

Mont Pelee

The dug-out swung frailly along the black stream
And paused in its course. As entranced in a dream
The oldster rose feebly; his eyes glowed with awe,
He saw neither jungle nor brilliant macaw
Which winged along shrieking, as slither oozed in
Complete and oppressive and stealthy as sin.
Leaves hanging fantastic, unquivering o'erhead,
A canopy over the slimy pool spread.
Reposing demure in an amethyst veil,
Pelee, o'er the island, its monarch and bale,
Serenely was brooding; concealed and submerged
Were demoniac powers with which she had scourged
The land, as a fountain outpouring a rain
Of fire and of lava's destruction and pain.
"Tis I know thy power, oh treacherous one,
Beholding with horror the deeds you have done,
Surviving your tempest of unholy rage!"
This passion of words shook the form, sere with age.
He faced me; his figure convulsed with travail,
His breath came in gasps. "I will tell you a tale,"
He whispered, and pausing, began, "On the coast
Of the isle, Martinique, stood a town which could boast
Of history stained with piratical acts,
With slave-trading, gambling, and oft-ruptured pacts,
A Sodom which vengeance, four decades ago,
Destroyed in a moment with ravaging blow!
Unjustly condemned, I was thrust in a cell
To live out my life in the silence of hell,
To see a thin sliver of sunlight so sweet
Through a slit in a stone which looked out on the street.
My torture of solitude eased when I pressed
My face to the grating, surveying those blest
With freedom; their steps unimpeded, they passed
In careless indifference. Starved gazes I cast
O'er the broad panorama: the city, the peak
Of Pelee, and the harbor, where ship's masts, oblique,
Were patterned unmoving against a bronze sky.
O'er all moved a murmuring, a low, stifled cry,
For the village was seething with rumors that day
That spirits had waked in the mountain Pelee.
I cast myself down on the dungeon's dank floor;
I heard and I felt a subdued, angry roar
In the caverns of earth; the volcano had stirred.
St. Pierre was in panic as wild sped the word;
An exodus flowed down the mountain's bare slopes,
A stream without banks, as one aimless who gropes
In danger-filled darkness, for paths to the light,
And knowing not where to direct his mad flight.
A feathery drifting of ashes like snow
Was filtering down through the dim, lurid glow
And tenderly shrouding the town and the field,
Enfolding the mountain, as though to have healed
Her lava-seared wounds, and as though to have cooled
Her ire with its wint'ry caress. She who ruled
The isle as a rival of pagan Pelee
Was Our Lady of Watch; to her image to pray
Crept abject beseechers, who, held in duress
By sea and volcano, now waded in distress,
And lips which had sneered and were ever profane
Were gasping petitions for mercy. In vain
Was penitence now, for the demon prevailed.
The most-mighty ocean recoiled when she flailed
Its steam-writhing waters with lashes of fire.
The jungle, in flames and the funeral pyre
For those who had died and would perish e'er day
Had faded in fiery twilight. There lay
A pall o'er the island of smothering clouds
Which crackled with light'ning. Hysterical crowds
Were milling in dread through each tortuous lane.
Then a shrieking like that of a devil insane
Arose from the mountain and stabbed through the roar
Which had rumbled so long that we heard it no more!
With a blasphemous blast and a horrible shriek,
Escaping in triumph, there rose a horrid peak
A fanatical, murderous genii of fire!
The spiral of cloud billowed higher and higher,
Lurching and rising, itself to excel
By grasping the stars! Bursting fetters of hell,
It towered ever heavenward, whirling and churning,
Upswelling, out-spreading, and finally returning
To cloak the hot earth with its mantle of death
And to blister the air with a venomous breath.
The vengeance collected its fury and sped
Down the slopes to the town. As though already dead,
Its people, a hypnotized, horror-struck throng,
Neither struggled nor fled nor sought to prolong
Their agony, as all the region became
A brazier of glowing, sanguineous flame.
The smothering, ash-laden vapors poured down
And extinguished the groan of a perishing town.
The dungeon whose walls I had cursed as a tomb
Was a chamber of life; like a child from the womb
I came forth and beheld the fantastical scene
Of a ravaged, a lifeless, demolished demesne.
This day I have looked on the mount to behold
That she manifests naught of her fury of old;
A Virgin of Vesta, o'er whose lofty brow
A wisp of a halo is glowing now.
Hypocrisy's maiden! She gloats on the day
When the world will again know the wrath of Pelee!"

—Nancy Meyer.



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