
A Struggle for Life

Henry Clay Lewis

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(1843, *Odd Leaves from the Life of a Louisiana Swamp Doctor*)

IT was the spring of 183-, the water from the Mississippi had commenced overflowing the low swamps, and rendering travelling on horseback very disagreeable. The water had got to that troublesome height, when it was rather too high for a horse, and not high enough for a canoe or skiff to pass easily over the submerged grounds.

I was sitting out under my favourite oak, congratulating myself that I had no travelling to do just then, — it was very healthy — when my joy was suddenly nipped in the bud by a loud hello from the opposite side of the bayou. Looking over, and answering the hail, I discerned first a mule, and then something which so closely resembled an ape or an ourang outang, that I was in doubt whether the voice had proceeded from it, until a repetition of the hail, this time coming unmistakably from it, assured me that it was a human.

“Massa doctor at home?” yelled the voice.

“Yes, I am the doctor; what do you want?”

“Massa sent me with a letter to you.”

Jumping in the skiff, a few vigorous strokes sent me to the opposite shore, where the singular being awaited my coming.

He was a negro dwarf of the most frightful appearance; his diminutive body was garnished with legs and arms of enormously disproportionate length; his face was hideous: a pair of tushes projected from either side of a double hare-lip; and taking him altogether, he was the nearest resemblance to the ourang outang mixed with the devil that human eyes ever dwelt upon. I could not look at him without feeling disgust.

“Massa Bill sent me with a letter,” was his reply to my asking him his business.

Opening it, I found a summons to see a patient, the mother of a man named Disney, living some twenty miles distant by the usual road. It was in no good humour that I told the dwarf to wait until I could swim my horse over, and I would accompany him.

By the time I had concluded my preparations, and put a large bottle of brandy in my pocket, my steed was awaiting me upon the opposite shore.

“Massa tole me to tell you ef you didn't mine swimming a little you had better kum de nere way.”

“Do you have to swim much?”

“Oh no, massa, onely swim Plurisy Lake, and wade de back water a few mile, you'll save haf de way at leste.”

I looked at the sun. It was only about two hours high, and the roads were in such miserable condition that six miles an hour would be making fine speed, so I determined to go the near way, and swim "Pleurisy slough."

"You are certain you know the road, boy?"

"Oh, yes, massa, me know um ebery inch ob de groun'; hunted possum an' coon ober him many a night. Massa, you ain't got any 'baccy, is you?"

"There's a chaw — and here's a drink of brandy. I'll give you another if you pilot me safe through, and a good pounding if you get lost."

"Dank you, Massa, um's good. No fere I lose you, know ebery inch of de groun'."

I had poured him out a dram, not considering his diminutive stature, sufficient to unsettle the nerves of a stout man, but he drank it off with great apparent relish; and by this time, everything being ready, we commenced ploughing our way through the muddy roads.

We made but slow progress. I would dash on, and then have to wait for the dwarf, who, belabouring his mule with a cudgel almost as large as himself, strove in vain to keep up.

The road was directly down the bayou, for some miles. There were few settlers on it then, and the extent of their clearing consisted of a corn-patch. They were the pre-emptioners or squatters; men who settled upon government land before its survey, and awaited the incoming of planters with several negroes to buy their claims, themselves to be bought out by more affluent emigrants. To one of the first-mentioned class — the pre-emptioners — my visit was directed, or rather to his mother, who occupied an intermediate grade between the squatter and the small planter, inasmuch as she possessed one negro, the delectable morsel for whom I was waiting every few hundred yards.

It wanted but an hour to sundown when we reached the place where it was optional with me, either to go the longer route by the bayou, or save several miles by cutting across the bend of the stream, having, however, to swim "Pleurisy slough" if I did so.

The path across was quite obscure, and it would be dark by the time we crossed; but the negro declared he knew every inch of the way, and as saving distance was a serious consideration, I determined to try it and "Pleurisy slough."

Taking a drink to warm me, for the dew that had commenced to fall was quite chilling, I gave one to the negro, not noticing the wild sparkle of his eye or the exhilaration of his manner.

We pressed on eagerly, I ahead as long as the path lasted; but it giving out at the edge of the back water, it became necessary for the negro to precede and pilot the way.

I followed him mechanically for some distance, relying on his intimate knowledge of the swamp, our steeds making but slow progress through the mud and water.

When we entered the swamp I had remarked that the sun was in our faces; and great was my astonishment, when we had travelled some time, on glancing my eye

upwards to see if it had left the tree-tops, to perceive its last beams directly at my back, the very reverse of what it should have been. Thinking perhaps that it was some optical illusion, I consulted the moss on the trees, and its indication was that we were taking the back track. I addressed the negro very sharply for having misled me, when, instead of excusing himself, he turned on me his hideous countenance and chuckled the low laugh of drunkenness. I saw that I had given him too much brandy for his weak brain, and that he was too far gone to be of any assistance to me in finding the way.

Mine was a pleasant situation truly. To return home would be as bad as to endeavour to go on; it would be night at any rate before I could get out of the swamp; and after it fell, as there was no moon, it would be dangerous to travel, as the whole country was full of lakes and sloughs, and we might be precipitated suddenly into one of them, losing our animals if not being drowned ourselves.

It was evident that I would have to pass the night in the swamp, my only companion the drunken dwarf. I had nothing to eat, and no weapons to protect myself if assailed by wild beasts; but the swamp was high enough to preclude the attack of anything but an alligator, and their bellow was resounding in too close proximity to be agreeable.

Fortunately, being a cigar-smoker, I had a box of matches in my pocket, so I would have a fire at least. My next care was to find a ridge sufficiently above the water to furnish a dry place for building a fire and camp. After considerable search, just at night-fall the welcome prospect of a cane ridge above the overflow met my gaze; hurrying up the negro, who by this time was maudlin drunk, I reached the cane, and forcing my way with considerable difficulty through it until I got out of the reach of the water, dismounted, and tying my horse, took the negro down and performed the same office for his mule.

My next care was to gather materials for a fire before impenetrable darkness closed over the swamp; fortunately for me, a fallen oak presented itself not ten steps from where I stood. To have a cheerful blazing fire was the work of a few minutes. Breaking off sufficient cane-tops to last the steeds till morning, I stripped my horse — the mule had nothing on but a bridle — and with the saddle and cane-leaves made me a couch that a monarch, had he been as tired as I was, would have found no fault with. As the negro was perfectly helpless, and nearly naked, I gave him my saddle blanket, and making him a bed at a respectful distance, bade him go to sleep.

Replenishing the fire with sufficient fuel to last till morning, I lit a cigar, and throwing myself down upon my fragrant couch, gave myself up to reflections upon the peculiarity of my situation. Had it been a voluntary bivouac with a set of chosen companions, it would not have awakened half the interest in my mind that it did, for the attending circumstances imparted to it much of the romantic.

There, far from human habitation, my only companion a hideous dwarf, surrounded with water, the night draped darkly around, I lay, the cane-leaves for my bed, the saddle for my pillow; the huge fire lighting up the darkness for a space around,

and giving natural objects a strange, distorted appearance, bringing the two steeds into high relief against the dark background of waving cane, which nodded over, discoursing a wild, peculiar melody of its own. Occasionally a loud explosion would be heard as the fire communicated with a green reed; the wild hoot of an owl was heard, and directly I almost felt the sweep of his wings as he went sailing by, and alighted upon an old tree just where the light sank mingling with the darkness. I followed him with my eye, and as he settled himself, he turned his gaze towards me; I moved one of the logs, and his huge eyes fairly glistened with light, as the flames shot up with increased vigour; the swamp moss was flowing around him in long, tangled masses, and as a more vivid gleam uprose, I gazed and started involuntarily. Had I not known it was an owl surrounded with moss that sat upon that stricken tree, I would have sworn it was the form of an old man, clad in a sombre flowing mantle, his arm raised in an attitude of warning, that I gazed upon. A cane exploding, startled the owl, and with a fond "tu whit tu whoo," he went sailing away in the darkness. The unmelodious bellow of the alligator, and the jarring cry of the heron, arose from a lake on the opposite side of the cane; whilst the voices of a myriad of frogs, and the many undistinguishable sounds of the swamp, made the night vocal with discordancy.

My cigar being by this time exhausted, I took the bottle from my pocket, and taking a hearty drink to keep the night air from chilling me when asleep, was about to restore it to its place, and commend myself to slumber, when, glancing at the dwarf, I saw his eyes fixed upon me with a demoniac expression that I shall never forget.

"Give me a dram," he said very abruptly, not prefacing the request by those deferential words never omitted by the slave when in his proper mind.

"No, sir, you have already taken too much; I will give you no more," I replied.

"Give me a dram," he again said, more fiercely than before.

Breaking off a cane, I told him that if he spoke to me in that manner again I would give him a severe flogging.

But to my surprise he retorted, "D--n you, white man, I will kill you ef you don't give me more brandy!" his eyes flashing and sparkling with electric light. I rose to correct him, but a comparison of my well developed frame with his stunted deformed proportions, and the reflection that his drunkenness was attributable to my giving him the brandy, deterred me.

"I will kill you," he again screamed, his fangs clashing, and the foam flying from his mouth, his long arms extended as if to clutch me, and the fingers quivering nervously.

I took a hasty glance of my condition. I was lost in the midst of the swamp, an unknown watery expanse surrounding me; remote from any possible assistance; the swamps were rapidly filling with water, and if we did not get out to-morrow or next day, we would in all probability be starved or drowned; the negro was my only dependence, to pilot me to the settlements, and he was threatening my life if I did not give him more brandy; should I do it or not? Judging from the effects of the two drinks I had given him, if he got possession of the bottle it might destroy him, or at least render him incapable of

travelling, until starvation and exposure would destroy us. My mind was resolved upon that subject; I would give him no more. There was no alternative, I would have to stand his assault; considering I was three times his size, a fearful adventure, truly, thought I, not doubting a moment but that my greater size would give me proportionate strength; I must not hurt him, but will tie him until he recovers.

The dwarf, now aroused to maniacal fury by the persistence in my refusal, slowly approached me to carry his threat into execution. The idea of such a diminutive object destroying without weapons a man of my size, presented something ludicrous, and I laughingly awaited his attack, ready to tie his hands before he could bite or scratch me. Wofully I underrated his powers!

With a yell like a wild beast's, he precipitated himself upon me; evading my blow, he clutched with his long fingers at my throat, burying his talons in my flesh, and writhing his little body around mine, strove to bear me to earth.

I summoned my whole strength, and endeavoured to shake him off; but, possessing the proverbial power of the dwarf, increased by his drunken mania to an immense degree, I found all my efforts unavailing, and, oh God! horrors of horrors, what awful anguish was mine, when I found him bearing me slowly to earth, and his piercing talons buried in my throat, cutting off my breath! My eyes met his with a more horrid gleam than that he glared upon me: his was the fire of brutal nature, aroused by desire to intense malignancy; and mine the gaze of despair and death. Closer and firmer his gripe closed upon my throat, barring out the sweet life's breath. I strove to shriek for help, but could not. How shall I describe the racking agony that tortured me? A mountain, heavier than any earth's bosom holds, was pressing upon my breast, slowly crushing me to fragments. All kinds of colours first floated before my eyes, and then everything wore a settled, intensely fiery red. I felt my jaw slowly dropping, and my tongue protruding, till it rested on the hellish fangs that encircled my throat. I could hear distinctly every pulsation of even the minutest artery in my frame. Its wild singing was in my ears like the ocean wave playing over the shell-clad shore. I remember it all perfectly, for the mind, through all this awful struggle, still remained full of thought and clearness. Closer grew the gripe of those talons around my throat, and I knew that I could live but a few moments more. I did not pray. I did not commend my soul to God. I had not a fear of death. But oh! awful were my thoughts at dying in such a way — suffocated by a hellish negro in the midst of the noisome swamp, my flesh to be devoured by the carrion crow, my bones to whiten where they lay for long years, and then startle the settler, when civilization had strode into the wilderness, and the cane that would conceal my bones would be falling before the knife of the cane-cutter. I ceased to breathe. I was dead. I had suffered the last pangs of that awful hour, and either it was the soul not yet resigned to leave its human tenement, or else immortal mind triumphing over death, but I still retained the sentient principle within my corpse. I remember distinctly when the demon relaxed his clutch, and shaking me to see if I were really dead, broke into a hellish laugh. I remember distinctly when tearing the bottle from me, he pulled my limber body off

my couch, and stretched himself upon it. And what were my thoughts? I was dead, yet am living now. Ay, dead as human ever becomes. My lungs had ceased to play; my heart was still; my muscles were inactive; even my skin had the dead clammy touch. Had men been there, they would have placed me in a coffin, and buried me deep in the ground, and the worm would have eaten me, and the death-rats made nests in my heart, and what was lately a strong man would have become a loathsome mass. But still in that coffin amidst those writhing worms, would have been the immortal mind, and still would it have thought and pondered on till the last day was come. For such is the course of soul and death, as my interpretation has it. I was dead, all but my mind, and that still thought on as vividly, as ramblingly, as during life. My body lay dead in that murderer's swamp, my mind roamed far away in thought, reviewing my carnal life. I stood, as when a boy, by my mother's grave. The tall grass was waving over it, the green sod smiled at my feet. "Mother," I whispered, "your child is weary — the world looks harsh upon him — coldness comes from those who should shelter the orphan. Mother, open your large black eyes and smile upon your child." Again, I stood upon the steamer, a childish fugitive, giving a last look upon my fleeing home, and mingling my tears with the foaming wave beneath. I dragged my exhausted frame through the cotton-fields of the south. My back was wearied with stooping — we were picking the first opening — and as dreams of future distinction would break upon my soul, the strap of the cotton-sack, galling my shoulder, recalled me to myself. All the phases of my life were repeated, until they ended where I lay dead! — dead as mortal ever becomes. I thought, What will my friends say when they hear that on a visit to the sick, I disappeared in the swamp, and was never heard of more? — drowned or starved to death? Will they weep for me? for me? — Not many, I ween, will be the tears that will be shed for me. Then, after the lapse of long years, my bones will be found. I wonder who will get my skull? Perhaps an humble doctor like myself, who, meditating upon it, will not think that it holds the mind of a creature of his own ambition — his own lofty instincts. He will deem it but an empty skull, and little dream that it held a sentient principle. But I know that the mind will still tenant it. Ha, ha! how that foul ape is gurgling his blood-bought pleasure. I would move if I could, and wrench the bottle from him; but mine is thought, not action. Hark! there is a storm arising. I hear with my ear, that is pressed on the earth, the thunder of the hurricane. How the trees crash beneath it! Will it prostrate those above me? Hark! what awful thunder! Ah me! what fierce pang is that piercing my very vitals? There is a glimmering of light before my eyes. Can it be that I the dead am being restored to human life? Another thunder peal! 'tis the second stroke of my heart — my blood is red-hot — it comes with fire through my veins — the earth quakes — the mountain is rolling off my chest — I live! — I breathe! — I see! — I hear! — Where am I? Who brought me here? I hear other sounds, but cannot my own voice. Where am I? Ah! I remember the dwarf strangled me. Hark! Where is he? Is that the sunbeam playing over the trees? What noisome odour like consuming flesh is that which poisons the gale? Great God! Can that disfigured half-consumed mass be my evil genius?

I rose up, and staggering, fell again; my strength was nearly gone. I lay until I thought myself sufficiently recruited to stand, and then got up and surveyed the scene. The animals were tied as I left them, and were eating their cane unconcernedly; but fearfully my well-nigh murderer had paid for his crime, and awful was the retribution. Maddened by the spirits, he had rushed into the flames, and, in the charred and loathsome mass, nothing of the human remained; he had died the murderer's death and been buried in his grave, — a tomb of fire.

To remain longer in the horrid place was impossible; my throat pained me excessively where the talons had penetrated the flesh, and I could not speak above a whisper. I turned the mule loose, thinking that it would return home, and conduct me out of the swamp. I was not incorrect in my supposition; the creature led me to its owner's cabin. The patient had died during the night.

My account of the dwarf's attack did not surprise the family; he had once, when in a similar condition, made an attack upon his mistress, and would have strangled her had assistance not been near.

His bones were left to bleach where they lay. I would not for the universe have looked again upon the place; and his mistress being dead, there were none to care for giving him the rites of sepulture.

