



Antoine's Date-Palm, by Thomas Bailey Aldrich

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Produced by David Widger

PÈRE ANTOINE'S DATE-PALM.

By Thomas Bailey Aldrich

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Near the Levée, and not far from the old French Cathedral in the Place d'Armes, at New Orleans, stands a fine date-palm, thirty feet in height, spreading its broad leaves in the alien air as hardily as if its sinuous roots were sucking strength from their native earth.

Sir Charles Lyell, in his Second Visit to the United States, mentions this exotic: "The tree is seventy or eighty years old; for Père Antoine, a Roman Catholic priest, who died about twenty years ago, told Mr. Bringier that he planted it himself, when he was young. In his will he provided that they who succeeded to this lot of ground should forfeit it if they cut down the palm."

Wishing to learn something of Père Antoine's history, Sir Charles Lyell made inquiries among the ancient créole inhabitants of the faubourg. That the old priest, in his last days, became very much emaciated, that he walked about the streets like a mummy, that he gradually dried up, and finally blew away, was the meagre and unsatisfactory result of the tourist's investigations. This is all that is generally told of Père Antoine. In the summer of 1861, while New Orleans was yet occupied by the Confederate forces, I met at Alexandria, in Virginia, a lady from Louisiana--Miss Blondeau by name--who gave me the substance of the following legend touching Père Antoine and his wonderful date-palm. If it should appear tame to the reader, it will be because I am not habited in a black ribbed-silk dress, with a strip of point-lace around my throat, like Miss Blondeau; it will be because I lack her eyes and lips and Southern music to tell it with.

When Père Antoine was a very young man, he had a friend whom he loved as he loved his life. Emile Jardin returned his passion, and the two, on account of their friendship, became the marvel of the city where they dwelt. One was never seen without the other; for they studied, walked, ate, and slept together.

Thus began Miss Blondeau, with the air of Fiammetta telling her prettiest story to the Florentines in the garden of Boccaccio.

Antoine and Emile were preparing to enter the Church; indeed, they had taken the preliminary steps, when a circumstance occurred which changed the color of their lives. A foreign lady, from some nameless island in the Pacific, had a few months before moved into their neighborhood. The lady died suddenly, leaving a girl of sixteen or seventeen, entirely friendless and unprovided for. The young men had been kind to the woman during her illness, and at her death--melting with pity at the forlorn situation of Anglice, the daughter--swore between themselves to love and watch over her as if she were their sister.

Now Anglice had a wild, strange beauty that made other women seem tame beside her; and in the course of time the young men found themselves regarding their ward not so much like brothers as at first. In brief, they found themselves in love with her.

They struggled with their hopeless passion month after month, neither betraying his secret to the other; for the austere orders which they were about to assume precluded the idea of love and marriage. Until then they had dwelt in the calm air of religious meditations, unmoved except by that pious fervor which in other ages taught men to brave the tortures of the rack and to smile amid the flames. But a blonde girl, with great eyes and a voice like the soft notes of a vesper hymn, had come in between them and their ascetic dreams of heaven. The ties that had bound the young men together snapped silently one by one. At last each read in the pale face of the other the story of his own despair.

And she? If Anglice shared their trouble, her face told no story. It was like the face of a saint on a cathedral window. Once, however, as she came suddenly upon the two men and overheard words that seemed to burn like fire on the lip of the speaker, her eyes grew luminous for an instant. Then she passed on, her face as immobile as before in its setting of wavy gold hair.

"Entre or et roux Dieu fit ses longs cheveux."

One night Emile and Anglice were missing. They had flown--but whither, nobody knew, and nobody, save Antoine, cared. It was a heavy blow to Antoine--for he had himself half resolved to confess his love to Anglice and urge her to fly with him.

A strip of paper slipped from a volume on Antoine's prie-dieu, and fluttered to his feet.

"*Do not be angry,*" said the bit of paper, piteously; "*forgive us, for we love.*" (Par-donnez-nous, car nous aimons.)

Three years went by wearily enough. Antoine had entered the Church, and was already looked upon as a rising man; but his face was pale and his heart leaden, for there was no sweetness in life for him.

Four years had elapsed, when a letter, covered with outlandish postmarks, was brought to the young priest--a letter from Anglice. She was dying;--would he forgive her? Emile, the year previous, had fallen a victim to the fever that raged on the island; and their child, Anglice, was likely to follow him. In pitiful terms she begged Antoine to take charge of the child until she was old enough to enter the convent of the Sacré-Cour. The epistle was finished hastily by another hand, informing Antoine of Madame Jardin's death; it also told him that Anglice had been placed on board a vessel shortly to leave the island for some Western port.

The letter, delayed by storm and shipwreck, was hardly read and wept over when little Anglice arrived.

On beholding her, Antoine uttered a cry of joy and surprise--she was so like the woman he had worshipped.

The passion that had been crowded down in his heart broke out and lavished its rich-ness on this child, who was to him not only the Anglice of years ago, but his friend Emile Jardin also.

Anglice possessed the wild, strange beauty of her mother--the bending, willowy form, the rich tint of skin, the large tropical eyes, that had almost made Antoine's sacred robes a mockery to him.

For a month or two Anglice was wildly unhappy in her new home. She talked continually of the bright country where she was born, the fruits and flowers and blue skies, the tall, fan-like trees, and the streams that went murmuring through them to the sea. Antoine could not pacify her.

By and by she ceased to weep, and went about the cottage in a weary, disconsolate way that cut Antoine to the heart. A long-tailed paroquet, which she had brought with her in the ship, walked solemnly behind her from room to room, mutely pining, it seemed, for those heavy orient airs that used to ruffle its brilliant plumage.

Before the year ended, he noticed that the ruddy tinge had faded from her cheek, that her eyes had grown languid, and her slight figure more willowy than ever.

A physician was consulted. He could discover nothing wrong with the child, except this fading and drooping. He failed to account for that. It was some vague disease of the mind, he said, beyond his skill.

So Anglice faded day after day. She seldom left the room now. At last Antoine could not shut out the fact that the child was passing away. He had learned to love her so!

"Dear heart," he said once, "what is't ails thee?"

"Nothing, mon père," for so she called him.

The winter passed, the balmy spring had come with its magnolia blooms and orange blossoms, and Anglice seemed to revive. In her small bamboo chair, on the porch, she swayed to and fro in the fragrant breeze, with a

peculiar undulating motion, like a graceful tree.

At times something seemed to weigh upon her mind. Antoine observed it, and waited. Finally she spoke.

"Near our house," said little Anglice--"near our house, on the island, the palm-trees are waving under the blue sky. Oh, how beautiful! I seem to lie beneath them all day long. I am very, very happy. I yearned for them so much that I grew ill--don't you think it was so, mon père?"

"Hélas, yes!" exclaimed Antoine, suddenly. "Let us hasten to those pleasant islands where the palms are waving."

Anglice smiled.

"I am going there, mon père."

A week from that evening the wax candles burned at her feet and forehead, lighting her on the journey.

All was over. Now was Antoine's heart empty. Death, like another Emile, had stolen his new Anglice. He had nothing to do but to lay the blighted flower away.

Père Antoine made a shallow grave in his garden, and heaped the fresh brown mould over his idol.

In the tranquil spring evenings, the priest was seen sitting by the mound, his finger closed in the unread breviary.

The summer broke on that sunny land; and in the cool morning twilight, and after nightfall, Antoine lingered by the grave. He could never be with it enough.

One morning he observed a delicate stem, with two curiously shaped emerald leaves, springing up from the centre of the mound. At first he merely noticed it casually; but presently the plant grew so tall, and was so strangely unlike anything he had ever seen before, that he examined it with care.

How straight and graceful and exquisite it was! When it swung to and fro with the summer wind, in the twilight, it seemed to Antoine as if little Anglice were standing there in the garden.

The days stole by, and Antoine tended the fragile shoot, wondering what manner of blossom it would unfold, white, or scarlet, or golden. One Sunday, a stranger, with a bronzed, weather-beaten face like a sailor's, leaned over the garden rail, and said to him,

"What a fine young date-palm you have there, sir!"

"Mon Dieu!" cried Père Antoine starting, "and is it a palm?"

"Yes, indeed," returned the man. "I did n't reckon the tree would flourish in this latitude."

"Ah, mon Dieu!" was all the priest could say aloud; but he murmured to himself, "Bon Dieu, vous m'avez donné cela!"

If Père Antoine loved the tree before, he worshipped it now. He watered it, and nurtured it, and could have clasped it in his arms. Here were Emile and Anglice and the child, all in one!

The years glided away, and the date-palm and the priest grew together--only one became vigorous and the

other feeble. Père Antoine had long passed the meridian of life. The tree was in its youth. It no longer stood in an isolated garden; for pretentious brick and stucco houses had clustered about Antoine's cottage. They looked down scowling on the humble thatched roof. The city was edging up, trying to crowd him off his land. But he clung to it like lichen and refused to sell.

Speculators piled gold on his doorsteps, and he laughed at them. Sometimes he was hungry, and cold, and thinly clad; but he laughed none the less.

"Get thee behind me, Satan!" said the old priest's smile.

Père Antoine was very old now, scarcely able to walk; but he could sit under the pliant, caressing leaves of his palm, loving it like an Arab; and there he sat till the grimmest of speculators came to him. But even in death Père Antoine was faithful to his trust.

The owner of that land loses it if he harm the date-tree.

And there it stands in the narrow, dingy street, a beautiful, dreamy stranger, an exquisite foreign lady whose grace is a joy to the eye, the incense of whose breath makes the air enamored. May the hand wither that touches her ungently!

"Because it grew from the heart of little Anglice," said Miss Blondeau tenderly.

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