logs from these very fields and with my coffee!” Dad thumped his chest with his fist. “Suppose you knock off work awhile, eh, Jean?”

I picked up my ax and Dad formed a link between Jacques and me as we marched toward the house arm in arm.

“I am just back from the Cap, where I have finalized the deal for our shop.” Pa said. “There is money in trade, you know. Maybe some day I will start a sawmill, eh? Haiti needs industry.”

Over dinner Dad let us in on other secrets.

“Ah, but these islands are a place for old men,” my father announced. “The future is in New France.”

Holmes

“This is New France, Papa.”

“No, Jean. I mean America.”

“They say New Orleans is a place of wonder,” Jacques said.

“Aye,” Pa agreed. “And of decadence. I have seen it with these eyes. But beyond is vast wilderness. A place lads like you can make your own.”

Dad had intended that I work logging and at the store to earn enough money to buy a sloop and stake my way in the world. Now he said that with Jacques along we could gain the money more quickly. So from June to January we stretched our muscles in such work and practicing our navigation skills on the sloop I’d named *La Suzanne* after my mother. Yet, Jacques was a greater help to my father at the shop, *DuSable et Fils*, than he was in the fields. In that way, we got on well enough to hire a crew to ship with the two of us to Martinique where we sold our wares.

However, I was disappointed when Jacques insisted I stay in port readying the ship for our return to St. Marc rather than go with him to get money from his father to help pay his share for *La Suzanne*. It hurt that he didn’t want me to meet his family, but I reluctantly went along with his wishes.

By spring my father felt we’d learned enough to journey across the Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans, the city named for that ancient seat of French kings. We were proficient in planting and harvesting coffee and at felling trees and making deals at the store, to which we weekly drove wagons loaded with the plantation’s produce. And Dad had taught us tricks of sailing and in hiring others to help with whatever tasks were needed. So all of us were confident that Jacques



and I would make enough from the sale of *La Suzanne* and her cargo to establish an enterprise in New France.

Now since boyhood it's been my wonder that at every seaport wait men who yearn to set sail not as passengers but as hands. Posted like silent sentinels, at the docks of these towns they stand with dreams of ocean. Nothing will content them but the most extreme limit of the land. And drawn by the magnetic virtue of the compass needle, they must get as near water as they possibly can without falling in. See, although they're smarter than Narcissus, they nevertheless can't resist the sea's ungraspable image.

Therefore, from such men I had my pick at Cap St. Marc. They prefer going to sea as simple sailors because they get paid to work before the mast, gaining wholesome exercise while sucking in the deck's pure air. And the ones I signed felt privileged at being given a share of our profits for a chance to enjoy New Orleans. Two planned to stay in Louisiana, while the third intended to ship back to Haiti on a returning brig.

Thus, on 12 April 1764, Jacques and I began our charted course across the Atlantic to the Mississippi's mouth. However, this was the very day another ship was leaving Paris with word announcing the end of the Seven Years' War, a message that would not only alter my life but the future of the continent to which I looked for haven. For the terms of peace sealed the end of New France except for two small islands off Newfoundland. You see, in losing the war the king had ceded all lands east of the Mississippi to Great Britain and all lands west to the hated Spaniards. Yet, this I wouldn't learn until

Holmes



much later. And I certainly had no idea I was sailing to territory now owned by those who'd killed my mother.

However, in sight of the Gulf, *La Suzanne* became becalmed. Jacques came up behind me as I held the sloop's lifeless wheel while gazing into the turquoise sky at pelicans winging from shore in a V.

"Make the wind blow, Captain!" Clemorgan said, clapping my back. "Look at that shoreline! I see marshes and the outline of forest beyond that beautiful white beach. But we can't get there!"

"We can wait," I told him. "America won't run away!"

"Ah! Always the patient philosopher!"

"I'm more concerned with those birds," I said warily. "They're flying away with a purpose."

"Oh, sure."

As the sun crawled westward, Jacques tried to content himself with dreams of a new life on the land that seemed would elude our reach forever. We debated becoming merchants or shipping magnates while afternoon heat oppressed us. But gradually the sky revealed ugly faces as we sat stagnant at sea. And toward nightfall the horizon turned crimson then violet and the water began roiling. Suddenly wind gusts filled our limp sails as purple clouds rolled above us. I felt *La Suzanne* tremble like a wounded animal before swift, angry rain pelted her with vengeance that became downpour.

I ordered the sails reefed when the wheel began fighting me. But with sea spray and rain stinging my face, I battled to hold the ship against waves that grew in size with each lashing of the bow.

"Haul in those sails!" I bellowed, interested less now with reaching shore than with saving *La Suzanne*.



All hands were busy with tiller ropes and forward pumps as the hurricane roared like a lion and the sloop's seams gaped and closed like hungry mouths. Then a giant, foamy pillar dashed the ship, turning her completely astern. A larger column whirled us upward, throwing me into the rigging, before a third line of waves, even bigger, split *La Suzanne* in two.

The five of us were washed into the maelstrom, and I buoyed myself on dancing waves, scanning churning ocean. Like driftwood, chunks of *La Suzanne* bounced away as I searched for my crewmen. At some distance, Jacques' face bobbed on the water while he struggled to stay afloat. When I reached him I saw he was caught in clumps of rope and sail that had been our ship's mast. As he fought against being dragged out to sea, I dove underwater, tearing him from debris threatening to pull him to the depths.

Then Jacques' eyes snapped open in recognition as I freed him from the broken mast.

"Save yourself, Jean!" he insisted. "My leg is broken. You can't make it with me."

He became unconscious dead weight that I was tugging toward shore. But about two hours later I managed to reach the beach, dragging him to solid ground. I could barely breathe myself, and the two of us lay unmoving on the sand totally spent as the hurricane blew itself out.

By morning a new sun radiated drying warmth over the Gulf. We must have slept for ten or twelve hours, and I was well rested for what proved a grueling search for food and wood to splint Jacques' leg. Making a cursory look for other survivors of the night's terror, I

Holmes



realized I'd lost not only my men but everything I owned in the world. Down with *La Suzanne* had sunk all our money, produce, and papers. Montaigne's volumes as well as ship logs and the journal I'd kept faithfully were now scattered on Atlantic's bottom.

Swallowing hard to remove the lump in my throat, I stared down at Jacques who still seemed unconscious. At least I'd saved him. But neither of us would get on long without fresh water and something to eat. However, the beach that had appeared so inviting from *La Suzanne's* deck was barren. And we had to find shelter before the rising sun scorched our bodies.

So I used my coat and two stripling trees to fashion a travois to haul Jacques inland. With effort that sapped me at each step, I pulled Jacques to the crest of a slope looking down on a wide river spreading over flatland and into tiny lagoons.

Jacques wakened as I gingerly lowered him down the hill's river side. At the bottom we drank musty water and cracked pecans with our teeth and ate mangoes that grew in abundance there. Then I packed his rapidly swelling leg with damp leaves.

"We're going to make it, Jean," Jacques announced. "That's the Mississippi! Even with the storm our course held true."

He was so happy to be alive that it hadn't registered that we were in alien country with nothing to our names.

"They say the Mississippi is Louisiana's main road," Jacques prattled on. "Big ships are always pulling in. And every planter has his own boat or canoe. We will be saved!"



I pretended not to be concerned with his leg as I scanned the river for Jacques' wonderful rescue vessels. I didn't have the heart to tell him no one seemed interested in sailing today.

Then, about a mile out, I saw a ship leisurely entering the strait. Immediately I told Jacques I would swim out and bring help.

"You're too weak," Clemorgan protested, rising up on the travois and peering out to the white sails gleaming in midday sun. "Wait till she's closer."

"I don't want to give her a chance to get away," I said. "I'll meet her as she wafts in. Rest easy. I'll be back for you."

Unable to argue, he slumped down on the stretcher as I swam away in the Mississippi's soothing waters.

But as soon as I was aboard *Helsingor*, a Danish brigantine, I became aware of a language barrier. The first mate, a Mr. Lawson as I would discover later, babbled unintelligibly with his men while they were hauling me in. When Captain Jansen appeared, I summoned a few Danish words I'd learned from my mother to ask if he spoke French.

"Not good," he said in broken French, as confused as his crew at seeing me dripping on his deck. "One moment." He turned to his mate. "Get Claude Leban."

Leban, the French steward, was not only an experienced sailor but a bit of a surgeon. When we had Jacques on board, he properly splinted his leg and fed us a strong tea that broke Clemorgan's fever.

"They thought you were a run away slave," Leban told me. "But I assured the captain that your bearing and language denote a French

Holmes



gentleman.” He grunted. “However, those tattered clothes and that scraggly beard do not argue well for you, eh?”

He held a glass up to my face.

“Try on these and a razor.” He handed me shirt and trousers.

After putting on the clothes, I looked into the mirror again. Although Leban was a fairly large man, his shirt was too tight against the muscles I’d developed in working my father’s fields. And my long legs stretched far below the edges of his cuffless pants. I felt like an ill-fitted scarecrow, but made no complaint. After all, he’d freely given what he had.

“I think I’ll keep the beard,” I told Leban. “It gives the face character, no?”

“Ah, well, trim it into shape. You want to be presentable when you appear in Captain Jensen’s quarters for questioning. He wants details for his logs of how you lost your ship.”

“Captain DuSable has nothing to be ashamed of,” Jacques protested from Leban’s bunk. “He did everything he could to save *La Suzanne* and her hands. As you can see I owe my life to his heroism.”

“The interrogation is a formality that must be met,” Leban said. “I will interpret for you, Captain.”

By the time my interview with Captain Jensen ended we were approaching New Orleans. Bustling with activity, the harbor was a hive of cargo ships ready to transport cotton, timber, furs, and sugar cane to France. On shore the port teemed with shops, inns, and crowds of busy people suffused with prosperity’s air.



But instead of proudly navigating *La Suzanne* into the famous port, I was being carried in on another man's ship with a crew speaking a tongue I couldn't understand. And this wasn't the worst of it. Unlike Haiti, New Orleans had few free black men, and I was thrust into this strange place with nothing of my own. Yet, I could at least be thankful for Captain Jensen's allowing Jacques to remain aboard *Helsingor* for a week to speed his recovery while the ship lay at anchor.

"Look up Bontemps and Colbert," Jacques advised as I descended the gangplank. "Your father's trading partners no doubt will give you a job after you tell them what happened to us."

"Of course," I said confidently while waving farewell. "See you soon, Jacques!"

However, my self-assurance was immediately dashed by a gendarme who challenged me alone of the passengers and crew who were passing through the city's gate.

"You there! Halt!" he ordered sharply. "Your name, please!"

"Jean DuSable."

"Where from?"

"That ship." I pointed to *Helsingor*.

"Oh." He eyed me suspiciously for a few seconds. But I couldn't blame his taking note of my poorly fitting clothes. Nevertheless, he finally said. "Proceed!"

Once by him, I noted my heart's rapid thumping. Instantly the danger I was in struck me. And, as if to accentuate my tenuous situation, when I entered one of New Orleans' narrow streets I witnessed something I'd never seen before. At the same time that I

Holmes



heard the rattle of chains, a coffle of black men and women shuffled slowly over the cobblestones and a Spaniard snapped his whip over their heads while shouting orders. Daring to look closer, I saw that many of their bare backs were scarred, and these slaves' heavy breathing forced my own breath's sharp intake. At the end of this line of shackled people crept a small child clinging to the tattered skirt of a young woman who carried a baby in her arms.

Now fear is the thing I am most afraid of. In harshness it surpasses all other sensations. I have hardly any idea of the mechanisms by which fear operates in us; but it's a very odd emotion all the same; doctors say there's no other feeling which more readily ravishes our judgment from its proper seat. Sometimes it puts wings on our heels; other times it hobbles us and nails our feet to the ground. In the first instance, it reveals its greatest power when it drives us to deeds of valor, as had happened to me in the storm. But many people, unable to withstand its stabbing pains, have hanged themselves, drowned themselves, or jumped to destruction, showing that fear is even more unbearable than death.

So, at this sight in the market place of New Orleans, I felt all my senses focused as they'd never been before on one object—survival. While the spectacle passed I stood stark still. Then, as anger, hate, and desolation engulfed me, my terror became blind and unreasoning, prompting me to run into a dark and winding street as if pursued by demons. Unseeing, I nearly knocked a man down.

But sheer will to stay on his feet kept this figure in dark robes grappled to me like eagle talons as my legs kept pumping.



“What troubles you, my son?” His voice reminded me of Father Michel. Certainly, he was as strong.

Yet, the fact that I recognized him as a priest didn't keep me from lying.

“Father, the man who summoned me here has disappeared. Now I am stranded with no work.”

“Where are you from?” he questioned when I'd settled down.

“From L'Ecole de Saint Thomas,” I said.

“Eh? You are a long way from Saint Cloud, my son.”

“Yes, Father. And I need work. There are things I can help with at your parish.”

“Indeed.” The priest smiled. “The mission can use these strong shoulders. And perhaps these fleet feet, too.”

That was the extent of my interview with Father Pierre Gibault, who offered me room and board in return for maintaining his mission's grounds and buildings. By the following week Jacques had a job, too, but in that short time I'd learned that America's etiquette frowned upon blacks' fraternizing with white businessmen. So I saw Clemorgan infrequently, not wanting to cost Jacques his clerk's position at a large merchandising house.

Too proud and stubborn to admit to my father that I needed financial help, I wrote him occasionally during the year I worked at the mission, but in telling of our shipwreck I didn't mention my horror of being thrown into slavery. Yet, I discovered that Jacques had written about what had happened to us, also, because Pointe DuSable sent him a copy of papers showing that I was a loyal and *free* subject of King Louis.

Holmes



Nevertheless, by January 1765 I'd become increasingly dissatisfied with my life in New Orleans. For one thing, I'd exhausted the scant reading material at the mission, and I no longer had Montaigne's writings to comfort me when I was troubled. Of course, that meant I had more time to rewrite the journal I'd lost with *La Suzanne*, but imposed inactivity was getting to me. The only time I experienced real relaxation was when I rode Father Gibault's horse on the back roads of Louisiana. Outside city walls I felt less stifled.

However, whenever I mustered enough courage to wander New Orleans' business district I heard snatches of rumors among warehousemen and traders that the city would soon be turned over to the Spanish. Making confession of my introductory lie to Father Gibault, I also told him what had happened to my mother at Port de Paix and that I'd never sleep under a Spanish flag. He sympathized with me, but I realized he had no way of understanding my deep hatred for Spaniards.

"I think we both know, Jean, that these rumors of Spanish takeover have validity," he said. "But we Jesuits do not care who wields temporal authority any place on Earth. However, when you go, my son, we will miss not only your work but also the great generosity you have bestowed on the poor people here. It has not escaped notice that you have been a caretaker in many ways."

I supposed Father Gibault was referring to the help I'd tried to give the children and adults who came to the mission daily. My motives, though, were not altogether altruistic, for I was attempting to regain the solace I'd enjoyed before coming to New Orleans by taking advantage of the church's quiet to reflect. And I feel one



shouldn't be inside church walls without having true Christian spirit. In losing my puerile innocence in New Orleans, I was reaching out more than ever for consolation provided by the Church, and I think I'd become more consciously religious than before or since.

Yet, one day while I sat silently in the back of the chapel trying to figure out what I'd do when the Spanish finally asserted their ownership of Louisiana, I witnessed a remarkable sight. A wiry, well-built native, his bare skin exposed to the waist, marched up the center aisle and knelt before the altar. As I rose to leave, not wanting to eavesdrop on another's prayers, I was transfixed when he raised his voice in perfect French, reciting the Our Father.

Watching this man, it occurred to me that since we've been graced with this set form of prayer dictated to us, word for word, from God's Own Mouth, we should use it more commonly. If it depended on me, I'd like to see Christians saying the Lord's Prayer as grace before and after meals, when we get up and go to bed, and on all those special occasions where we normally speak to our Creator.

Nevertheless, I began wondering how the error arose which leads us to God in all our doings and designs, calling upon Him in every need and in any place whatsoever where our weakness seeks support, without once considering whether the occasion is just or unjust. No matter how we are or what we're doing—however sinful it may be—we invoke God's Name and Power. He is, of course, our Protector, able to do anything whatever to help us; but even though He gives us that sweet honor of being our adoptive Father, He grants us His Favor according to its criteria not our petitions.

Holmes

Understand, Reader, that on daily reflection it had occurred to me that if we implore Him to use His Power in a wicked cause, it's of no avail. Our souls must be pure, at least for that instant when we make our prayers, free from vicious passions; otherwise we offer Him rods for our own chastisement. So instead of amending our faults we redouble them by offering God (from Whom we ought to be begging forgiveness) emotions full of irreverence and hatred. That's why I didn't approve of those whom I saw praying frequently and regularly if deeds consonant with their prayers didn't bear witness to some reformation. And to this day I feel that the man who mingles devotion with a detestable life seems somehow to deserve more condemnation than one who is self-consistently evil.

However, this native didn't appear to be praying out of habit and custom, merely mouthing the words as outward show. There was depth behind his coming into the church, and I couldn't move while I tried to figure out what motivated him. So, swept away in my thoughts about how the Church calls all the sinful to her, I didn't see that the man had risen. I was thinking that we must receive absolution with thanksgiving and have a soul loathing its own shortcoming and hostile to those passions which drove us to offend our Holy Law when I found myself suddenly face to face with the visitor.

"Call me Choctaw," he introduced himself.

I embarrassed myself by blurting out, "Why were you praying?"

"To no kill those cheating Spaniards who hurt Choctaw," he announced as matter of fact.

"My name is Jean," I said, extending my hand.



Looking into his face, I saw he was tired and weak. So I sat him down on the church bench. But he wasn't so exhausted not to gush the story of injustice that had been done him. He told me he was a Potawatomi from the Great Lakes and had traveled the Mississippi many times as guide for fur traders. But in his last job, after arriving in New Orleans, his employers had dismissed him with no money when they'd sold the furs he'd helped trap. With no defense he'd been roving the streets penniless, grubbing food, until he'd wandered onto mission grounds today.

"Black Robes our friends on shores of Lake Michigan," Choctaw said. "I know they give Choctaw one night shelter."

"Certainly," I agreed. "And I will ask Father Gibault to let you stay until you are stronger."

When Choctaw had told Father Gibault his troubles, I volunteered sharing my daily ration of food with the newcomer.

"Jean, I admire your compassion," the priest said. "But our visitor can earn his own keep, as you have, by assisting you in the garden."

Choctaw and I both widened our faces with smiles, sealing a friendship that would last all our lives.

"Father," Choctaw said. "Your kindness like Black Robes on banks of St. Joseph. My people do their rituals even without priests. Now I see why. Thank you."

"You are welcome, my son."

While we worked together in the coming months, Choctaw intrigued me with descriptions from the land of his birth. In a fascinating idiom which I admired as lyrically poetic, he spoke of

Holmes



freedom in the northern wilderness and of the beautiful rivers and lakes, the abundant forests and endless plains. When he described the riches in furs awaiting those strong enough to hunt them, I knew fur trapping in that wondrous country was for me.

“I must see this land of yours,” I said one day. “We must make preparations.”

Choctaw’s open laughter was uncharacteristic.

“How make trip up Mississippi without a cent?” he asked in cryptic and blunt French that I was coming to realize disguised his deep mastery of my native tongue.

“We will raise the money,” I said. “I have a friend who is good at that.”

Choctaw simply grunted. But I went to tell Jacques of my plans that night. The next day Clemorgan took Choctaw and me before the merchants of Maxent, Laclede and Company, who held exclusive rights from the king to trade with tribes in the Missouri River valley and all lands west of the Mississippi. They needed additional men for their post at St. Louis, wanting to get all they could from the land for themselves and for France before French ownership changed hands. When our interview was over, Choctaw and I could barely contain our excitement while we waited for Jacques in the street outside their office.

But when Clemorgan came through the door his face was more drawn than it had been on his saddest day at L’Ecole.

“Come,” he said. “We’ll find another way.”

“What went wrong?” I questioned.

At twenty-two years old, Jacques' pale face told me he was holding back angry tears. I'd never seen him so tortured.

"They will be glad to take you, Choctaw," Jacques said. "The job is yours if you want it."

Clemorgan put his arm around my shoulder and began leading me off.

"What about me, Jacques?" I asked.

He stopped in the street, looking into my eyes.

"They don't want blacks on their expedition," he spit out. "They called you a free-booting pirate."

"No go!" Choctaw exclaimed, coming up behind us. "Choctaw no work for dummies!"

Becoming immediately aware that he employed this clipped and ungrammatical usage for reasons beyond fooling Europeans into believing that he fit their expected type, I realized at this moment he was attempting to diffuse my anger and embarrassment. In time I would learn that Choctaw's skillful use of language concealed even more wondrous secrets of compassion and human depth.

For now he achieved his goal of healing my hurt, and I started laughing despite the humiliation I felt. Then the three of us stumbled toward the mission in inexplicable hilarity. But in my brain I filed away a burning intention to solve Choctaw's enigmatic mystery.

"What do we need for our own expedition?" I asked him.

"Good dug-out canoe, food, traps, guns, blankets."

"A case of wine and overcoats," Clemorgan added. "Gets pretty cold in winter, eh, Choctaw?"

Holmes



Choctaw grunted assent. “Need buckskin clothes.”

“I think I can swing everything with my savings,” Jacques said.

“I can’t take your money,” I protested indignantly.

“Nonsense! I owe you all I have or ever will have,” Clemorgan said softly.

“I won’t hear of it,” I insisted.

“Where is that wise philosopher I once knew?” Clemorgan asked, embracing my shoulder. “Don’t you know I wouldn’t let my partner venture into this wilderness with nothing? Besides, I’m going with you to protect my investment.”

I had to grab him to keep Jacques from doing his crazy jig outside the mission’s fence, and the three of us shook hands around, clapping each other on the back.

Our signal for leaving came in February when Louisiana Governor Aubrey finally confirmed our dreaded rumors by raising the Spanish flag over the New Orleans square. Luckily, we had all our supplies packed, as did many others who honored their allegiance to King Louis. Thus, my first real venture into the world opened with whispers “The Spanish are coming” and closed with cries “The Spanish are here!”

And what had I learned? For one thing not to shrink from life’s shifting sands, but to take charge and shape their grains to my liking. I was rapidly growing to understand that frequent commerce with the world can be an astonishing source of light for a man’s judgment. Most of the time we’re so cramped and confined within ourselves that we can see no further than our noses. When hail beats down on our heads, the entire hemisphere seems stormy and tempestuous.



But we are all caught in a harmful error of great consequence without realizing it. And only the man who can picture in his mind the mighty idea of Mother Nature in her total majesty—who can read in her countenance a variety so general and so unchanging and then pick out therein not merely himself but an entire kingdom as a tiny, feint point—only he can reckon things at their real size. In growing older I came to understand that this great world of ours (which for some is only one species within a generic group) is the looking glass in which we must gaze to come to know ourselves from the right slant.

Thus, travel provides a variety of schools of thought, opinions, laws, and customs to train us to judge sanely and teach our judgment to acknowledge its shortcomings and natural weakness. And that's no light apprenticeship. Even my school book acquaintance with history had taught me that the many wars and revolutions I'd read about, the many changes of fortune of a state, should make us realize that our own fortune is no great miracle.

And so, from one minute dot on a twirling globe a black man, a red man, and a white man paddled away in a canoe to see what could be, and what could be better.

Holmes

