

Cavanelle

KATE CHOPIN

I WAS always sure of hearing something pleasant from Cavanelle across the counter. If he was not mistaking me for the freshest and prettiest girl in New Orleans, he was reserving for me some bit of silk, or lace, or ribbon of a nuance marvelously suited to my complexion, my eyes or my hair! What an innocent, delightful humbug Cavanelle was! How well I knew it and how little I cared! For when he had sold me the confection or bit of dry-goods in question, he always began to talk to me of his sister Mathilde, and then I knew that Cavanelle was an angel.

I had known him long enough to know why he worked so faithfully, so energetically and without rest—it was because Mathilde had a voice. It was because of her voice that his coats were worn till they were out of fashion and almost out at elbows. But for a sister whose voice needed only a little training to rival that of the nightingale, one might do such things without incurring reproach.

“You will believe, madame, that I did not know you las’ night at the opera? I remark’ to Mathilde, ‘tiens! Mademoiselle Montreville,’ an’ I only rec’nize my mistake when I finally adjust my opera glass. . . . I guarantee you will be satisfied, madame. In a year from now you will come an’ thank me for having secu’ you that bargain in a poult-de-soie. . . . Yes, yes; as you say, Tolville was in voice. But,” with a shrug of the narrow shoulders and a smile of commiseration that wrinkled the lean olive cheeks beneath the thin beard, “but to hear that cavatina render’ as I have heard it render’ by Mathilde, is another affair! A quality, madame, that moves, that penetrates. Perhaps not yet enough volume, but that will accomplish itself with time, when she will become more robus’ in health. It is my intention to sen’ her for the summer to Gran’ Isle; that good air an’ surf bathing will work miracles. An artiste, voyez vous, it is not to be treated like a human being of every day; it needs des petits soins; perfec’ res’ of body an’ mind; good red wine an’ plenty . . . oh yes, madame, the stage; that is our

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intention; but never with my consent in light opera. Patience is what I counsel to Mathilde. A little more stren'th; a little dev'lopment of the chest to give that soupçon of compass which is lacking, an' gran' opera is what I aspire for my sister."

I was curious to know Mathilde and to hear her sing; and thought it a great pity that a voice so marvelous as she doubtless possessed should not gain the notice that might prove the step toward the attainment of her ambition. It was such curiosity and a half-formed design or desire to interest myself in her career that prompted me to inform Cavanelle that I should greatly like to meet his sister; and I asked permission to call upon her the following Sunday afternoon.

Cavanelle was charmed. He otherwise would not have been Cavanelle. Over and over I was given the most minute directions for finding the house. The green car—or was it the yellow or blue one? I can no longer remember. But it was near Goodchildren street, and would I kindly walk this way and turn that way? At the corner was an ice dealer's. In the middle of the block, their house—one-story; painted yellow; a knocker; a banana tree nodding over the side fence. But indeed, I need not look for the banana tree, the knocker, the number or anything, for if I but turn the corner in the neighborhood of five o'clock I would find him planted at the door awaiting me.

And there he was! Cavanelle himself; but seeming to me not himself; apart from the entourage with which I was accustomed to associate him. Every line of his mobile face, every gesture emphasized the welcome which his kind eyes expressed as he ushered me into the small parlor that opened upon the street.

"Oh, not that chair, madame! I entreat you. This one, by all means. Thousan' times more comfortable."

"Mathilde! Strange; my sister was here but an instant ago. Mathilde! Où es tu donc?" Stupid Cavanelle! He did not know when I had already guessed it—that Mathilde had retired to the adjoining room at my approach, and would appear after a sufficient delay to give an appropriate air of ceremony to our meeting.

And what a frail little piece of mortality she was when she did appear! At beholding her I could easily fancy that when she stepped outside of the yellow house, the zephyrs would lift her from her feet and, given a proper adjustment of the balloon sleeves, gently waft her in the direction of Goodchildren street, or wherever else she might want to go.

Hers was no physique for grand opera—certainly no stage presence; apparently so slender a hold upon life that the least tension might snap it. The voice which could hope to overcome these glaring disadvantages would have to be phenomenal.

Mathilde spoke English imperfectly, and with embarrassment, and was glad to lapse into French. Her speech was languid, unaffectedly so; and her manner was one of indolent repose; in this respect offering a striking contrast to that of her brother. Cavanelle seemed unable to rest. Hardly was I seated to his satisfaction than he darted from the room and soon returned followed by a limping old black woman bringing in a sirop d'orgeat and layer cake on a tray.

Mathilde's face showed feeble annoyance at her brother's want of savoir vivre in thus introducing the refreshments at so early a stage of my visit.

The servant was one of those cheap black women who abound in the French quarter, who speak Creole patois in preference to English, and who would rather work in a petit ménage in Goodchildren street for five dollars a month than for fifteen in the fourth district. Her presence, in some unaccountable manner, seemed to reveal to me much of the inner working of this small household. I pictured her early morning visit to the French market, where picayunes were doled out sparingly, and lagniappes gathered in with avidity.

I could see the neatly appointed dinner table; Cavanelle extolling his soup and bouillie in extravagant terms; Mathilde toying with her papabotte or chicken-wing, and pouring herself a demi-verre from her very own half-bottle of St. Julien; Pouponne, as they called her, mumbling and grumbling through habit, and serving them as faithfully as a dog through instinct. I wondered if they knew that Pouponne "played the lottery" with every spare "quarter" gathered from

a judicious management of lagniappe. Perhaps they would not have cared, or have minded, either, that she as often consulted the Voodoo priestess around the corner as her father confessor.

My thoughts had followed Pouponne's limping figure from the room, and it was with an effort I returned to Cavanelle twirling the piano stool this way and that way. Mathilde was languidly turning over musical scores, and the two warmly discussing the merits of a selection which she had evidently decided upon.

The girl seated herself at the piano. Her hands were thin and anæmic, and she touched the keys without firmness or delicacy. When she had played a few introductory bars, she began to sing. Heaven only knows what she sang; it made no difference then, nor can it make any now.

The day was a warm one, but that did not prevent a creepy chilliness seizing hold of me. The feeling was generated by disappointment, anger, dismay and various other disagreeable sensations which I cannot find names for. Had I been intentionally deceived and misled? Was this some impertinent pleasantry on the part of Cavanelle? Or rather had not the girl's voice undergone some hideous transformation since her brother had listened to it? I dreaded to look at him, fearing to see horror and astonishment depicted on his face. When I did look, his expression was earnestly attentive and beamed approval of the strains to which he measured time by a slow, satisfied motion of the hand.

The voice was thin to attenuation, I fear it was not even true. Perhaps my disappointment exaggerated its simple deficiencies into monstrous defects. But it was an unsympathetic voice that never could have been a blessing to possess or to listen to.

I cannot recall what I said at parting—doubtless conventional things which were not true. Cavanelle politely escorted me to the car, and there I left him with a hand-clasp which from my side was tender with sympathy and pity.

“Poor Cavanelle! poor Cavanelle!” The words kept beating time in my brain to the jingle of the car bells and the regular ring of the mules' hoofs upon the cobble stones. One moment I resolved to have a talk with him in which I would en-

deavor to open his eyes to the folly of thus casting his hopes and the substance of his labor to the winds. The next instant I had decided that chance would possibly attend to Cavanelle's affair less clumsily than I could. "But all the same," I wondered, "is Cavanelle a fool? is he a lunatic? is he under a hypnotic spell?" And then—strange that I did not think of it before—I realized that Cavanelle loved Mathilde intensely, and we all know that love is blind, but a god just the same.

Two years passed before I saw Cavanelle again. I had been absent that length of time from the city. In the meanwhile Mathilde had died. She and her little voice—the apotheosis of insignificance—were no more. It was perhaps a year after my visit to her that I read an account of her death in a New Orleans paper. Then came a momentary pang of commiseration for my good Cavanelle. Chance had surely acted here the part of a skillful though merciless surgeon; no temporizing, no half measures. A deep, sharp thrust of the scalpel; a moment of agonizing pain; then rest, rest; convalescence; health; happiness! Yes, Mathilde had been dead a year and I was prepared for great changes in Cavanelle.

He had lived like a hampered child who does not recognize the restrictions hedging it about, and lives a life of pathetic contentment in the midst of them. But now all that was altered. He was, doubtless, regaling himself with the half-bottles of St. Julien, which were never before for him; with, perhaps, an occasional petit souper at Moreau's, and there was no telling what little pleasures beside.

Cavanelle would certainly have bought himself a suit of clothes or two of modern fit and finish. I would find him with a brightened eye, a fuller cheek, as became a man of his years; perchance, even, a waxed moustache! So did my imagination run rampant with me.

And after all, the hand which I clasped across the counter was that of the self-same Cavanelle I had left. It was no fuller, no firmer. There were even some additional lines visible through the thin, brown beard.

"Ah, my poor Cavanelle! you have suffered a grievous loss since we parted." I saw in his face that he remembered the circumstances of our last meeting, so there was no use in

avoiding the subject. I had rightly conjectured that the wound had been a cruel one, but in a year such wounds heal with a healthy soul.

He could have talked for hours of Mathilde's unhappy taking-off, and if the subject had possessed for me the same touching fascination which it held for him, doubtless, we would have done so, but—

“And how is it now, *mon ami*? Are you living in the same place? running your little ménage as before, my poor Cavanelle?”

“Oh, yes, madame, except that my Aunt Félicie is making her home with me now. You have heard me speak of my aunt—No? You never have heard me speak of my Aunt Félicie Cavanelle of Terrebonne! That, madame, is a noble woman who has suffer' the mos' cruel affliction, and deprivation, since the war.—No, madame, not in good health, unfortunately, by any means. It is why I esteem that a blessed privilege to give her declining years those little comforts, *ces petits soins*, that is a woman's right to expect from men.”

I knew what “*des petits soins*” meant with Cavanelle; doctors' visits, little jaunts across the lake, friandises of every description showered upon “Aunt Félicie,” and he himself relegated to the soup and bouillie which typified his prosaic existence.

I was unreasonably exasperated with the man for awhile, and would not even permit myself to notice the beauty in texture and design of the mousseline de laine which he had spread across the counter in tempting folds. I was forced to restrain a brutal desire to say something stinging and cruel to him for his fatuity.

However, before I had regained the street, the conviction that Cavanelle was a hopeless fool seemed to reconcile me to the situation and also afforded me some diversion.

But even this estimate of my poor Cavanelle was destined not to last. By the time I had seated myself in the Prytania street car and passed up my nickel, I was convinced that Cavanelle was an angel.