

FLOREAL PELEATO

THE CIRCLE OF THE WINDS

Short-listed for the Valladolid Athenæum Award

*"He did not find it necessary either to apologize or to boast,
because he was the equal of any man on earth"*

Dorothy Johnson
A man called Horse

*"I would rather be ashes than dust !
I would rather that my sparkle should burn out in a brilliant
blaze.
The proper function of man is to live, not to exist.*

Jack London
Jack London's Tales of adventure

PART ONE

Spring of 1791

« L'Amérique habite encore la solitude ; longtemps encore ses déserts seront ses mœurs, et ses lumières sa liberté. »

“America still inhabits solitude; for a long time yet her wilderness will be her manners, and her enlightenment will be her liberty.”

(Trans. Richard Switzer, U Kentucky P, 1969)

Chateaubriand,

Voyage en Amérique (1827)

On his voyage of 1791

I

It was mid-March 1791 in a world untouched by the dreams of the French Revolution. The belief in a new man was beginning to tear apart a Europe intoxicated by universal principles, but it was the seasons and the stars that regulated Indian life. From Texas to Canada, the Indians of Louisiana had no idea that the lasso thrown around that territory was tightening.

A harsh wind rippled through the flooded Prairie under a cloud-filled sky. A column of fifteen horsemen rode in silence among isles of tall grass. They rode east, their heads down. The procession was headed by a white man whose long hair and beard was speckled with gray and whose pale eyes were hidden under heavy lids. With each step his horse took his tall figure was ever more burdened with fatigue as his sabre swung against his thigh, yet his hands, clad in suede gloves, did not flinch. European travelers to the American West found neither cities of gold, fountains of youth, giants nor griffins, but the trace of the original chaos. For some, America was the Promised Land, for others, a realm of Perdition.

A few bare Indians tied together with rope followed the white man. These unarmed horsemen had barely reached adolescence. Their smooth, unblemished bodies, free of scars, were dedicated to hunting and combat. They sat straight up in the saddle despite the short stirrup, and despite the rain and the wind that blew their eight, ten, twelve braids. They were Cheyenne. Among the group of captives, a black man in a worn-out poncho shivered on his horse. A *fleur-de-lis* had been seared into his withered forehead upon which sat an erect toupee and a pair of braids held in place by leather straps which revealed the absence of his right ear. Unlike the Indians, his enormous hands were not fastened to the high horn of his saddle.

Three imposing Osage Indians, their large foreheads flat, a long lock of hair floating in the middle of each shaven head, guarded the captives. In spite of the cold, the blankets that hung diagonally across their shoulders revealed tattooed arms holding extra-long bows. The rings on their fingers, bracelets on their wrists and hoops hanging from their ears contrasted sharply with the nudity of the Cheyenne. The Indian captives calmly scanned the area in hopes of seeing an apparition but the black man cast unceasing, anguished glances around him. His horse sank in the flooded prairie. The black man fell on some sharp reeds injuring his hands. He sought aid. The Osage did not stir. The white man turned his head toward the fallen man before throwing him a lasso to grab. A piercing whinny was heard: a hard branch had scraped against the chest of the horse upon which the black man was mounted. An Osage cut short the animal's agony slicing its throat in a single slash. Its last gasp was drowned out in the waters below.

They all spotted a small group of horsemen on a plateau; a smile of relief appeared on the black man's face: perhaps they were trappers or a Cheyenne war party searching for their offspring who had been kidnapped in the middle of the Black Coast. They approached at a gallop, appeared and disappeared at times behind boulders and groups of trees.

The white man took advantage of a shaft of light streaming through the clouds to pull out of his backpack a *calumet* and a fistful of tobacco leaves mixed with red willow bark. Luckily, the water had not dampened them. After several attempts, he managed to light the pipe with a flint. The horsemen would not arrive for a few minutes, though their silhouettes stood out sharply; he had ample time for a smoke.

The water, eddied by the wind, splashed him from head to foot and the Indian captives caught his attention: the youngest of the Cheyenne was graced with a grown man's gaze. That he was still a child was evident from his thin legs, doll-like hands, long neck and protruding ribs while his flat belly signaled the strength of approaching adulthood. His gaze fell next upon the black man: a runaway or perhaps a freed slave. Wherever he might go he would always be considered a slave of some sort no matter how much he insisted on the equality revered by the men of the French Revolution.

Illuminated by a ray of light, the horsemen emerged from the splashing waters. The silence of the Prairie gave way to the sound of cascading water thrown by pounding hoofs. Some Cheyenne made animal noises as a signal. Two Osage armed their bows and pointed their arrows in the direction of the group of horsemen. As they approached there was no room for doubt: they were white; the black man's gaze was stripped of its last glint of hope. Under a cloud's shadow arrows shot by the Osage crossed paths with the bullets of the white men.

Six white men charged up at full gallop brandishing pistols before surrounding them. Each time their sharp spurs sank into the horses' bloody flanks the man with the pale eyes would flinch. A forge's flames could not have toasted to a darker hue the skin of the bearded men, clad in leather from their capes, leggings and chaps to their headdress. Their closely cropped hair lent their fossilized wood heads an air of menace.

One of them freed the captives while the other took the sabre and pistol from his captor. The Indians' stiff fingers recovered their flexibility. The youngest Cheyenne grabbed a machete that hung from one of the white men's saddles and lunged at the surviving Osage, decapitating him in an act whose astonishing velocity was equaled only by its force and precision. The white men made no effort to stop him: vengeance was just. The young Indian immediately lifted his bloody trophy into the air.

When another Cheyenne prepared to jump on the pale-eyed man the white horsemen intervened. After a middle-aged trapper sporting a soft leather cap made hand signals to them, the Cheyenne cried out and having gained neither food nor weapons, except for the young man's machete, galloped off in the direction of the Rocky Mountains. They took the horses of the three Osage with them.

Having seen the pale-eyed man's sabre, a horseman wearing a felt hat spoke. With his burning, swollen cheek, he had trouble expressing himself.

—If you were a Spaniard, you would know that Indians are useless as slaves. They would prefer to die rather than work.

—It is good to know that there are men who are useless as slaves, the pale-eyed man said in accented Spanish.

—You are the lowest form of trader. They are but children. How did you capture them?

—They were bathing.

—What tribe are they?

—*Chaguienne*, I think.

—*Cheyenne*, he must mean, but what does he care? he said in Spanish. Do you know that tribe? he asked the old trapper who had used sign language.

—Yes. They are Cheyenne. They live between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains, the old trapper answered.

The man with the felt hat glared scornfully at the pale-eyed horseman whose fair hair was going gray. He paused to spit blood before responding.

—And you have to corrupt the Osage. It has been hard enough trying to pacify them for the past four years without you coming here now creating conflict between the Indian nations.

—As far as I know, the Osage and the Cheyenne are enemies.

—Enough... You know, or should know, that the slave trade is prohibited on land controlled by the King of Spain.

—Selling them is, but not possessing them. And Louisiana is not really Spanish...

—What did you say?

—It is a large territory, extraordinarily large, with no borders or laws beyond the Rio Chato.

—You are wrong. And where did you think you were going to sell them?

—On some plantation...

—You were going to sell Cheyenne as slaves in the South?

—I don't think the government cares a good deal about my little business.

—I told you. The Indians die in captivity. Today everyone wants black slaves. They are as strong as trees. Sir, you live in a bygone century. You had better be careful. Here in this deserted flood plain there are borders and laws.

—Useless laws and stolen lands, that is.

—Who do you work for? the Spaniard asked.

—That is of no importance.

—Don't be so haughty. I am proud to work for the Chouteau family and for the governor. And who do you work for? For what company?

—I work for myself.

Despite a widely-held belief, trappers were required to obtain licenses to ply their trade. Those who decided to freelance assumed greater risk. When they managed not to lose equipment and avoided theft of their weapons by Indians, they roamed a land where compasses and maps were of little use.

—What is your name, sir?

—Desjohnette. I am to be hanged, I suppose. But you have nowhere to hang me from.

—We will go to Saint Louis. They have a jail there. And a gallows. We will find you a guillotine if you prefer, sir. So that you know with whom you are riding, I will tell you my name: Alonso Sahagún. And you, he said to the black man, what is your given name?

—Josué, sir.

—How dare you? —Desjohnette said. Do you not know that a black man may not use a white man's name? After all, you are still a slave.

—Not any more, sir. I am an *affranchi*. What's more, I have been baptized and that is my Christian name.

—We will call you Josué. Sahagún said, then spat blood again.

—We must give the Osage proper burial. Josué said.

—What for? The water will rot everything anyhow. Desjohnette replied.

—Sir, not if we bring them to dry land.

—Alright. Desjohnette, help him.

—No. I refuse to help him.

—What? You will do as I say —the Spaniard barked, ending the discussion.

The two men dug with such tenacity that they were soon able to bury the bodies. When they rejoined the horsemen, the old trapper tied Desjohnette's hands. As the leather straps tightened against his flesh, the Frenchman gazed out on the discolored prairie. His eyes, used to a landscape shaped by the hand of man, lost purchase on the flat land. Each day, fascination and anxiety would vie for control in the centerless circle of the Prairie, condemning the traveler to wandering along the rim of a wheel. Unlike the watercolor sky of France, the American vault was shot through with a curtain of light that strained the eyes of many a European traveler exposing them to certain ocular diseases and forcing some to travel at night. Desjohnette was no exception. His tired eyes required balm in addition to a felted beaver fur hat.

At nightfall on the first day of the journey the horsemen camped on a bulbous hill which the Indians call Skull Hill, and whose sharp slopes had allowed Indians to corral the bison they hunted, before horses were brought to America. At the travelers' feet, in the gully, hundreds of fallen bison bones were piled high all the way to the Rio Chato. Desjohnette was shaken by the sight of this indestructible reminder of death.

While a few Spanish trappers picked up branches for the campfire, Josué dried off his horse's chest, which was covered in foam, with a handful of grass. Desjohnette watched him. Josué showed no sign of fatigue though he had ridden in an uncomfortable position for the entire day. The Frenchmen noticed his skill in cleaning the animal's hoofs, the speed with which he checked its cannons and took its pulse. Desjohnette started to walk over to the Spaniards' horses, massaging his swollen hands and wrists. All were Indian ponies except for Sahagún's purebred, which was taller and had a more powerful chest but thinner limbs. As for Sahagún, he walked along the edge of the cliff grumbling in pain while he rummaged around in his mouth with a small knife. Suddenly, he called out to Josué.

—Hey, you... yes you, Josué or whatever your name is, go fetch some water.

—Sir, it would be better to wait.

—What? Do as I say.

—Sir, we must care for our horses... after all, your horses are beautiful.

—That brand on your forehead does not authorize you to speak to me in this manner.

—I am a free man.

—Is that so?

—For the last ten years.

—Where's the document that proves it?

—My belongings were stolen long ago, but I swear to you sir that my master, Mr. Polignac, gave me my freedom.

—And then you fled to Indian territory ? Go down to the river immediately.

Desjohnette had listened very carefully and he spoke to Sahagún calmly, almost completely at ease:

—He is right. We must first feed and water the horses.

—Fine. We will wait until he has finished giving them food and water. And until he has washed them. And you, since you know so much, will help him. Go look for water and take the horses if you like...

—Sir, Josué said to Sahagún, your cheek is bleeding. I can help you, if you wish.

—You?

—Yes, sir. When I come back from the river I will bind it for you.

—We'll see. For now, go. Desjohnette, do you give me your word that you will not attempt to escape?

—Yes.

Desjohnette and Josué took the canteens and gathered the horses before going down to the banks of the Rio Chato whose bends sheltered small beaches. Up on the hill a trapper watched them ever ready to train his rifle on them. The horses bathed while the two men remained seated on the sand resting their feet in the water. Josué stood up, removed his clothing and jumped into the water. His back, covered in scars, revealed the years spent as a slave and his physical prowess. Desjohnette, in turn, undressed and entered the water up to his chest. Both saw a raft float down the river illuminated by the setting sun. Three Indians smoked as they sat on the raft. Smoke spirals veiled the immobile figures. Two dead deer lay with their horns crossed in front of the Indians. Josué waved a friendly hand at the Indians, a gesture they readily reciprocated. The raft floated smoothly away.

—They are Pawnee. Or, if you prefer, they are men from the Nation of Wolves —Josué said firmly.

—Tell me about the Indians, you know them.

—Yes, sir. I have known many tribes. Many.

—So, tell me, why is it that there are so many tribes in these parts, and why are they so different?

—Ah, that I do not know. They are warlike, as well.

—But they are few. In the city I lived in in France there are more inhabitants than there are Indians in all of America.

—No. That cannot be. America is too large. Here one can see the biggest mountains and prairies in the world.

—And how did you end up living with the crows?

—Things did not go well for me as a free man living with the Americans so I went as far West as I could and rode until the Rocky Mountains, all the way to the land of the crows. Seeing that land is a gift. Since they had never seen a black man and very rarely white men, they believed that I was the color of the earth and they called me, *A-wé*, earth, because the earth is brown or as the crows say, *Hís-shi-shi-té*, that is, black-red. I lived with them for several years; the Cheyenne captured me only recently.

—It's a beautiful country, you say?

—Snow-capped mountains, majestic trees, rivers, many of them; horses, many, the best... But there is something that I still cannot abide: the cold. And the land of the crows is pure hell in winter. But believe me when I say that it is the most beautiful country in the world, sir.

—It does not exist, Josué. That would be Paradise.

—Yes it does exist. God made it so.

—Of what God do you speak?

—Of the Creator of all things.

—The God of the Bible?

—Yes sir. Our maker.

—Our maker. Now you are speaking like an Indian.

—I was baptized and have been a good Christian.

—And do you not recall that your race was condemned by God and by man... The curse of Canaan. Do you know what that is?

—Yes. My master taught me about the Bible. Too many years have gone by for it to have any effect.

—But if the God in whom you believe decreed that it should be so...

—Noah was unjust, sir. He should not have cursed Ham. A father must not curse his own son.

—You recognize his guilt.

—Where is the harm?

—To see one's father naked is a sin, or at least one can say that it is not usually done, nor should it be. Japheth and Shem covered their naked father but Ham, the cunning, did not.

—Noah should have been punished. *He* should have, not his son Ham. He had been drinking and that is how his son saw him, naked in the tent. Neither Ham, nor his son Canaan, nor his descendants are guilty of having seen his father drunk. I have seen many white men with more rum than blood in their veins and no curse hangs over their sons.

—And you are all sons of God as are we white men, sons of Japheth?

—Yes sir.

—Then it is just, if you are sons of Adam, that you should pay a high price for your depravation. And if you are not sons of God, you are not men...

—Our souls are as white as those of white men as you know... Christ is my savior, Yes, Christ, the Lord. He understands and loves his black children.

—Do you know how to read?

—Yes.

—Because your masters taught you, I suppose. They have been good to you.

—God has been good because he gave me a gift.

—Then, you see, God is good to his black children... you say that God has bestowed a gift on you, so he believes in you as much as you believe in him... What gift do you have?

—I cured cows and horses and pigs when I lived in Louisiana. With my help they did not die, and there were many epidemics, especially after the Mississippi flooded. Mr. Polignac, my master, was a doctor.

—Polignac? A member of the famous Polignac family? Here in America?

—I don't know about his family. He saw that I learned quickly about animals and he let me cure slaves, and Indians. I can cure Sahagún as well.

—A healer, huh? Or a quack. Are you a butcher, then?

—No sir. I cure people with God's help.

—God saves no one.

—That is blasphemy.

—What did you do to deserve that *fleur-de-lis* brand on your forehead?

—That is from a past master who was worse than the devil. I escaped once and I joined a militia of fugitive slaves.

—You speak as though you were soldiers.

—We were. We were very disciplined. It was necessary to survive. We stole rice and sugar and sold it to poor families. But my master caught me and punished me.

—And what was your job in that militia?

—To guard our camps on horseback and to be a scout...A year after my master caught me, I escaped again on a good horse. I spent a month in the Ozarks with Osage Indians, but I was caught again and my master told me: “What do you prefer, that I should cut off both your ears and brand your shoulder, as the Black Code provides or should I cut off only one ear and brand your forehead and let you live in shame in the eyes of all?” Sir, we could escape now. Why don’t we try?

—Is your word good? As good as mine? Then, why do you suggest we escape?

The two men came out of the water, dressed and mounted their horses bareback to drive the horses to where the trappers were waiting but Desjohnette changed direction and, instead of following up the hill, he galloped along the banks of the Rio Chato. Josué followed him laughing out loud. The trappers loaded their rifles; both horsemen disappeared behind a bend in the river. As they galloped and changed paths, Desjohnette admired the skill with which Josué managed to direct the horse into a controlled canter without tightening his legs or pulling back on the reins. Without anyone probably having taught him, he knew how to *rendre la main*, that is, lower the reins in order to ease off the pressure exerted. Back on Skull Hill Sahagún could be heard shouting, itching to crack the whip on both their backs and to chain them up, when Desjohnette and Josué snaked around at a canter back to where the Spaniards’ horses were. They were headed back to the camp.

Anyone who had heard the previous conversation between the two men would have been intrigued, but possessing slaves in Louisiana determined one’s social status. Little by little, there were twice as many blacks, doubled over in the tobacco, cereal and indigo fields, as whites in the swamps of the delta. Buying and possessing slaves be they black or mulatto was regulated by the Black Codes the Louisiana version of which was published in 1724.

Some slaves escaped the plantations and mixed with the Indians in whom they instilled a mistrust of white men, though, it must be said, some Indian nations also captured Indian and black slaves. Some fugitives who were determined not to suffer any further abuse went as far as the Northern Plains. This was the case with Josué. They were runaway slaves, that is savages; the French called them *marrons*. Creole society freed a small number of slaves. These so-called *affranchis* were prohibited from holding any position of public trust, being a surgeon, a jurist, or carrying a sword. An effort was even made to impose upon them the usage of degrading nicknames instead of Christian names. The colonists used them to hunt down runaway slaves.