

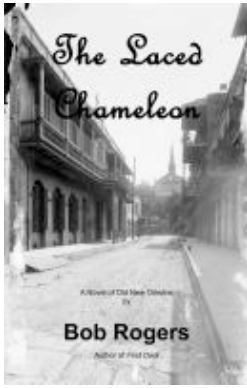


The Laced Chameleon

A Novel of Old New Orleans
by

Bob Rogers

Author of First Dark



New Orleans native Francesca Dumas is a quadroon courted by moneyed white men. She leads a sheltered life of elegant gowns and lavish balls until a bullet shatters her dream world. While awaiting arrival of the Union Navy atop a Mississippi River levee on April 25, 1862, Francesca's lover is shot dead. Rain soaked and blood-stained, Francesca vows revenge. Conundrums confront Francesca: solve her identity crisis, succeed as a spy, and find and defeat a three-time murderer.

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THE LACED CHAMELEON

Bob Rogers

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This book is a work of fiction based on the deeds of real people while New Orleans was occupied by the Union Army in the summer of 1862. The Carpenter Plantation and names of fictional characters herein are my inventions. Separate lists of fictional and nonfictional characters are included at the end of this work. The historic men and women referenced, organizations, other plantations, places, churches, businesses, events, ships, geography, weapons, and the acts of war and kindness are real. See the bibliography at <http://bobrogers.biz>.

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Chapter 1

Shots rang out from upriver. A single bullet fired from a .44 caliber Colt Walker revolver shattered Joachim's right temporal bone, scattering fragments in the lobe, then passing through the hypothalamus, wrecking his autonomic nervous system, stopping his heart, before exiting through his left ear. Francesca heard Joachim make a gurgling sound. She turned toward him in time to see him sag and crumble, then fall into the mud on his back. Francesca screamed.

In an instant, she dropped her umbrella and was on her knees beside Joachim, cradling his head between her hands. She saw blood oozing from the hairline at his right temple. Francesca shrieked, "Oh, mon Dieu, non!"

Minutes before, at almost noon that Friday, the heavy downpour had become a steady light rain. In spite of foul weather on the afternoon of April 25, 1862, a large crowd of New Orleans's citizens remained standing in the mud atop the levee on the east bank of the Mississippi River. Smiling broadly, Francesca and Emily had broken into song when the first of Union Flag Officer David Farragut's warships came into view, rounding Slaughterhouse Bend. Francesca had thought this is better than the Mardi Gras that Mayor Monroe restricted last month. They had waved their umbrellas to and fro in time with the song. A half dozen or so on-lookers had joined them. Emily's mellifluous mezzo-soprano voice soared above the crowd:

Yankee Doodle went to town
A-riding on a...

Now, Emily retrieved Francesca's umbrella and knelt beside her, and, using two umbrellas, shielded both of them

Bob Rogers

and Joachim's face from the rain. Francesca wailed and sobbed, repeating, "Non, non, non, non!" Her shoulders shook as tears, mucus, and rain drops streamed down her face.

With her bloody fingertips, Francesca closed Joachim's blue eyes. Her lower lip quivered as she again touched the bullet hole in his bleeding right temple. With his lips barely parted, Joachim's face still showed surprise. Francesca noticed that his blood felt sticky. She no longer heard the crowd moving about her as their screams had ebbed into a low buzz while others attended the wounded. Absent-mindedly, Francesca wiped her hands on the hem of the expensive ankle-length red hoop dress she had worn the previous evening to Joachim's party celebrating his twenty-fifth birthday. As onlookers murmured and gawked, she unfolded his bandana and covered his face and temple. She unbuckled Joachim's gunbelt and felt her corset pinch her waist as she pulled the belt from underneath his body. Then, from his pockets, she removed his watch and purse.

Still on her knees, using the last hole, she strapped Joachim's belt about her small waist under her coat and felt it slip down. But for her hips, his belt and holstered four-shot Allen & Wheelock .31 Pepperbox Model 1857 would have fallen into the mud. The pistol was less than the length of her hand, weighed not as much as a pound and had four fluted barrels that rotated, each of them two and seven-eighths inches long. Francesca cried, "Why? Why? Joachim, who took you away from me? Oh, Joachim, my love, my love, I swear I'm going to find out who did this to you. I promise you, the bastard will pay with his life."

She sniffed and her tears burst forth anew. Presently, Francesca brushed her wet cheeks with the back of her hands. Then, for the first time since she knelt by his side, she looked up. Francesca's friend, Brooke, and Joachim's friend, Louie,

The Laced Chameleon

held out their hands to help her and Emily stand. In her grief, Francesca appreciated the warmth in Emily's quivering empathetic smile.

Standing in the crowd on the levee beside the river opposite the beginning of Bienville Street and now holding Emily's hand, Francesca blinked back tears and whispered, "See the scum walking toward Front Street?"

Emily and Louie nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Find out if those bastards are the ones who did the shooting. Later, I'll need to find them."

Emily glanced at the men. And then, she protested in a pleading voice. "Fran, I know it's hard, but forget them. They ain't worth the trouble. I'll help you take care of Joachim and get home."

Louie and Brooke agreed. Louie said, "Yes, they're worthless. Of course, you know we could just turn the matter over to the law."

"That is, if you can find a lawman who hasn't run off to Camp Moore with the soldiers," said Brooke.

Silence.

Francesca stared at her friends for almost a minute before noticing several in the crowd gazing at her. Resolute, she set her jaw and shook her head. Her remaining brunette curls bounced and her bangs shifted. "Y'all, that's very kind. I need what I asked you to find out. In the meantime, I'll get men here on the levee to help me move Joachim."

Her friends looked from one to the other. Emily said, "I heard you promise revenge. Now, why do you think you're fit and able to go traipsin' off 'hind gunmen? Don't you 'member, there's a war on? Any ways, what could *you* do if you caught up to them? They could just shoot you, and that would be that. You know there ain't no mo' law to speak of here 'bouts." Emily glanced at the small pistol's bulge under Francesca's

Bob Rogers

coat. “Besides, you know less about guns than I do, which ain’t much.”

Francesca sucked her teeth. “That’s why the bastards ain’t dead, yet.”

Still holding Emily’s hand, Francesca turned for another look at David Farragut’s procession of United States Navy warships gliding upstream as more rounded Slaughterhouse Bend. She took a deep breath. Her voice was low, but firm, “Em, I’ve never been surer of anything in my life. I’ll avenge Joachim’s murder or die trying. Now, please go before they’re out of sight.”

Nodding and looking from Brooke to Louie, Emily hugged Francesca and said, “O-okay. W-we’re going.”

“Thank you, my dear friends.”

The muddy hem of Francesca’s dress covered Joachim’s right knee and the top of his boot. She did not watch her friends depart. She remained close to Joachim’s body and continued gazing, as if in a trance, at the warships and the stars and stripes they flew. Though grieving, Francesca wanted to remember the sight of the return of the grand old flag to New Orleans. She whispered to no one in particular, “Thank God, we’re back in the Union.”

A wet stubble-faced white man wearing a battered fedora, black coat, and wrinkled collarless white shirt stepped from the crowd and tapped Francesca’s shoulder. “Er, Miss, I’m sorry to bother you heah in your time o’ b’reavement. But I seed what happened. Some thugs just fired on anybody cheering dem Yankees. I’m sho’ glad you didn’t get hit. Damn shame, there ain’t hardly any law ta speak of in these times.”

Francesca turned her stern, tear-stained face and looked the short man level in the eye. “Yes? What do you want?”

The man snatched his hat off and fidgeted. He stammered, “W-Why, I-I-I’m sorry Miss. Er, I-I-I didn’t mean ta rattle on

The Laced Chameleon

like that. What I meant to say was me and my cousin, Jimmy,” he pointed, “over yonder, have a wagon at the bottom of the levee. We’ll deliver the body for you to the undertaker of your choice.”

The rain fell again in torrents. Francesca felt it had been a long time since she had smiled -not the ten minutes that had actually passed since she laughed together with Joachim, Emily, and others on the levee while waiting to welcome the arrival of Farragut and his ships. The ships were an even more formidable sight as they rode high on the river due to a recent freshet that caused the river to be nine feet higher than normal. Their big guns pointed down into the city’s streets.

Francesca forced a faint smile as the small man clutched his hat by the crown and held it to his chest. “Sir, I’m sorry that I was a bit gruff.”

He nodded. “Yes’m. It’s alright. I understand.”

“Thank you for your kindness. Please help me take my husband’s body to the undertaker Peter Casanave up there on Bourbon Street. Tell him that my husband’s father is Edouard Buisson.”

The man smoothed back a wet blond and gray lock and donned his hat. “Yes’m, we can do that. Did you say, Pierre Casanave?”

“No, Peter, Monsieur Pierre’s son.”

“Now, where ’xactly on Bourbon is this heah Casanave undertaker?”

Francesca brushed damp hair from her face and tucked a tress behind her left ear. She pointed over the man’s shoulder to the intersection of Water and Bienville Streets. “Go straight up Bienville to Bourbon. Casanave’s is on the far corner on the right.”

Balancing her umbrella between her shoulder and jaw, Francesca stirred the contents of Joachim’s purse and pulled

Bob Rogers

out three Confederate paper notes. She groaned at the irony. The two New Orleans Bank Confederate one dollar notes in her hand were printed by the American Bank Note Company of New York City and in the top center it bore the image of five enslaved black stevedores unloading a schooner. Francesca held out her hand with the two ones and a Central Bank of Alabama Confederate ten dollar note printed in Philadelphia bearing separate images of George Washington and enslaved black cotton pickers. “Oh, I’m sorry to ask, but will you take these Confederate dollars as payment?”

Chapter 2

The pandemonium that began early on Thursday in brilliant sunshine had continued over a misty night and persisted unabated during the rain on Friday. It all started when word arrived that the Yankees had fought their way past Forts Jackson and St. Philip. All over the city on Thursday, church bells had sounded the alarm. On Friday, the smell of smoke still lingering from smoldering cotton bales, ships, and warehouses set ablaze by Confederates, made Francesca cough from time to time as she wandered upriver beside the levee on the cobblestones of Water Street. Even with the coat she wore, Francesca felt chilled and she clutched at its collar. In spite of the umbrella, her hoop dress was wet well above its muddy hem. Because the dress stood out all around from her mid-calf length pantaloons, her undergarments remained mostly dry. Though tired and hungry from being afoot for hours, she trudged along in her soaked and muddy high-top shoes among the crowd watching the warships drop anchor on both sides of the river opposite the city's streets, Canal through Julia.

Francesca's mind drifted back to her first, and last, Christmas with Joachim, just four months ago to the day. Though Emily and her mother, Ada, had pooh-poohed her notion that Christmas Day was her wedding day, that's the way she remembered the signing of her plaçage contract with Joachim. The memory of that happy time before the parlor fireplace caused a lump in her throat. She let go of the coat collar and covered her mouth lest she sob aloud in a crowd of strangers. Francesca swallowed the sob as her tears flowed again. She felt her heartbreak afresh as the wonderful moments of their courtship in the summer of '61 flashed through her mind. Brooke had introduced Ada and Francesca to Joachim last spring at the Orleans Ballroom on Orleans Street where

Bob Rogers

well to do white men went regularly to meet beautiful young octoroons and quadroons. She thought Joachim was handsome, dashing, and exciting to be with in New Orleans's weekend party scenes and balls. She remembered the fun they had taking the new streetcar service from the stop beside their house to concerts and plays. At age twenty-four, Joachim was younger than her other suitors. And besides, he made her feel like a queen.

Francesca dabbed at her wet cheeks with her sleeves. She thought, with the rain, maybe people won't notice. Yet, another memory came to mind. Joachim's promise to send their children to school in New York or Boston was in their plaçage contract, thanks to Ada and Brooke. She continued crying knowing that she would never bear Joachim's child, for her menses had ended on Thursday.

At Girod Street, Francesca glanced at the frantic movement of Confederate formations, commandeered mule drawn wagons, and oxen or horses pulling two-wheeled carts loaded with supplies and plunder from hastily emptied warehouses. Yesterday, she was amused by the panic of Confederates. Today, her emotions floated back and forth from grief caused by the loss of Joachim to somewhat diminished joy that her city had been liberated. For Francesca, the Confederates were reduced to scenery.

Presently, Francesca looked into the throng of angry faces gazing at the warships. She found not one familiar face. Francesca was popular and seldom alone. Her thought of missing Emily and her friends was interrupted by a stabbing hunger pain. She made an audible sigh and heard her voice announce, "I will go home."

Hunger caused Francesca to remember that only a day's rations remained at the house she had shared with Joachim. She had been surprised that Joachim's purse held only \$43.00 in

The Laced Chameleon

Confederate dollars and two books of streetcar tickets worth about ten cents per ticket. She knew she would need a plan, and soon. Her future looked as bleak as the skies. Francesca decided, "I'll survive. She was reminded of her hero from Alexandre Dumas' novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. If Edmond Dantes survived, so can I."

Tears blurred her vision causing her to miss, her turn at Julia Street. She wiped her eyes and found herself at St. Joseph Street. She took a deep breath and turned northwest on St. Joseph toward her streetcar stop at Tivoli Circle, heading away from the river. Several blocks ahead she could see a column of wagons turning from Camp Street onto St. Joseph and making rapid progress toward the railhead of the New Orleans, Jackson and Great Northern Railroad. Ragged formations of soldiers, some of whom were so inebriated that they staggered, followed the wagons. Francesca's smile at the sight of fleeing Confederates vanished and she stopped abruptly to ponder the thought, Joachim's murderer could be escaping with the fucking Secesh, running like rats for the trains.

* * *

Francesca sucked her teeth and began walking again, this time away from her streetcar stop and toward City Hall on St. Charles Avenue. Aloud, she said, "I don't know who he is or where he is. I don't know how, but I'll find the scum."

It had not occurred to her until now to seek help from the police, for Francesca had heard many stories about how ineffective and corrupt the New Orleans police force was. Besides, many policemen had volunteered to fill the regiments requested by Louisiana's Governor Moore and sent to fight for Confederate armies in Arkansas, Tennessee, and Virginia. On wooden sidewalks, she remained close to buildings and out of the oncoming traffic moving with dispatch toward the railhead.

Bob Rogers

Four blocks later, she stood in front of New Orleans' magnificent nine year old City Hall. Here, she paused and considered retreat. Looking up three stories at the figure of a woman in the center of the pediment representing justice, Francesca thought what would Edmond Dantes do? The pediment was supported by six massive marble columns whose capitals curled like those seen in paintings of the Acropolis in Athens. She took a deep breath and darted across the street to the building, weaving among cantering horses pulling carriages, wagons, and carts bearing soldiers and the rich.

Francesca stood inside the great hall, near the door, trying to control her nerves and breathing. Presently, she found the desk sergeant; an old man who she judged was born in the eighteenth century. He referred her to Detective Philippe Rousseau. She found herself wondering who was older, the man at the desk or Detective Rousseau. His white hair was thin and he was bald and pink on the top of his head.

With one hand, Philippe Rousseau held papers at his side while he used the other to smooth the silver hair above his ear. Philippe looked at her from head to muddy dress hem. Flushing, Francesca said, "Sir, I'm sorry to barge in like this from out of nowhere. I must look a fright."

Philippe Rousseau smiled and the handles of his silver handlebar mustache moved upward at the corners of his mouth. He said, "Let's sit over here and be comfortable. Alright, now, tell me who you are and what brings you our station."

As Francesca poured out her story in English and French, Philippe Rousseau made notes. From time to time, uncontrollable sobs interrupted her speaking. The effect of reliving her trauma surprised Francesca. She wished for better control, but could not muster it. Philippe waited each time Francesca stopped for her to begin again. He made no attempt to comfort her.

The Laced Chameleon

When she finished, Philippe said, "I'm sorry. But I must ask you a few questions."

Francesca's eye brows rose. Her voice was pleading. "Why must you interrogate me?"

Philippe waved his pencil back and forth. "Oh, no, Mlle. Dumas. My questions will wrap up our interview. This is not an interrogation. We interrogate suspects. You're not a suspect; that much is quite clear to me."

Francesca leaned back in her uncomfortable wooden chair. "Oh."

"Did you see who shot Monsieur Buisson?"

"No, sir."

"Was anyone near you hit?"

"I'm not sure, but I think so from the screams. I didn't see anyone on the ground."

"How many shots did you hear?"

"I don't know."

"Half dozen?"

"More."

"A dozen?"

"Less."

"How close was the sound of the shots?"

"I don't know."

"You told me where you stood. From which direction did the shots come?"

"I think from upriver."

"How many shooters?"

"I don't know."

"Did you hear rifle fire or pistols?"

"I don't know."

"Close your eyes. Did all the shots sound the same?"

Francesca tilted her head to the right and frowned. "They all sounded the same except the last one."

Bob Rogers

“In what way was the sound of the last shot different?”

“It was louder.”

“Was that the shot that struck Monsieur Buisson?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay. You can open your eyes. Mme. Dumas, I’m going to be perfectly candid with you. Though your loved one was the son of a prominent banker, I’m afraid we have no resources left for a case like this. The body and witnesses are gone from the scene and you haven’t given me the first lead. Unless someone who knows the perpetrators walks in here and gives us something we can go on, there is nothing we can do. I could make promises, but I won’t.”

Philippe stood. “Besides, the way I hear it, the perpetrators may have been common Confederate sympathizers. We are at war. Mlle. Dumas, I’m very sorry about your loss.”

As Philippe walked away, Francesca sucked her teeth and clinched her fists on her lap. She remained seated and cried silent tears.

* * *

At St. Charles Avenue and Tivoli Circle, Francesca was greeted by an unusual sight. Downtown bound streetcars sat idle at Tivoli Circle with no mules to pull them, for they had been commandeered by absconding Confederate soldiers. With the thought of walking the twenty-three blocks home from Tivoli Circle, her breathing quickened as she trudged along Prytania Street past abandoned uptown bound streetcars toward the sound of braying. Ahead, a queue of expensively dressed women was waiting, tickets in hand, to board the only streetcar in sight with a mule hitched to it. She rummaged through Joachim’s purse and pulled out a pasty, sticky, well-used shinplaster that reeked of rotting meat for the female

The Laced Chameleon

conductor. Francesca tried to smile at the thought that this was her first memory of ever being happy to see a brown mule.

* * *

Francesca sneezed. She blinked the tears from her swollen eyes. With her left hand, Francesca unlatched the yard gate in front of the house at Conery and Prytania Streets. She passed under the sprawling limbs of a large live oak and by the small Crepe Myrtle she had planted in March to reach Joachim's house, the place she had called home since December. The unbearable thought that Joachim would not join her caused new sobs. Yet, she was glad to be away from the too kind woman who was her streetcar seat-mate. The stranger had tried to comfort Francesca during their ride, but had made matters worse.

She struggled to remove her wet shoes on the veranda before entering the house Joachim had provided for her. Suddenly, the front door opened. Startled, Francesca's eyes widened and she dropped a shoe. A plump, apron-clad dark-skinned woman of about thirty-five smiled at her from the doorway. Francesca sneezed again, then stammered, "W-who're you?"

Beaming, the woman opened the door wider. "Why, I'm Edna Black, Missus Maria's house servant. You must be Francesca, Joachim's partner."

Francesca frowned. "H-how did y-you know....? Y-you don't know, do you?"

"How do I know who you are?"

"No. Y-you don't know..." Francesca sneezed.

She saw Edna's brow crease. In a scolding tone to match her frown, Edna said, "Com'on in the house outta this damp weather, Chile, 'fore you catch yo' death." Smiling and cheerful again, Edna continued. "Now, o'course, I don't really

Bob Rogers

know you. I just know nobody but a missus would take off her shoes on a veranda and not knock. Guess you wonder how cum I'm here? Well, Missus Maria done sent me over to tidy up for y'all."

Francesca looked into the kind face and ached to talk with someone, anyone. If not Emily, maybe this pleasant woman would do. With a full throated sob and new tears, Francesca seized Edna in a fierce embrace. She screamed, "You don't know! You don't know!"

Her forehead furrowed, Edna dropped her feather duster and hugged the distraught Francesca with both arms. Patting Francesca's back, Edna softly asked, "Chile, what is this thing I don't know?"

Francesca tried to catch her breath. She was gasping between sobs. Finally, she blurted, "Joachim's dead! He's gone. My Joachim's gone! What am I gonna do? Oh, Mary, Mother of God, what can I do?"

Edna hugged tighter. "Oh, my Lawd, Chile. My, Lawd. I'm so sorry." Edna rocked Francesca gently from side to side. "Honey, I'm so very sorry 'bout yo' loss."

Francesca's teeth clattered.

Edna walked her upstairs to the bedroom, removing and dropping clothes and they went. "Let's get you outta these wet things and into a hot bath."

Edna left Francesca on the bed under two quilts and went to the kitchen to heat water.

While Edna prepared the bath, Francesca, prayed, "Mary, Mother of God, thank you for sending someone in my time of need."

* * *

After Francesca's bath in a zinc coated tub of about four feet long with lion paw feet, she told Edna the details of

The Laced Chameleon

Joachim's death. Francesca guessed that Joachim must be in his coffin by now, so she covered her sixty-four inch one-hundred-thirteen pound frame in black mourning clothes. She let her bangs hang, but braided the rest of her brunette hair, tying the two mid-back length braids around her head like a crown. As they talked, she rubbed oil on her bare white shoulders, resting her brown eyes on the small round dark birthmark at her left shoulder like it was the first time she had seen it. Edna helped her cover the mirrors and drape the front door according to mourning custom. They shared a supper of yams, bread, and dried beef. Edna made sassafras tea as the gloom outside brought an early onset of night.

Francesca asked, "Miss Edna, do you think the Buissons will let me stay in this house for a time?"

Edna dropped her head. And then, she looked into Francesca's brown eyes. "You can call me just plain Edna. But, to answer your question, I don't know."

"What do you think?"

Edna hesitated. "Well, I don't really know. But, since you insist on an answer, I think they will ask you to leave."

Francesca sipped her tea and nodded thoughtfully. "Logical. Deep down, I suppose I knew that. What more can a black woman expect? But now, I'll be prepared."

Edna tilted her head in a quizzical gaze. "I know you've got African blood. But you look white."

"I guess that's because my ma is mulatto and my pa is French."

"Are you free?"

Francesca saw a pained expression on Edna's face that said she wished she had not asked. Francesca smiled. "Edna, it's okay to ask. You're my friend." Her weak smile faded and her face turned serious. "No, I'm not free. I'm just another enslaved quadroon. My pa owns me and Ma."

Bob Rogers

Edna nodded, smiled, and stood. “Well, I need to get back. Wid dis bad weather and all, I think you oughta stay in tonight. Do you want me to give Missus Maria the bad news?”

Francesca leaned forward in her chair. “But, you didn’t finish telling me about your girls, yet.”

“That’ll have to wait for another time.”

Now, Francesca realized she didn’t want Edna to leave, though she didn’t say so. She thought for a long moment and decided to take the easy way out. And then, she stood. “Yes, please tell Madame Buisson.”

Chapter 3

“Son, by the grace of the Almighty, you’re back here in time to take charge of the family cause. Me and yo’ ma are dependin’ on you to make it happen.” Sixty-one year old Paul Dodson could say no more. Red-faced, he rocked back and forth on his horse, reeling from a dry hacking cough.

Thirty-four year old Troy’s narrowed eyes and creased brow showed grave concern for his father who was nearly twice his age. “Pa, you know I’ll do my best. Don’t you think you oughta see Doc Peters about that cough? It’s been with you ever since I got back.”

Between coughs and spitting, Paul managed to say, “Don’t mention that ol’ quack to me again.”

When his coughing ceased, Paul said, “I still believe ’twas a miracle that saved you on that battlefield and brought you back home to Belle Chasse.” The older man raised his sweat-stained wide brimmed hat and smoothed his silver hair.

Troy’s horse raised her head from grazing and snorted. Father and son sat their horses on the track leading from the barns to the first cane field. They watched Matt, Troy’s younger brother; assign the day’s tasks to enslaved men and women preparing for work in the dim light of early morning that Thursday, April 10, 1862.

Troy laughed and said, “Have it your way, Pa. But, you know I still think it was ol’ Jean Pierre, at the risk of his own skin, who dragged me from harm’s way.”

“Never you mind, it’s that same Providence that will see us own this place and the means of production ’fore I pass on. Just you mark my words.”

Troy thought, *yes, and someday it’ll be mine*. To his father he said, “Well, Pa, the morning’s wearing on. I’d best be getting on to Slaughter House Point. I’m following your advice

Bob Rogers

to get in and see that banker at a good hour. So, I'll need to catch an early ferry."

"Yeah, son. You run along and bring home a deal that make ol' Theodore salivate. Make me and your ma proud."

* * *

As Troy rode toward Algiers, he remembered his teenage years when Judah Benjamin owned Belle Chasse Plantation. He was young, about the age Troy was now. After Benjamin emerged from a flamboyant life and the dregs about Rampart Street to become a successful attorney, he married a beautiful young girl who was Troy's age. In no time, Benjamin owned a townhouse on Bourbon Street, bought Belle Chasse, and built one of the grandest Greek Revival houses anywhere near New Orleans. Troy still admired the whitewashed two-storied structure supported by tall square columns with its wraparound verandas on both levels columns. Oh, and the parties Benjamin held! Benjamin's still a worthy hero. Troy smiled. *Now, that's what I want before I'm nearly as old as Pa.* Benjamin was the go-to fellow for planters far and wide seeking to duplicate his successful sugar cane planting and process methods. *I can see myself bringing those days back. And, by Jove, I will!*

The contacts I'm making by working for General Mansfield Lovell should help me and Pa gain respect in Plaquemines Parish, New Orleans, and beyond. Colonel Hebert's letter of introduction has already been a big help. With a little luck, I oughta be able to make General Lovell's close connections to Mayor Monroe and Governor Moore count. In due time, I'll make Mr. Benjamin remember me.

Troy's face turned grim when he remembered how his father had just missed taking advantage of Benjamin's misfortune. He thought how he had felt bad for his hero when Benjamin, now just three weeks into his new job in Richmond

The Laced Chameleon

as Secretary of State for the Confederate States of America, was forced to sell Belle Chasse and its three-hundred acres, including about a hundred-fifty slaves, at a loss. Troy slapped his thigh. As he recalled, Benjamin had to sell in 1850 to pay off the debt of a friend who defaulted on a loan Benjamin had co-signed. He shook his head in awe at the memory that Benjamin didn't just recover, but went on to serve two terms in the United States Senate. Theodore J. Packwood, one of Benjamin's partners, had outbid his pa for the purchase of Belle Chasse and that was that. Troy's eyes brimmed with bitter tears as he recalled the derision of community people who scoffed at the notion that the overseer class, folks like him and his pa, had the temerity to even attempt to enter the planter class.

Aloud, Troy said into his horse's hearing, "Well now, we'll just see about that!" With a snarl on his lips, he spurred the animal, hard. "Com'on, git up there!"

His horse responded with a grunt and by vaulting from a canter to a gallop.

* * *

Troy disembarked from the Canal Street Steam Ferry and walked along Water and Custom House Streets to Citizens Bank at the intersection with Royale, arriving minutes before nine o'clock. In one of his new finely tailored suits, black string tie, and matching black boots, Troy felt the part of the gentleman planter and businessman he aspired to become. He threw his shoulders back and walked tall as a clerk showed him to the office of Edouard Buisson, who received him with grace. After minutes of pleasantries, Monsieur Buisson said, "Mr. Dodson, a thousand pardons, but because an urgent government matter has thrust itself upon me just yesterday, I must spend unplanned time on getting it resolved. Of course,

Bob Rogers

this is highly unusual, especially after my letter confirming our meeting. However, I have arranged for another officer to assist you. Please do forgive me.”

Troy’s ire went up. “So my business is not important to you.”

“Oh, contraire, Mr. Dodson, we see the business you bring today reaching into a bright future for your Belle Chasse Plantation and our bank. We are well aware of Judah Benjamin’s success at Belle Chasse. We’d like to help you reach even greater success. Now, please come with me. Let me introduce you to one of our real estate stars. This officer is none other than my esteemed son.”

* * *

A seething Troy Dodson used his fork to pick at and rearrange the food on his plate in the City Hotel’s restaurant. From his portfolio, he withdrew paper and a pencil. In his two hour meeting with Monsieur Joachim Buisson, they had agreed that the likely total sales price for Belle Chasse Plantation and its one hundred forty-seven slaves would be approximately one hundred ten thousand nine hundred twenty dollars. Early in the meeting, Troy had offered ten percent down. Too late, he realized the estimated purchase price would require the Dodsons to raise another forty-five hundred dollars. He wondered where the hell that would come from. He knew they had nothing they could sell that would raise the difference. With his brow furrowed and sweating, Troy fought off the urge to tell Joachim that he needed more lenient terms and to explain what hard workers the Dodsons were. His pride won. He did not ask. Worse, Joachim’s final word was that Citizens Bank could not do a deal on Belle Chasse for less than twenty percent down. Aloud, he said, “Damn that little Yankee-loving bastard!”

The Laced Chameleon

Troy looked about to see if anyone had noticed his outburst. Seeing no one looking his way, he muttered, “Somehow, the sniveling little sonovabitch must know I can’t raise twenty-three thousand dollars.”

* * *

Troy sat in his room figuring until one o’clock the next morning. He slept fitfully and was out of sorts when he rose. He managed to collect himself at breakfast.

Troy presented his new proposal with fresh confidence to Joachim. “Monsieur Buisson, let’s make eighteen of the slaves a part of the deal, added to my down payment with the mortgage and say that’ll close the deal. That sum will easily reach the estimated sales price we made yesterday.”

Joachim stood and paced behind his desk with one hand rubbing his chin. Troy watched as his new found confidence eroded. His anxious mind wondered, *what now?*

At length, Joachim returned to his desk, opened a side drawer, and flipped thru a large ledger. He began shaking his head. With a finger on a number to hold his place, he looked up at Troy. “I see a problem here with diminishing returns.”

An annoyed Troy said, “Speak plainly, Monsieur Buisson.”

“Alright. There are presently one hundred forty-seven slaves at Belle Chasse. Selling eighteen slaves will not close the gap for you.”

“Why, that’s more than fourteen thousand dollars I’m adding to my down payment! Of course, the deal closes.”

Joachim shook his head and said, “I don’t think so. Eighteen would fetch perhaps a just bit more than ten thousand. But the real concern I have is will there be enough labor left to produce harvests required to make the mortgage payments?”

“I don’t agree with your slave prices.”

Bob Rogers

“Mr. Dodson, I think your assumptions are perhaps a bit optimistic, at best, on the speculative side, given the falling prices of slaves auctioned right here in the city at Mr. Thomas Foster’s depot since the loss of Forts Henry and Donelson this year. Not factored in is the certain negative impact of catastrophic Confederate losses this week at the Battle of Shiloh. Nor, can we estimate future influence of battlefield losses on markets.”

Troy leapt from his seat and hit Joachim’s desk with his fist. Tremendous pain in both temples and behind his left eye caused him to close his eyes and massage both temples. His caged thoughts were hot with fury, what does a profiteering Unionist like him know about battles or the better than even chances of our armies to drive out the invaders? He forced himself to take a deep breath. He had a blinding headache. After a moment, Troy turned and left Joachim’s office without a hand shake or farewell.

On the street, Troy said several times, “Confounded! Hellfire! Damn his black soul!”

* * *

Back at Belle Chasse Friday afternoon, Troy told his father and Packwood that the officers at Citizens Bank were considering his proposal and would reach a decision before the end of the month.

The next day he returned to work for General Lovell at the general’s headquarters on Camp Street across from Lafayette Square. Within an hour of his return, General Lovell sent Troy off on a small steamer to check again the readiness of Forts Jackson and St. Philip to defend against an attack by the Union Navy. He wore a collarless brown shirt and the coarse butternut trousers like the ones he had worn during his stint as an infantryman in the Confederate Army. His nearly sixteen inch

The Laced Chameleon

long Colt Walker .44 six shooter was strapped to his right thigh.

As he had predicted to General Lovell, the Union fleet opened fire on the two forts the next week. He also predicted the forts would hold off the Yankees. Saturday, April 19, the day after the Federal's siege began, Troy returned to Belle Chasse to collect clothing and his soldier's accoutrements. While there, Packwood summoned him without his father and intimated that the day before he had received an unsolicited bid from a team of investors.

With a forced smile, Troy said, "Well now, that's very interesting. Can you tell me who these folks are?"

Packwood answered, "Of course, I can. The bidders are James E. Zunts, a part owner of the City Hotel at Camp and Common Streets and Joachim Buisson, an officer at Citizens Bank on Royale Street. Their bid is an even one hundred thirteen thousand. With you in mind, I'm delaying them. I told them I'd let them know my decision by Monday, the twenty-eighth instant."

* * *

Standing at the stern of a small Confederate steamer on another reconnaissance Wednesday morning, April 23, Troy raised his head from staring into the brown waters of the Mississippi River as a grim grin changed his countenance. He had settled upon a new plan to acquire Belle Chasse. Upon his return, he made his report to General Lovell: The forts may not hold after all unless we deploy our powerful ironclad, the *CSS Mississippi*, tonight and destroy the Yankee mortar schooners laying siege.

Using his influence as a Confederate agent, Troy had collected personal information and built a dossier on Joachim Buisson, James E. Zunts, and Sarpy Lille, an officer in the

Bob Rogers

Union Bank of New Orleans. Putting his plan into action the same afternoon, he coerced Zunts to sign an agreement and join as his bid partner alongside Union Bank should the bid Zunts made with Buisson be turned down by Packwood or withdrawn.

By evening, Troy was in Lafayette Cemetery peering through his binoculars into the windows of Joachim Buisson's house across Prytania Street. He tried to ignore the sound from the Federals' six-day old continuous bombardment of the forts. Troy scoffed as he remembered General Duncan's telegram from Fort Jackson to General Lovell at the end of the day; "We can hold them at bay. We can stand it if they can." He shook his head and said aloud, "Stay focused on Buisson. The fate of New Orleans is not my affair." Troy reassured himself. Again, he thought it is clear; the only path to success is to kill Buisson. He smiled. Then, of course, his bid is withdrawn. *I must be patient and be present when the right moment presents itself to remove the haughty young Monsieur Joachim Buisson.* He repeated several times: *Discipline. I will wait and watch for a clear opportunity.* He fondled the grip of his powerful Colt Walker .44.

Before mid-morning on Thursday, New Orleans was sent into a panic when the ringing of a prearranged twelve bell signal by the city's churches announced that the invading enemy had managed to pass the forts. Troy's immediate thought was that his plan for the day was doomed. He slapped his holster and said, "Hellfire!"

Instead of stalking Joachim, Troy went to General Lovell for orders. With Troy and several staffers, Lovell decided to take his steamer downriver and assess the situation himself. Lovell ordered the captain to retreat to New Orleans when they were nearly captured by the *USS Varuna*. Before they escaped

The Laced Chameleon

the Federal warship, Troy thought hellfire, there goes Belle Chasse!

Back in New Orleans, General Lovell instructed Troy and his staff to order troops to burn anything that could be used by the enemy and evacuate. For the rest of the day, Troy fought his way to and fro on a commandeered horse through the throngs of marching soldiers, and terrified women and children to oversee fires being set to tens of thousands of bales of cotton and warehouses. He encountered Negroes and poor whites with wheelbarrows and pails salvaging high priced staples that were being destroyed, including molasses and sugar. Toward evening, dark clouds rolled in from the south and west, but that did not deter the mayhem in the streets.

With his duty done and Lovell in lengthy meetings with Governor Moore, and Mayor Monroe explaining why his foot soldiers would not be able to defend the city against a fleet of warships, Troy took his leave. The last words he heard from Lovell to the governor and mayor were, “Dammit, I’ve told you several times that our *CSS Mississippi* is still under construction. There is no way we can have her engage the enemy.”

A cold heavy mist fell as he retired to his room at the City Hotel where he discovered a birthday party in progress in honor of Joachim Buisson. Troy learned from the desk clerk that Joachim and his friends would be at the hotel until Saturday. He thought that’s more than enough time to find an opportunity. Troy was confident but did not sleep well because, with the change in weather, pain returned in his left thigh where he was struck by shrapnel during the Battle of Oak Hills.

Dressed in a business suit and wide-brimmed white hat covering part of his face at breakfast, Troy watched Joachim and his friends as they decided to go to the levee in the rain to await the arrival of the Union warships. He checked the load in

Bob Rogers

his Colt Walker .44, turned up his collar, and followed. Determined not to limp, Troy endured the pain in his thigh and walked as much as possible like a soldier marching.

Around noon, the heavy rain gave way to a farmer's shower. As the first of the Federal warships were sighted rounding Slaughterhouse Bend, sparse, but distinct cheers arose from Unionists in the crowd gathered on the levee. When some revelers broke into "Yankee Doodle," gunfire erupted to Troy's right; he thought *my opportunity has arrived. Act. Dammit, be quick!* In a continuous fluid motion, Troy brushed aside his coattail, drew, cocked the .44, aimed, fired a single bullet into the side of Joachim Buisson's head from thirty-five feet, and holstered his revolver.

Chapter 4

In Saturday morning's sunlight streaming through the dining room window, Francesca sat with an unpainted red cedar pencil and a used envelope behind the remains of her breakfast. There were only tiny bits of her fried eggs and grits left clinging to her plate under a few bread crumbs. As was her habit while contemplating any matter, Francesca used the index and fore fingers of her left hand to curl and uncurl a tress above her left ear. For the third time, she counted the Confederate notes in Joachim's purse. Returning the Confederate currency and soft brown leather draw-string purse to their place inside her corset between her small breasts, Francesca began a list of items to buy, if she could still find them, while people may still accept Confederate dollars. She thought, what is the best use, right now, of \$31.00? At the rate prices were rising, would the things on her list still be affordable next week? Or could they be found at any price? And, when the money is gone, what then?

On the same envelope, Francesca wrote the names of people she thought could or would help her. After thirty minutes, she still had only five names: Ada De Mortie, Emily Jenkins, Brooke Bouffard, François Dumas, and Edouard Buisson. With a heavy sigh, she dropped the pencil into the lap of her black dress.

She put her arms on the table and lay her head down to sleep. Francesca had been awake since four o'clock and was now afraid to sleep lest she have the same dream from which she awoke twice, heart racing and in a sweat. In her dream, she saw Joachim shot and fall. The dream ended each time with the gunman running her down and placing his revolver to her head.

The cord beside the transom above the front door swished and the doorbell rang angrily, driving the thought of dreams

Bob Rogers

from her head. Startled, Francesca felt the hair on her neck move. She stood and her left hand flew to cover her mouth. Her pencil clattered onto the hardwood floor. The visitor gave the pear-shaped wooden handle attached to the cord on the outside another firm yank. The bell rang again. She wished Joachim was there to confront the caller. She blinked and thought what would Edmond Dantes do? He would handle it. *But he was much stronger and more athletic than me.*

The thought did not linger. She shouted, “Bonjour, un moment!”

Francesca ran up to the bedroom and strapped Joachim’s pistol above her left hip and covered it with a black shawl that she draped around her shoulders. She thought, Em is right, *I’ve gotta learn how to use this thing. Dear Mary, Mother of God, please do not let me need to use it.*

At the front door, Francesca reached for the latch and paused. She took a deep breath, put her left hand under the shawl, and opened the door with her right. Instead of Joachim’s killers, she was relieved to find a tall slim thirty-something white woman dressed in expensive mourning clothes standing on the veranda eyeing her from head to foot under a frowning brow, arms folded and tapping one foot. Francesca felt like a side of beef must feel hanging in the market.

Francesca mimicked the posture she saw and folded her arms. With a confident smile she did not feel, Francesca said, “Bonjour. Vous devez être Mme. Buisson.” Francesca moved aside and curtsied. “S’il vous plaît venez po.” Once she spoke, Francesca thought she saw surprise in the woman’s face and the foot tapping ceased.

The woman stepped inside and glanced about the front hallway as she spoke. “Bonjour. Je vous remercie. Oui, je suis Mme. Buisson.”

“I’m Fran...”

The Laced Chameleon

Still examining what she could see of the house and with ice in her voice, Mrs. Maria Buisson cut her off, “I am well aware of who *you* are.”

Francesca maintained her forced smile. Standing under the front hall chandelier, she gestured toward the parlor. “Please sit here in the parlor. I will make tea for us.”

Maria’s hand went half way up and Francesca saw “no” on her lips. Maria closed her mouth, exhaled, and dropped her hand. Francesca pretended not to notice. Maria elected to sit upon a bowed seat upholstered bergeres chair with scrolled wooden arm tips and said, “Thank you. Tea would be lovely.”

* * *

Though she had only sassafras tea and no sugar, Francesca brought it to the parlor in a fine tea service, just as she had practiced at Mère Henriette Delille’s small parochial school in a house on St. Bernard Avenue. She tried to keep smiling though the tremor in her hands angered her.

“Aha! So that’s why I could not find my mother’s tea service!”

Francesca, startled by this news, recovered and served tea while changing the subject. “Mrs. Buisson, I’m sorry that when we finally meet it is under these sad circumstances.”

In an aloof voice, chin raised, Maria sounded detached. “Yes. Otherwise, it is possible that we *never* would have met. So-o-o, tell me, do you know the Buisson and Bouligny families?”

“I remember what Joachim told me. He said that his uncle, John Bouligny, was serving in the U.S. House of Representatives when Louisiana seceded and chose to stay and live in Washington.”

Maria hissed. “Yes, the damned Unionist!”

Francesca ignored the epithet. “He also told me that John’s uncle, Charles Bouligny, served in the U.S. Senate. All I recall about Buissons is that Joachim, like his father, is an officer at Citizen’s Bank.”

“I don’t suppose the little Unionist told you that our cousin, Pierre Benjamin Buisson, serves ‘the cause’ in our Confederate States of America as a brigadier general.”

Francesca shook her head. Uncomfortable in the presence of a supporter of the “peculiar institution” of slavery, she shifted her feet about and tried to think of a way to change the conversation.

Maria asked, “Now tell me, what’s noteworthy about your family? How have they served Louisiana?” Running on and not pausing for Francesca to respond, Maria clucked. “I learned that your father, François, is a hopeless drunk, a gambler, and runs a pathetic little restaurant in Vieux Carré. Is there anything else I should know?”

Francesca blinked and silently seethed. Again, she shook her head and stared into her cup.

Maria sipped her tea and changed the subject. “Frankly, my dear, I must tell you, though Joachim was only my step-son, I completely disapprove of *plaçage arrangements*.”

Angered, Francesca felt tightness in her chest and about her head. She took a deep breath and spoke in an even tone. “Actually, Joachim and I had much more than an arrangement. I loved him, and he loved me.”

Maria made a small backhanded slap gesture. “Ha! What do *you* know of love? How old are you anyway? Seventeen? Maybe, eighteen? Certainly, you’re old enough for sex and making babies, but not old enough to know the difference between sex, love, and exploitation. You, and your kind, give sex in exchange for room and board, plus a relative life of ease, in other words, the kept woman.” Maria raised her chin and

The Laced Chameleon

looked down her nose at Francesca and spat her next words. “Or, perhaps, I should say *concubine*.”

Francesca flushed bright pink and felt the tears coming. She willed the tears back but her forehead still felt warm. *I can cry later*. She sipped her tea as if Maria had not spoken. She tried to sound aloof. “Last year, Joachim and I had a wonderful courtship. We were in love. Though he’s gone, I will love him for a very long time. If we could have married under the law, we would have. *Plaçage* is what we could do for now. Oh, by the way, I’ll be nineteen this year, in just a few months.”

Maria set her tea cup into her saucer with a crash. “When I walked in here, I was pleasantly surprised by your command of two languages, apparent education, housekeeping, and manners. I expected much less. For a moment, I thought maybe this one is more than just another pretty face with a great body. Now, you have confirmed my original beliefs. *Plaçage* girls are just that, *girls*. They have no idea that they’re being exploited for sex. Love has *nothing* to do with it. *Nothing!* Open your eyes, *child*, and look around! How many of these *arrangements* have you seen where the white man does not eventually marry a white woman, whether he keeps his *plaçage* girl or not? I prematurely gave you *far* too much credit.”

Again, Francesca blinked. She thought, *though I don’t like her, this rings true. But, true or not, I don’t like what I’m hearing, no, not one bit. It sounds too much like something Mère Delille said*. She blinked again and tried desperately not to sound hollow. She insisted, “Joachim and I are, I-I-I mean, were in love.”

Maria sneered, moved forward to the edge of her chair, and looked at Francesca with narrowed eyes. “Why, you little fool! Did Joachim love you enough to introduce you to his family and his betrothed?”

Bob Rogers

This time, Francesca was completely unprepared for what she heard. She felt stabbing pain in her temples. Her tears burst forth before she could attempt to control them. Because her vision was blurred, she set her cup and saucer down at an angle, spilling her tea as the cup overturned onto the parlor's marble top center table. Francesca leapt from her seat, hit another bergere chair with her knee, recovered, and ran from the room. The stairs were a blur, so she stumbled forward using the hand rail. She threw herself onto her tall four-post mahogany bed without noticing that her speed caused the mosquito net hanging from the canopy to billow as she continued sobbing loudly. Francesca buried her face in one pillow and pulled another over her head. The pain inside her head would not subside. The ache and anguish she felt was deep in her chest and acute, like a hand in fire that could not be removed before the burn registered. This new hurt was worse than seeing Joachim gunned down. It was far worse than anything she could remember or imagine. For now, the hurt absorbed her whole mind as she gradually curled into a fetal position. She shut out all else, even Maria.

After Francesca had cried for what felt to her like hours, actually only forty minutes, she sat on the edge of her bed wiping her eyes. She felt fatigued. When she could see again, there was Maria in the doorway, leaning against the jamb, arms folded. Francesca's first thought was to shoot Maria. But then, she thought, *Maria is only the messenger. Besides, by the time I figure out how to work the damn gun, she'd be upon me, and I'd have no gun.*

With a slight grin, more a smirk, Maria asked, "Can you talk?"

Francesca nodded.

"Okay, there are three more things I need to mention before I depart. One. Which undertaker has Joachim's body?"

The Laced Chameleon

Francesca coughed and cleared her throat. “Peter Casanave on Bourbon Street.”

At the mention of Casanave, a black undertaker, Maria paused and scowled, but made no remark. She said, “Two. You are not to attend the funeral or have any contact with my family. And three. You can keep gifts Joachim may have given you, but you are to remove yourself and your personal belongings, and *only* your personal belongings, from this house within the hour. Understood?”

It was almost ten in the morning.

Slowly, Francesca stood and plodded to within five feet of Maria. With a quizzical look on her face, Maria stood up straight, arms still folded. Francesca maintained eye contact, conveying hatred. With her right hand, she removed her shawl and let it fall to the deep red and white ornate carpet. With her pistol exposed and left hand by her side, Francesca was surprised when she heard herself speaking in a stern voice, without hysterics, “Mme. Buisson, je pense que la fin de la journée est assez tôt. Pas vous?” (Mrs. Buisson, I think the end of the day is soon enough. Don't you?)

Maria's eyes widened as she retreated backwards from the doorway. Gone was her haughtiness. Maria's voice went up and down, from flat to squeaky to flat again. “W-why, er sure, Francesca, t-the end of the day is quite soon enough. A-actually, t-tomorrow will be fine.”

Francesca stood rooted to the spot staring at the door and listening to the sound of Maria's shoes on the stairs. Momentarily, she heard the front door open, and then, it slammed shut again.

Chapter 5

For a time, the only sound in the house was the tick-tock of the 1860 inlaid French Morez movement clock that hung on the wall above the mantle, striking the hours and half hours. The black and gold picture frame clock was two feet tall. When it stopped at 11:53 a.m., Francesca let go of the hair above her left ear and looked up from her seat on the floor of the parlor. She smiled and thought, *time's up for me, too*. She remembered that Joachim had last wound the clock a week before, back when Confederate General Lovell, in charge of the defense of New Orleans, and the local rags still believed the two forts downriver would defeat the Union Navy.

Gazing at the clock, Francesca thought, this day reminds me of the time they threw poor Edmond Dantes into the sea bound in a burial sack. It is time to sink or cut free and swim. *I will follow Edmond. I am done with crying. I will live.*

In the bedroom, Francesca spread a sheet on the floor. In the center, she placed clothes she had brought with her to Joachim's house the previous December. She left all the expensive clothes Joachim had given her hanging in the large polished mahogany crown wardrobe or neatly folded in two drawers, visible when the wardrobe doors were open. Francesca let the wardrobe doors and drawers remain open for Maria to see. She arranged a display of jewelry gifts on the marble top cherry wood commode beside the fine china wash bowl and pitcher, with several necklaces hanging from the supports of the five foot tall free standing mahogany framed mirror.

By half past noon, Francesca was hungry. She thought, *I'd better finish this little job off and get on to Mama's*. She sat down at the dining room table and wrote notes she would post on the front door upon her exit for Emily and Brooke, inviting

The Laced Chameleon

them to visit at her mother's home. She stood and took a step before she returned to her seat. She sat and wrote another note, this one to Maria:

Chère Mme. Buisson, trouver de l'argent pour le drap de lit j'ai pris dans un pot dans le placard. Je suis également quitter tous les dons de Joachim. Francesca Dumas. (Dear Mrs. Buisson, find money for the bed sheet I took in a jar in the cupboard. I am also leaving all of Joachim's gifts. Francesca Dumas.)

She placed the note for Maria in the parlor on Maria's mother's tea service. As she laid the note in place, the doorbell rang. Startled, Francesca's left hand moved to her pistol. "Qui?"

"It's me, Edna."

Francesca took a deep breath and ran, smiling, to admit her new friend. "Coming!"

* * *

They ate pork sausage patties generously covered with blackberry jam stuffed inside Edna's large flakey warm biscuits from the center table in the parlor with their legs crossed like high society women, sipping sassafras tea. "Miss Edna, I mean, Edna, I'm so glad to see you." Francesca laughed. "And your food! I was starved after all that packing."

"Now, what all packin' is dis you're talkin' 'bout, chile? From what I see, yo' thumb is firmly in Missus Maria's eye by yo' leavin' behind all that fine jewelry and them fancy clothes Joachim done bought fo' you!"

Laughter.

Smiling, Francesca tilted her head and put a hand on her hip. "Oh, I wouldn't want the Buissons to have nothing to sell when all those Confederate dollars of theirs turns into confetti!"

Raucous laughter.

“Chile, you the quickest ‘widow’ I ever seed recoverin’ from her b’revement.”

“That’s because you never met a ‘widow’ who found out the day after her man died that the double dealing scoundrel was betrothed to another.”

More raucous laughter.

When they recovered, both fell silent. Francesca felt the need was more urgent than ever to spend the contents of Joachim’s purse, quickly. What to do for income next week? Next month? She mused, *Maybe, in a month or so, I’ll get Brooke to line up a new partner for me. This time, I’ll remember what Maria said. Love ain’t got nothing to do with it. I’ll do as she expected, I’ll exploit. Period. We’ll be even. He’ll get what he wants and I’ll live by my wits. I will live.*

Presently, Francesca realized that she was staring at her tea cup. She looked up. “Since this is your market day, if you don’t mind, I’ll go with you and pick up some things for Ma.”

“Cos’ not. You come on along and we can talk. I’ll be happy to have you. But, ’fore we go, tell me. Were you just now thinkin’ ’bout yo’ money sit’ation? ’Bout how you gone eat, live indoors, and sich?”

Francesca’s face brightened. “Why, yes! You’re right! That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

Edna’s face turned serious. “Though we’ve known each other for only a minute, I’ma tell you like I’d tell my own Rebecca or Rachel, if’n they were yo’ color.” Edna leaned forward. Her voice became somber. “Plaçage was invented to trap young pretty girls dat are de color dey are ‘cause some white man done ravished dey mamas and gra’mas. Dis plaçage thing ain’t no good for yo’ heart or yo’ head.”

Francesca thought these are Mère Delille’s words exactly. Could it be that they know each other? Francesca’s sigh was

The Laced Chameleon

audible. She clasped her hands in her lap. “Edna, I must live on my own. Mama can’t support me. Papa is always in debt with his damned gambling. We don’t have a farm. I can’t sew, cook, or do house work. White people use slave women for those jobs. Now, of course, you realize, no white man can marry me, even if one wanted to do so. I’ve never had any luck to even get a free black man to do more than look at me. And, Lord knows, I’ve tried. After looking and declaring that I’m beautiful, they tell me I ‘look like trouble.’ And, since I can’t buy one, slave men are out of the question. Don’t you see? My choices are very, very narrow.” She wrung her hands. “I don’t know any other way. I have to use what I have.”

Edna slowly shook her head and dropped her chin. Francesca saw sadness on her face. For the first time, the thought occurred to her, maybe Mère Delille was right. Maybe...

Edna blinked and brightened. She interrupted Francesca’s thought. “Honey, times are changin’ real quick dese days! A woman your color has a better and better chance to make something of herself.”

With two fingers in her hair, Francesca tilted her head to one side. You know what; this woman treats me better than my own ma. But, right now, she ain’t making any sense. Francesca rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “Give me a for instance. How would I go about making something of me?”

Edna had a satisfied grin on her face. “Well, I’m happy you didn’t tell me what I half expected, that I’d lost my mind.”

Francesca stretched and yawned, holding both fists above her head. “Oh, no. Not at all. I really believe you have my best interest at heart.”

“Gimme a lil’ time and, I’ll give you a for instance.” Edna stood. “Meanwhile, let’s head on down to de market.”

“Which one?”

Bob Rogers

Edna chuckled. “With Missus Maria’s purse in my pocket, I like de French Market. ’Sides, it’s on the way to yo’ ma’s place.”

* * *

Francesca tacked her open faced notes for Emily and Brooke to the front door. Then, they boarded a Prytania and Camp streetcar beside the house headed upriver. The house faced Conery Street, which was only one block long, and across Prytania was Lafayette Cemetery. Francesca was almost certain the Buissons would bury Joachim there.

Though she sat on the streetcar’s left side oak bench with her back to the cemetery and thought she had been resolute about declaring an end to tears, she felt like crying again. She thought why is this? *Joachim deceived me, though he never actually said he loved me. I was a fool to assume he did just because of the gentle way he treated me, oh, and all those damned gifts. My feelings are confused.* She wanted to shake and clear her head, but did not, lest Edna inquire. Instead, she stared at the ceiling and held her tears back.

At Toledano Street, the tracks made a turn toward the river. Four blocks down Toledano, they made another left turn onto Magazine Street and started downriver toward the center of the city. Francesca took little notice of the mansions they passed. She wanted to talk and avoid thinking about Joachim. Edna sat on the same bench, which ran the length of the car. Francesca’s bundle, tied by the four corners, was between them, crowned by Edna’s brown and worn shopping basket.

Again, Francesca was reminded of Joachim as the streetcar passed through the block between Fourth and Third Streets. He had told her that his house, acquired in a sweet deal from his bank following a foreclosure, was built in 1841 on the same

The Laced Chameleon

architectural plan as the thirty-two year old house she saw through the open window in front of her.

Presently, Francesca asked, "How old is Rebecca?"

A sigh came from Edna. "Bec just turned seventeen last month. Oh, and Rai will be fifteen in a coupla weeks."

Francesca smiled. "Why, they could be my little sisters. I wish I could meet them."

Edna turned her face away.

Francesca saw the pain before Edna turned. She thought, *now look what I've done. I've caused my friend to remember the greatest hurt of her life because I'm trying to escape from my pain.* She reached across the bundle and basket and touched Edna's shoulder. "Oh, Edna, I'm so sorry. I've made you feel bad."

Edna put her hand over Francesca's. "I'm okay. My hard grievin' was done long, long ago. But the dull ache is still deep in here." She slapped her chest. "It returns several times every day. I fear it will follow me to my grave. Now, don't you try to take on my agony atop yo' present troubles."

Francesca's eyes watered. "I'm so glad I met you. I can't wait to introduce you to Mama and my friend, Emily."

"I'd like that."

Both women sat with their arms folded, staring at the floor. Francesca was deep in thought, trying to imagine her mother being sold and taken from her at Rachel's age four years before.

Edna cleared her throat and spoke in a low voice. "Lawd, Lawd dat was a time. Nobody oughta hafta go through dat kinda hurt. And jes lak that." Edna snapped her fingers. "The ol' widow missus up and snatched me from my family. She sold me off, and then my babies and husband saw me led away in chains. Poor lil' Rai ran after the shuffle, blinded by her tears, runnin', stumblin', and fallin' tryin' her level best to

Bob Rogers

catch up to the shuffle. It nearly tore my heart out to see lil' Rai like that." Edna sniffed, her eyes brimmed with water that almost spilled over. "I wanted to yank and pull at my chains. But I couldn't do that 'cause it would hurt the peoples in front and behind me."

Speaking as gently as she could, Francesca asked, "What's a shuffle?"

"Oh, that's a bunch o' slaves chained together by their necks and connected to the back o' a speculator's wagon. We walked all the way from Smith County, Mississippi to N'Awlins by way o' Natchez. That is 'cept ol' Lucille. She had walked from Columbus, Georgia, but died on the road after Natchez. One night, she jes gave up and passed on in her sleep." Edna paused. After a long sigh, she continued. "Once here, they put us in a pen and fatten us up, like hogs, to be sold again. That sellin' was nothing. It was that first one that tore up my family, broke my heart, and wrecked my life."

Francesca patted Edna's shoulder. And then, she caught the eye of a fashionably dressed white woman sitting across from them. The woman had been listening to Edna. The eye contact was less than half a second, for the woman then found the floor to be very interesting.

* * *

Frantic shouting began outside Francesca's streetcar window. She turned on her seat and saw Confederate soldiers and fat huffing old men hurrying away from the doors below the six massive middle columns of the grand St. Charles Hotel. For a third day, they scurried toward the railhead. Minutes later, their streetcar reached the end of the line at the base of the Henry Clay monument, where St. Charles Avenue met Royal and Common Streets.

The Laced Chameleon

They entered the heart of the Vieux Carré walking northeast along Royal Street. Five blocks on, Francesca pointed out her father's restaurant at the corner of Royal and Toulouse Streets. One block later, Edna guided them onto St. Peter Street toward the river. They entered Jackson Square's southwest gate. Near the center of the square facing the statue of Andrew Jackson on a horse, Francesca looked to her left at the edifice of the St. Louis Cathedral with its three majestic spires and was again reminded of Joachim. They had met in the Orleans Ballroom in the block directly behind the cathedral. She thought, Hail Mary, Mother of God, please guide my mind. The live oaks in the square flexed their gnarled mighty limbs like the muscles of champion wrestlers. The new light green leaves of spring on other trees and shrubs brightened Francesca's feelings. They exited the square on Decatur Street.

Francesca pointed across Decatur. "Hey, Edna, look. There's the new coffeehouse Joachim told me about. It's called Café Du Monde and was opened just two weeks ago. He said their café au lait and beignets are so-o-o good! Let me treat you to these delights and toast our new friendship."

Edna's face shone with an impish grin. "I've got a better idea. Let's let Missus Buisson treat us!"

Francesca laughed, showing perfectly even teeth. "Edna, you're a mess! I'm so glad I met you."

Leaving Café Du Monde behind, they entered the French Market and shopped until Edna had filled her basket with spinach, strawberries, leeks, kale, scallions, and collard greens. Francesca stuffed a few items into her bundle for her mother, including: asparagus, carrots, mint, parsley, and rosemary. Edna declared that, though the price of most foods were up since last week, before the invasion, the prices for flour, molasses, and sugar had reached levels for which she wouldn't even pay with Mme. Buisson's money. Satisfied with their

bounty, they promised to meet the next Saturday at the Café Du Monde and said their good-byes at Decatur Street and Ursulines Avenue.

Francesca boarded an omnibus service that traveled Ursulines through Faubourg Tremé up to Hagan Avenue. She paid the driver with two shinplaster streetcar tickets and he climbed the spokes of the rear wheel and placed her bundle in the cargo rack atop the vehicle. Francesca boarded with five other passengers. The only door was in the center of the rear end of the bus, which was drawn by four large bay horses. She thought the bus looked a bit like an intercity stagecoach from the front. It even had the same high box seat for the driver, but no side doors.

Crossing Chartres Street one block later, Francesca spotted a man who she thought could be one of the shooters. *Damn, here I go again.* She shook her head. *Now, I'm seeing things.* Given her changing feelings about Joachim, she felt less like honoring her pledge to the dead man to avenge his murder. But she also felt guilty because she considered renegeing on her promise. She watched the man walk along Chartres toward Dumaine Street until he was out of sight. Twenty blocks later at Ursulines Avenue and Rocheblave Street, Francesca left the bus and let herself into her mother's house. As she expected, her mother was not at home, but was probably working at the restaurant.

The sunny day, Saturday, April 26, 1862, was fading. Francesca poured a cup of sweet tea and dragged a grass-bottom ladder back chair outside and sat on the front veranda facing the shotgun house across the street where Emily lived with her parents, free blacks, Laura and Anthony Jenkins. Before Francesca's chair was warm, Laura ran across Ursulines wearing a troubled face.

The Laced Chameleon

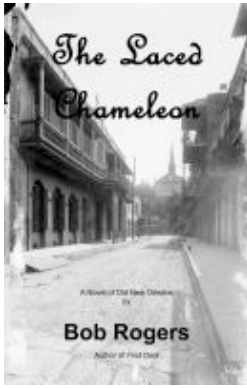
Francesca smiled and waved. “Hello, Auntie Laura! How are you?”

Laura, a mulatto who was a well-known seamstress, paused to catch her breath. “Chile, this minute, I’m right poorly. I sho’ am glad to see you! Is Emily inside?”

Concerned, Francesca sat her cup on the floor. “No, Auntie Laura, I thought Em was with you. Why, I was coming over for a visit soon’s I finished my tea.”

Wringing her hands, Laura stopped at the steps to the veranda. A tear trickled down one cheek. Then, Francesca saw Tony, the shoemaker, standing across the street, fists thrust deep in his pockets. His medium brown complexioned jaws were clinched as he stared at his wife and Francesca. Though the day was warm, Francesca felt a sudden chill in her spine and deep foreboding.

With panic in her voice and an outstretched hand, Laura gestured toward Francesca. “Fran, I thought she was with you. Em didn’t come home last night.”



New Orleans native Francesca Dumas is a quadroon courted by moneyed white men. She leads a sheltered life of elegant gowns and lavish balls until a bullet shatters her dream world. While awaiting arrival of the Union Navy atop a Mississippi River levee on April 25, 1862, Francesca's lover is shot dead. Rain soaked and blood-stained, Francesca vows revenge. Conundrums confront Francesca: solve her identity crisis, succeed as a spy, and find and defeat a three-time murderer.

The Laced Chameleon

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