

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JULY, 1949

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WEIRD TALES CLUB

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor

Dark o' the Moon

BY SEABURY QUINN

A woman of incredible beauty, of monstrous evil. . . .

A HISS like steam escaping from a seething kettle sounded, and Baxter jerked back just in time to miss the vicious stroke of the cottonmouth. Had the reptile not been numbed with the night's chill and torpid with the mice it had gorged at the entrance of the muskrat house it would have been a thought quicker and fleshed its fangs in his hand.

Baxter shivered as he made a detour of the mounded musquash houses, stepping warily about the pools of stagnant water that pock-marked the treacherous surface of the *flostante*. If only he could reach the open water where the pirogue was moored . . . there was a bright moon, that would help, but he must beware of the *congos* and the 'gators—they could pull a man down to sure death in the swamp-water.

For hours—for days, it seemed—he had been struggling across the false-land of the *flostante*, every step an inch above death in the stagnant waters of the *lac*, with death from grasping teeth or poison fangs all round him. A *flostante* is a floating stratum of decayed and rotting vegetation resting on the surface of a backwater that has become blocked with storm debris and on which the jungle has set up outposts. Light-stepping, nimble men can cross its treacher-

Heading by Vincent Napoli



ous surface, skimming from one relatively solid point to the next before the spot beneath them sinks under their weight, but if the traveler breaks through there is no help for him. Baxter felt the water oozing in at his boot top, and took an agile, long step, landing on an earth-encrusted square of almost solid mat, and drew his sleeve across his sweat-streaked face. If he could hold out . . . if the moon kept shining . . .

Three months ago—it seemed a lifetime as he looked back on it—he had been riding from 'Pelier with dispatches from Colonel Cosgrove to General Bütler. They'd warned him to be careful when he passed the *chênière*—the ridge of live-oaks growing by marsh. Three couriers had set out for New Orleans after dark in the past week, and none of them had reached headquarters. News of Mumford's hanging had blazed through the bayou country like marsh-fire, and while the city smoldered in a sullen calm beneath the watchful eyes of provost guardsmen open season had been declared for Yankees in the swamplands; every trapper's hut concealed a gun, and men who could bring down a squirrel from the top of a live-oak did not waste a second bullet on lone riders.

He should have left 'Pelier at five o'clock and so reached the city by twilight, but there was a girl at the *'berge*, a black-haired wanton named Solange Dufour who craved pleasure *coute que coute*—at whatever cost. So he had lingered over rum punch and innumerable *vins de murs*—blackberry wine—till the sun dropped like a shot bird in the west and storm-dark dusk lay over everything.

The dirt road wound and crept along the river brim as torpidly as a frost-stiffened snake, and the *flottante* was knee-deep in a gray haze of dank brume when he reached the *chênière*; the live-oaks with their trailing beards of gray-green Spanish moss came right down to the highway, stretching gaunt boughs up to share dark secrets with the darker sky, and with a prescience of disaster Baxter set spurs to his horse and leant down almost to the beast's mane in an effort to present as small a target as possible.

The wind from the slug nearly knocked his kepi off, and almost as he felt the hot draft on his cheek he heard the *spang* of the

Spencer. The horse almost leaped out from under him as he drove his spurs into its flanks. He saw the carbine's flash in the deep undergrowth and heard the whip-crack of its report just before he felt the numbing impact of the ball in his left shoulder, felt his arm go dead, and knew he had been hit.

The next thing he remembered he was lying on a pallet and a warm spoon pressed against his lips. The smell of soup was in his nostrils and a soft voice crooned, "Drink it, beautiful young mans, drink it for Dou-douce; it will be a *remède* for you. *Mais oui*. But certainly."

The soup was hot and very good, *gombo filé*, made with several kinds of fish and shrimp and crab meat, spiced and thickened with chopped sassafras leaves and piquant with strong wine. He felt his strength returning with each spoonful, and looked about him with that feeling of luxurious laziness that only convalescents know. The woman who knelt by him and supported his head in the bend of her left elbow, was like something seen in a dream from which he had no wish to waken.

Her face was narrow with an arched, thin nose and high cheekbones beneath which delicate hollows showed; her great brown eyes beneath their drooping lids and haughty brows were soft and gentle as a gazelle's; her lips were full and sensuous and darkly red, like the darker kind of strawberries. Her skin, untouched by color, seemed to have been dusted with fine grains of powdered gold and the hair that hung unbound down to her shoulders was the purple-black of a grackle's throat and held a heady perfume of suave spices in its shadowed depths. Great golden crescents dangled in her ears and round her throat was looped a necklace of gold coins, American half eagles, British sovereigns, Spanish dollars, French louis d'ors, even Persian krans and Danish frederiks. Her sole costume was a white-cotton chemise, sleeveless, open to the waist to show a narrow V of golden-tinted skin and the entrancing rondure of her small high breasts, and a petticoat of scarlet woolen stuff extending just below her knees. Her hands were small and slim and very soft, her naked feet most delicately shaped.

"*Bien. Bon*. You feel better now, *hein?*" She sat back upon her heels and eased his

head down to the husk-stuffed pillow. "Hé, you were *malade à la morte*, you, when I first found you, me."

He managed to contrive a grin. "Where did you find me, you?" he asked in imitation of her Cajun dialect.

"*'Cré nom!*" she spread her hands and raised her brows and shoulders, "in my *basse cour*—how do you call him?—back yard. You had been shot in the shoulder and were weak from the lost blood when you came creeping *ventre à terre* like the 'gator to my place. Yes. And afterwards you had the *frisson* and the fever. Oh, I tell you, you were one sick, beautiful young mans, but me, I cured you of your *maladie*, and now"—she said it simply as she might have stated she had bought a pig or calf—now you are mine, *m'ami*; all mine." She bent forward and kissed him.

There was little passion in the embrace, it might have been a mother's or a sister's, but there was a finality about it definite and decisive as a herdsman's putting his brand on an animal.

He learned the story by degrees. The

storm that had been threatening when he set out for New Orleans had broken almost at the moment he was shot—one of those explosive deluges when every ditch and gully ran awash at once and the dry, dusty road changed to an overflowing flume. The sniper who had fired at him hugged the wood's shelter, and in the downpour, acting more by instinct than volition, he had crept between the trees and underbrush until he reached the clearing where her cabin stood. The rain that washed his tracks out washed the telltale blood away, so he was safe from pursuit when she heard him whimpering *comme une 'tite chouette*—like a little screech owl—by the hedge of thorn-locust that separated her yard from the jungle.

She had dragged him to the house somehow, though he was *lourdement comme un ours*—heavy like a bear—and cut his tunic and shirt away. His wound was bleeding freely and he was weak from loss of blood, but the bullet had ploughed through the flesh, so she did not have to probe for it, and no bones were broken. She made a pack

of cobweb and bandaged it on the wound, and fed him tea of coatgrass—*l'herbe cabri*—by the spoonful when the quaking fever came on him. Then a long diet of milk soup and finally the nourishing *gombo*. Now he was all well, almost, and ready for the *pot-au-feu*—the meat boiled with vegetables.

HIS strength returned slowly, and one day he was able to go out to the doorway and sit in the armchair made of a sawn-out cask and bask in the sunshine. That day she greeted him with a dazzling smile, and coming close to him put both arms around him. He would have been sub-human if he had failed to respond to her embrace, but he was unprepared for her ardor, for as his arms closed around her slight shoulders and drew her to him she pressed her mouth against his so fiercely that it seemed their lips must be bruised. The arms about his neck tightened and she pressed her body against his, rigid as a carven thing, then limp and yielding, the once more rigid, and as she groaned softly with a kind of animal-whimper he could see her half-closed eyes go empty of all sight, like the eyes of a dead woman.

Her cabin was a one-roomed hut, not a flimsy frame hung with palmetto leaves, but made substantially of logs and weather-grayed timbers that had been salvaged from the river's flotsam. Its entrance was closed by a door carved with elaborate arabesques and hung on massive hinges of cast bronze, obviously once part of a "floating palace" river steamboat, and the windows were high-set and small, so at full daylight there was always lodgement for small pools of shadow in the corners. The floor was hard-packed earth and furniture was primitive, a bed constructed of four stakes set upright in the earthen floor with strands of rope and raw-hide lashings stretched between them to support a mattress filled with corn husks, and a chest of drawers, much warped from long exposure to the water, evidently something rescued from the jetsam of a wrecked or burned packet. There was no cellar, but a *magasin* of plastered stones with a sod roof stood in the yard, and in this Doudouce kept her small store of staples: *vin d'orange*, *vin de murs*—orange and blackberry wine—a few bottles of cognac, some coarse brown

sugar and a powder-can of salt. Oranges grew on the backlot, and grapevines clambered over a low trellis. In a clay oven Doudouce baked *croquignoles*—hard, brittle biscuits—and on a grating set above a shallow pit she fried the fish or meat or chicken or boiled the shrimp or crab, or brewed the spicy *gombo* and the hearty *pot-au-feu*.

Life was pleasant, indolent, and utterly without objective. The quiet, lazy days flowed by as sluggishly as the brown river sliding to the Gulf. His blouse had been spoiled when she cut it off to dress his wound, but she made shift to mend his shirt, and when his strength returned enough for him to walk and go with her on fishing trips in her pirogue she made him leave his boots off—"You mus' go *pieds nus, comme moi-même*—barefoot like me—" she told him. "Cajun peoples do not wear the shoes when they can help it."

"But I'm no Cajun," he protested, "I'm—"

"*Foutre, non!*" she laughed. "I say you are a Cajun now; me, I have adopted you!" and she kissed him again, her head flung back, her lips apart. "Now, what you say, *hein?* You do like I say, *non?*"

Her kiss drained him of all resistance. "Yes, yes!" he gasped. "I'm anything you say, Doudouce. I'm—I'm—"

She put her hands up to his cheeks and patted them gently. "You are a very sweet young mans, *m'ami*, an' me, I love you very much. Yes."

She was in his blood like an unconquerable drug, and like a drug she mastered him completely. At any hour, day or night, she could compel him to her will by a soft word or gesture, almost by a look, and while she was consistently gentle, she was insatiable in her demands. She took all, but she gave all. She cooked his food, washed his clothes, she waited on him hand and foot—sometimes even fed him out of hand, taking food from her plate and putting it into his mouth—but she brooked no denial of her wishes, giving orders as one rightfully entitled to obedience, and expecting instant and unquestioning compliance. It pleased her to weave wreaths of orange blossoms for their hair, and when he protested that such things were "sissy" she paid no more heed to his

objections than a mother would to a son's remonstrance against velvet clothes and curls. If he wished to linger in the dooryard after sundown while he smoked a final cheroot she would call him, at first softly, then with an imperious voice, and, sighing, he would toss the half-smoked cigar away and go into the scented darkness of the cabin where soft arms and softer lips awaited him.

She puzzled him. Was she a *femme de couleur*? He had seen white women with far darker complexions, and octoroons in New Orleans with skins far lighter. Still . . . Who were her parents? How did she come there? She appeared well supplied with money. A linen bag in the storehouse was literally filled with gold coins. Could these be from a treasure trove, the buried booty of Lafitte or Pierre Rambeau or Vasseur? How had she come by them? Did she know where more could be found? When he asked her she shook her head and laughed. When he persisted she came close to him and reached up, drawing his face down to hers. Her laughing lips were cool and moist against his hot, dry mouth, and the treasure in his arms wiped out all thought of pirates' buried gold.

Sometimes it seemed to him as if he'd given his soul into her keeping, and somehow this seemed disgraceful; yet why, he asked himself, should he consider it shameful? Except for his extraordinary handsomeness James Baxter was an average young man, thoughtless, funloving, rather superficial. Until it passed from his keeping into hers he'd hardly known he had a soul.

He was afraid of her, too. That time she charmed the snake she'd shaken him to the foundation of his being; put an almost superstitious fear of her into his heart. He was coming from the *magasin* with a jug of *vin d'orange* when a rattler sounded its warning right at his feet. To please Doudouce he had gone barefoot, and the snake lay coiled less than ten inches from his bare ankle. If he moved it would strike, and would surely drive its fangs in him before he could leap to safety. Perhaps it would strike anyway, so he was doomed if he stood still or moved. The fear of death was on him, nausea crawled in his stomach and clamored in his throat. His breathing stopped

and paralyzing numbness settled on his limbs. Then, suddenly: "*Hé, labas, M'sieur le Serpent Sonnette! Va t'en toi, oui!*"—Hey, Mr. Rattlesnake, get out of here, I tell you!"—came Doudouce's command, and at her voice the poised head lowered and seemed to listen. "*Tendez, toi, va t'en!*"—Listen to me, you, get out of here!"

The diamond-shaped, death-freighted head lowered, and the snake slithered away like a reprimanded dog. Baxter breathed again, but with an effort, and turned trembling to Doudouce. "Wh—what are you?" he demanded in an awed voice.

"*Hé!*" she laughed delightedly and stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "*Je suis tienne au grand jamais*—what should I be but thine forever, my beloved?" she asked, then added, almost darkly, "And thou art mine the same way."

But that had been only a foretaste, the faintest whiff of brimstone from the bottomless pit on whose brim he had been standing unsuspecting.

Last week three strangers came into the clearing by the cabin, lean, fox-faced men with guns held in the crook of their elbows and grim determination in their bearing. "*Hola, Doudouce Boudreaux,*" called their leader, "we hear you have a *ventrebleu*—a blue-bellied Yankee—in your house."

"*En bas!*" Doudouce whispered, and for the first time Baxter saw her self-possession falter. "*Au-dessous de châlit, mon amoureux!*"—creep beneath the bed, my lover!"

IT MIGHT have been around midnight, perhaps a little earlier or later, when he wakened to the sound of singing. The moon was round and bright and almost in the center of the sky, but in the cabin it was dark, and when he felt along the coarse rep of the mattress Doudouce was not there, though the place where she had lain was still warm. He went to the high window at the back of the room and looked out.

The orange trees dropped down a shower of petals, but the orange blossoms on the ground and in the air were not whiter than her slim moon-washed body as she knelt and held a clay *bassin* of water up to the white moon. She sang a chant of strange words, words that had been old when Babylonish priestesses invoked the Moon God-

dess Astarte. And as she sang the water in the basin frothed and boiled and then fell still again, and as it quieted she put the dish to her mouth and drank greedily. A drop of water spilled from the dish to the grass, and another, and another, and Baxter saw them fall like silver coins among the orange petals, but the kneeling woman drank and drank, and first a little concave hollow showed in the moon's disc, and then a larger one, until the moon was darkened as if it had been wiped from the sky, and presently from far away there sounded a dog's howl, and then another and another, until it seemed that all the dogs in the world mourned the loss of the bright silver sphere at which they had been wont to bay.

There was no moonlight any more, but by the faint gleam of the stars he saw her fall face-forward on the ground and heard the threshing of her limbs as she clawed at the earth. She rolled and fought and struggled like a thing in its death agonies, then lay still, panting with great, laboring, moaning gasps, and suddenly it was not a woman that he saw, but a cow alligator, eight feet long from snout to tail, and gleaming in the semi-dark of starshine like a thing in armor.

The creature struggled to its feet and slithered toward the hedge of thorn-locust that marked the boundary of the clearing, walking high on its webbed feet, not dragging either tail or belly. In a moment it was gone and Baxter stood alone in the cabin while terror clawed at his spine with icy talons.

He knew he couldn't have seen it. Such things one might read of in books of old and evil magic, but in 1862—the Nineteenth Century . . .!

He felt his way to the storehouse, found a bottle of *vieux cognac*, knocked its top off and drained it. The last thing he remembered as he fell across the bed in drunken coma was his muttered protest, "I didn't see it! It's not so; such things can't be!"

THE sun was up a full two hours when he wakened to a pounding headache and a feeling of malaise. He had a sense the night had been filled with dreams of formless menace, but what he'd dreamed he could not remember. Doudouce he felt

while outside . . . he heard a sound, not like a person walking, but like something sliding, something creeping sinuously toward the open door. The breath came hot and sulphurous in his throat and his heart thrashed and jerked like a gaffed trout. Who—what—was outside?

He got up, crept across the earthen floor and looked out. The yard was white and still and empty in the moonlight, but its very emptiness lent terror to its aspect. Doudouce was she . . .? He walked softly to the angle of the house and looked toward the *orangerie*. It was untenanted.

For the first time he thought of flight. They'd try him for desertion if he went back to New Orleans, maybe hang or shoot him. What of it? Hanging was a felon's death, and shooting a bloody one, but they were men's deaths, after all. Not like being torn and mangled by a monstrous lizzard.

He crept back to the cabin, found his boots and put them on. He'd need them in the underbrush; there might be snakes about. What else? His pistol? He'd been wearing it when he was shot, but she had taken it; he had no idea where it was hidden, and no time to search for it. The thing above all things was to go quickly, before she returned. She might come back in human form, or . . . his brain refused to form the thought; that way certain madness lay.

He stepped across the doorsill, and almost ran into her arms. "So?" She swept him with a quick, stock-taking glance, and her eyes widened as she saw his boots. "So, you fix to run away from Doudouce, *hein?*" Her eyes were dark and hard and bright with bitter anger, yet tears stood in them. "Me, I tell you you cannot do this! I saved you when your blood ran out and you were dying; when those bad mens came for to shoot you I drove them off. You are mine, *mine*; you hear it? I—"

His voice was hard and gritty as he interrupted. "You're a damned witch!" He brought the word out like the flick of a lash.

She recoiled from the epithet as from a blow. Her great eyes widened like a cat's in the dark, seemingly all pupil and devoid of all expression. "*Bête*," she spit the word like a curse, "*niais-niais, quisquidis*—beast,

beside him. She was not there. Then her voice came to him from the dooryard where she baked the morning's *croquignoles*. Doudouce . . . singing . . . He came to full consciousness as if swimming up out of deep water. Doudouce in the *orangerie* last night, Doudouce drinking the moon, and afterwards . . .! He walked to the door. She was kneeling at the oven, and the glow from the coals lent a quince color to her cheeks. There was a smile on her face and her small, white, even teeth showed brilliantly behind the redness of her lips. He shook his head as if to clear it of a sediment of dread. Doudouce sweet, gentle little Doudouce . . . he must have dreamed it all. He'd drunk the cognac before he had that vision, not afterwards.

But later in the morning he went to the orange grove and probed among the sparrow-grass and fallen blossoms with his bare foot. There, where Doudouce had knelt and drunk the water silvered by the moonbeams, he found two little discs of argent metal, bright and hard and shining as new-minted coins—and, he remembered with a chill, Doudouce had spilled two drops as she drank.

TONIGHT he had awakened from a vague, fear-haunted dream. Outside the moon was shining brilliantly, but in the cabin it was dark. Dark like a hole. Like a grave. His hand explored the bed beside him. Nothing lay there. He was alone.

Alone. The thought coursed through him like a cold flame. Alone in this dark place,

ninny, fat-head, pig!" Then with her little, soft hand that had never touched him save in a caress she struck him in the face.

Hot, furious anger flooded through him at the blow. The flame of it raced through his nerves and crashed against his brain. The fear that is akin to hatred and the hatred that is born of fear drove him to frantic, homicidal madness. He seized her by the throat and shook her as a bulldog shakes a cat. Her eyes went wide and wider, starting from their sockets with the force of his throttling, and her mouth opened and her tongue protruded. She fought him futilely with clawing hands and kicking feet, then suddenly went flaccid as a doll from which the sawdust had been spilled, and slumped down to her knees, her body bent back limply and her head as loose upon her neck as if it hung upon a cord. He drove his thumbs into the soft flesh of her throat each side the larynx, gave her a final shake and dropped her as he might have dropped a sack of meal.

Halfway across the clearing he remembered. There was a bag of gold in the *magasin*. It would come in handy if he managed to escape. Why should he go back to New Orleans and be court-martialed? Her pirogue was tied up at the far side of the *flottante*. If he could get to it he'd paddle down the river, traveling by night and tying up by day, until he reached the Gulf. Maybe he could find a ship to carry him to Europe. If he couldn't, he should surely find some sort of hideout. Men with ready money were immune from disconcerting questions. Gold stopped curious mouths and prying eyes. "*Poderoso caballero es Don Dinero.*" The Spanish proverb had the right of it. "Mr. Money is a powerful gentleman."

THE moon, a little past the full and shaped like a bent pie-plate, put a veil of magic on the *flottante*, striking back pale flashes from the little open spaces where the pools broke through the treacherous crust, and he could see his way almost as clearly as in daylight as he made for the place where the pirogue was moored. He'd have to be more careful going past the muskrat houses, though; that moccasin had nearly got him . . .

The eerie, astral silence that accompanies moonlight was broken by a long-drawn, quavering cry, the sound of a dog howling far away. Lonely, quavering and sad as the lament of a lost soul, it wound in a thin wailing coil of sound that spiraled up and up until it lost itself, but in a moment it was answered by another, and another.

The shadows lengthened and the highlights of the landscape began to blur. There was something wrong with the moon. Something crept across its bleached disc, something like a cloud that was no cloud, for it did not obscure, it wiped away the moon-substance as rushing water wipes away a river-bank. A strange, eerie duskiness spread over the *flottante*, and all at once the air seemed heavy, ominous and full of threat.

Baxter licked dry lips with a tongue that had gone stiff. Something that was lurking terror coiled in the depths of his heart, the blood churned in his ears and his breath came hissing noisily between his parted teeth.

She wasn't dead! He hadn't finished her; she'd revived and gone to the *orangerie*; now she drank the moon, and in a moment . . .

He blundered across the *flottante*, and the splashing of his rushing steps in the swamp-water was panic made audible. No time for careful choosing of the way now . . . he had to get to the pirogue, he had to, *had to* . . .

Something scratched against the stiff grass of the *flottante* with a sound like scuttering dry leaves. He dared not turn to look behind him, yet . . . He brought up suddenly. Only half-mindful of the path he chose, he had come to a wide space of open green-scummed water dotted with small islets, all out of jumping distance from each other.

He wheeled to make a detour, and stopped frozen in his tracks. Walking high, tail raised, jaws opened wide, came an eight-foot cow alligator, and for a long, horror-freighted moment he looked into a cavernous white mouth.

"Doudouce," he whimpered pleadingly. "Dou—"

Then the monster charged.