

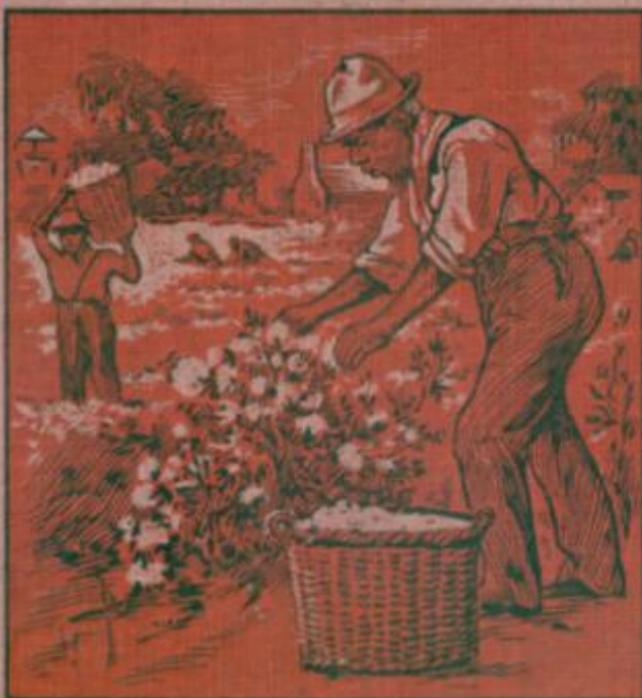








BONAVENTURE  
A · TALE · OF · LOUISIANA



GEORGE · W · CABLE



**BONAVENTURE**

**A Prose Pastoral of  
Acadian Louisiana**

By

GEORGE W. CABLE



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## BONAVENTURE.

## CARANCRO.

### CHAPTER I.

#### SOSTHÈNE.

Bayou Teche is the dividing line. On its left is the land of bayous, lakes, and swamps; on its right, the beautiful short-turfed prairies of Western Louisiana. The Vermilion River divides the vast prairie into the countries of Attakapas on the east and Opelousas on the west. On its west bank, at its head of navigation, lies the sorry little town of Vermilionville, near about which on the north and east the prairie rises and falls with a gentle swell, from whose crests one may, as from the top of a wave, somewhat overlook the surrounding regions.

Until a few years ago, stand on whichever one you might, the prospect stretched away, fair and distant, in broad level or gently undulating expanses of crisp, compact turf, dotted at remote intervals by farms, each with its low-roofed house nestled in a planted grove of oaks, or, oftener, Pride of China trees. Far and near [Pg 2] herds of horses and cattle roamed at will over the plain. If for a moment, as you passed from one point of view to another, the eye was shut in, it was only where in some lane you were walled in by fields of dense tall sugar-cane or cotton, or by huge green Chickasaw hedges, studded with their white-petalled, golden-centred roses. Eastward the plain broke into slight ridges, which, by comparison with the general level, were called hills; while toward the north it spread away in quieter swells, with more frequent fields and larger houses.

North, south, east, and west, far beyond the circle of these horizons, not this parish of Lafayette only, but St. Landry, St. Martin, Iberia, St. Mary's, Vermilion, — all are the land of the Acadians. This quarter off here to northward was named by the Nova-Scotian exiles, in memory of the land from which they were driven, the Beau Bassin. These small homestead groves that dot the plain far and

wide are the homes of their children. Here is this one on a smooth green billow of the land, just without the town. It is not like the rest,—a large brick house, its Greek porch half hid in a grove of oaks. On that dreadful day, more than a century ago, when the British in far-off Acadie shut into the chapel the villagers of Grand Pré, a certain widow fled with her children to the woods, and there subsisted for ten days on roots and berries, until finally, the standing crops as well as the houses being destroyed, she was compelled to accept exile, and in time found her way, with others, to these prairies. Her son founded Vermilionville. Her grandson rose [Pg 3] to power,—sat in the Senate of the United States. From early manhood to hale gray age, the people of his State were pleased to hold him, now in one capacity, now in another, in their honored service; they made him Senator, Governor, President of Convention, what you will. I have seen the portrait for which he sat in early manhood to a noted English court painter: dark waving locks; strong, well-chiselled features; fine clear eyes; an air of warm, steady-glowing intellectual energy. It hangs still in the home of which I speak. And I have seen an old ambrotype of him, taken in the days of this story: hair short-cropped, gray; eyes thoughtful, courageous; mouth firm, kind, and ready to smile.

It must have been some years before this picture was taken, that, as he issued from his stately porch,—which the oaks, young then, did not hide from view as they do now,—coming forth to mount for his regular morning ride, a weary-faced woman stood before him, holding by the hand a little toddling boy. She was sick; the child was hungry. He listened to her tale. Their conversation was in French.

“Widow, are you? And your husband was a Frenchman: yes, I see. Are you an Acadian? You haven’t the accent.”

“I am a Creole,” she said, with a perceptible flush of resentment. So that he responded amiably:—

“Yes, and, like all Creoles, proud of it, as you are right to be. But I am an Acadian of the Acadians, and never wished I was any thing else.”

He found her a haven a good half-day’s ride out [Pg 4] across the prairies north-westward, in the home of his long-time acquaintance,

Sosthène Gradnego, who had no more heart than his wife had to say No to either their eminent friend or a houseless widow; and, as to children, had so many already, that one more was nothing. They did not feel the burden of her, she died so soon; but they soon found she had left with them a positive quantity in her little prattling, restless, high-tempered Bonaventure. Bonaventure Deschamps: he was just two years younger than their own little Zoséphine.

Sosthène was already a man of some note in this region,—a region named after a bird. Why would it not often be well so to name places,—for the bird that most frequents the surrounding woods or fields? How pleasant to have one's hamlet called Nightingale, or Whippoorwill, or Goldfinch, or Oriole! The home of Zoséphine and Bonaventure's childhood was in the district known as Carancro; in bluff English, Carrion Crow.

## CHAPTER II.

### BONAVENTURE AND ZOSÉPHINE.

They did not live *à la chapelle*; that is, in the village of six or eight houses clustered about the small wooden spire and cross of the mission chapel. Sosthène's small ground-story cottage, with garret stairs outside in front on the veranda and its five-acre farm [Pg 5] behind, was not even on a highway nor on the edge of any rich *bas fond*,—creek-bottom. It was *au large*,—far out across the smooth, unscarred turf of the immense prairie, conveniently near one of the clear circular ponds—*maraises*—which one sees of every size and in every direction on the seemingly level land. Here it sat, as still as a picture, within its hollow square of China-trees, which every third year yielded their limbs for fuel; as easy to overlook the first time— as easy to see the next time— as a bird sitting on her eggs. Only the practised eye could read aright the infrequent obscure signs of previous travel that showed the way to it,—sometimes no more than the occasional soilure of the short turf by a few wheels or hoofs where the route led into or across the *coolées*—rivulets—that from *marais* to *marais* slipped southward toward the great marshes of the distant, unseen Gulf.

When I say the parent of one of these two children and guardian of the other was a man of note, I mean, for one thing, his house was painted. That he was the owner of thousands of cattle, one need not mention, for so were others who were quite inconspicuous, living in unpainted houses, rarely seeing milk, never tasting butter; men who at call of their baptismal names would come forth from these houses barefooted and bareheaded in any weather, and, while their numerous progeny grouped themselves in the doorway one behind another in inverse order of age and stature, would either point out your lost way, or, quite as readily as Sosthène, ask you in beneath a roof where [Pg 6] the coffee-pot never went dry or grew cold by day. Nor would it distinguish him from them to say he had many horses or was always well mounted. It was a land of horsemen. One met them incessantly; men in broad hats and dull homespun, with thin, soft, untrimmed brown beards, astride of small but handsome animals, in Mexican saddles, the girths and bridles of plaited hair, sometimes a *pialle* or *arriatte*—lasso, lariat—of plaited rawhide coiled at the saddle-bow. “Adieu, Onesime” —always adieu at meeting, the same as at parting. “Adieu, François; adieu, Christophe; adieu, Lazare;” and they with their gentle, brown-eyed, wild-animal gaze, “Adjieu.”

What did make Sosthène notable was the quiet thing we call thrift, made graceful by certain rudiments of taste. To say Sosthène, means Madame Sosthène as well; and this is how it was that Zoséphine Gradnego and Bonaventure Deschamps, though they went not to school, nevertheless had “advantages.” For instance, the clean, hard-scrubbed cypress floors beneath their pattering feet; the neat round parti-colored mats at the doors that served them for towns and villages; the strips of home-woven carpet that stood for roads—this one to Mermentau, that one to Côte Gelée, a third *à la chapelle*; the walls of unpainted pine; the beaded joists under the ceiling; the home-made furniture, bedsteads and wardrobes of stained woods, and hickory chairs with rawhide seats, hair uppermost; the white fringed counterpanes on the high featherbeds; especially, in the principal room, the house’s one mantelpiece, of wood showily stained in three [Pg 7] colors and surmounted by a pair of gorgeous vases, beneath which the two children used to stand and feast their eyes, worth fifty cents if they were worth one,—these

were as books to them indoors; and out in the tiny garden, where they played wild horse and wild cow, and lay in ambush for butterflies, they came under the spell of marigolds, prince's-feathers, lady-slippers, immortelles, portulaca, jonquil, lavender, althæa, love-apples, sage, violets, amaryllis, and that grass ribbon they call *jarretière de la vierge*,—the virgin's garter.

Time passed; the children grew. The children older than they in the same house became less and less like children, and began to disappear from the family board and roof by a mysterious process called marrying, which greatly mystified Zoséphine, but equally pleased her by the festive and jocund character of the occasions, times when there was a ravishing abundance of fried rice-cakes and *boulettes*—beef-balls.

To Bonaventure these affairs brought less mystery and less unalloyed pleasure. He understood them better. Some boys are born lovers. From the time they can reach out from the nurse's arms, they must be billing and cooing and choosing a mate. Such was ardent little Bonaventure; and none of the Gradnego weddings ever got quite through its ceremony without his big blue eyes being found full of tears—tears of mingled anger and desolation—because by some unpardonable oversight he and Zoséphine were still left unmarried. So that the pretty damsel would have to take him aside, and kiss him as they clasped, and promise him, "Next time—next time, without fail!"

[Pg 8] Nevertheless, he always reaped two proud delights from these events. For one, Sosthène always took him upon his lap and introduced him as his little Creole. And the other, the ex-governor came to these demonstrations—the great governor! who lifted him to his knee and told him of those wonderful things called cities, full of people that could read and write; and about steamboats and steam-cars.

At length one day, when weddings had now pretty well thinned out the ranks of Sosthène's family, the ex-governor made his appearance though no marriage was impending. Bonaventure, sitting on his knee, asked why he had come, and the ex-governor told him there was war.

"Do you not want to make haste and grow up and be a dragoon?"

The child was silent, and Sosthène laughed a little as he said privately in English, which tongue his exceptional thrift had put him in possession of:

“Aw, naw!” —he shook his head amusedly— “he dawn’t like hoss. Go to put him on hoss, he kick like a frog. Yass; squeal wuss’n a pig. But still, sem time, you know, he ain’t no coward; git mad in minute; fight like little ole ram. Dawn’t ondstand dat little fellah; he love flower’ like he was a gal.”

“He ought to go to school,” said the ex-governor. And Sosthène, half to himself, responded in a hopeless tone:

“Yass.” Neither Sosthène nor any of his children had ever done that.

[Pg 9]

### CHAPTER III.

#### ATHANASIOUS.

War it was. The horsemen grew scarce on the wide prairies of Opelousas. Far away in Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, on bloody fields, many an Acadian volunteer and many a poor conscript fought and fell for a cause that was really none of theirs, simple, non-slaveholding peasants; and many died in camp and hospital—often of wounds, often of fevers, often of mere longing for home. Bonaventure and Zoséphine learned this much of war: that it was a state of affairs in which dear faces went away, and strange ones came back with tidings that brought bitter wailings from mothers and wives, and made *les vieux*—the old fathers—sit very silent. Three times over that was the way of it in Sosthène’s house.

It was also a condition of things that somehow changed boys into men very young. A great distance away, but still in sight southward across the prairie, a dot of dark green showed where dwelt a sister and brother-in-law of Sosthène’s *vieille*,—wife. There was not the same domestic excellence there as at Sosthène’s; yet the dooryard was very populous with fowls; within the house was always heard the hard thump, thump, of the loom, or the loud moan of the spinning-wheel; and the children were many. The eldest was

Athanase. Though but fifteen he was already stalwart, and showed that intelligent [Pg 10] sympathy in the family cares that makes such offspring the mother's comfort and the father's hope. At that age he had done but one thing to diminish that comfort or that hope. One would have supposed an ambitious chap like him would have spent his first earnings, as other ambitious ones did, for a saddle; but 'Thanase Beausoleil had bought a fiddle.

He had hardly got it before he knew how to play it. Yet, to the father's most welcome surprise, he remained just as bold a rider and as skilful a thrower of the *arriatte* as ever. He came into great demand for the Saturday-night balls. When the courier with a red kerchief on a wand came galloping round, the day before, from *île* to *île*,—for these descendants of a maritime race call their homestead groves islands,—to tell where the ball was to be, he would assert, if there was even a hope of it, that 'Thanase was to be the fiddler.

In this way 'Thanase and his pretty little *jarmaine*—first cousin—Zoséphine, now in her fourteenth year, grew to be well acquainted. For at thirteen, of course, she began to move in society, which meant to join in the contra-dance. 'Thanase did not dance with her, or with any one. She wondered why he did not; but many other girls had similar thoughts about themselves. He only played, his playing growing better and better, finer and finer, every time he was heard anew. As to the few other cavaliers, very willing were they to have it so. The music could not be too good, and if 'Thanase was already perceptibly a rival when hoisted up in a chair on top of a table, [Pg 11] fiddle and bow in hand, "twisting," to borrow their own phrase—"twisting the ears of that little red beast and rubbing his abdomen with a stick," it was just as well not to urge him to come down into the lists upon the dancing-floor. But they found one night, at length, that the music could be too good—when 'Thanase struck up something that was not a dance, and lads and damsels crowded around standing and listening and asking ever for more, and the ball turned out a failure because the concert was such a success.

The memory of that night was of course still vivid next day, Sunday, and Zoséphine's memory was as good as any one's. I wish you

might have seen her in those days of the early bud. The time had returned when Sosthène could once more get all his household – so had marriages decimated it – into one vehicle, a thing he had not been able to do for almost these twenty years. Zoséphine and Bonaventure sat on a back seat contrived for them in the family calèche. In front were the broad-brimmed Campeachy hat of Sosthène and the meek, limp sunbonnet of *la vieille*. About the small figure of the daughter there was always something distinguishing, even if you rode up from behind, that told of youth, of mettle, of self-regard; a neatness of fit in the dress, a firm erectness in the little slim back, a faint proudness of neck, a glimpse of ribbon at the throat, another at the waist; a something of assertion in the slight crispness of her homespun sunbonnet, and a ravishing glint of two sparks inside it as you got one glance within – no more. [Pg 12] And as you rode on, if you were a young blade, you would be – as the soldier lads used to say – all curled up; but if you were an old mustache, you would smile inwardly and say to yourself, “She will have her way; she will make all winds blow in her chosen direction; she will please herself; she will be her own good luck and her own commander-in-chief, and, withal, nobody’s misery or humiliation, unless you count the swain after swain that will sigh in vain.” As for Bonaventure, sitting beside her, you could just see his bare feet limply pendulous under his wide palm-leaf hat. And yet he was a very real personage.

“Bonaventure,” said Zoséphine, – this was as they were returning from church, the wide rawhide straps of their huge wooden two-wheeled vehicle creaking as a new saddle would if a new saddle were as big as a house, – “Bonaventure, I wish you could learn how to dance. I am tired trying to teach you.” (This and most of the unbroken English of this story stands for Acadian French.)

Bonaventure looked meek for a moment, and then resentful as he said:

“‘Thanase does not dance.”

“‘Thanase! Bah! What has ‘Thanase to do with it? Who was even thinking of ‘Thanase? Was he there last night? Ah yes! I just remember now he was. But even he could dance if he chose; while you – you can’t learn! You vex me. ‘Thanase! What do you always bring him up for? I wish you would have the kindness just not to

remind me of him! [Pg 13] Why does not some one tell him how he looks, hoisted up with his feet in our faces, scratching his fiddle? Now, the fiddle, Bonaventure—the fiddle would just suit you. Ah, if you could play!" But the boy's quick anger so flashed from his blue eyes that she checked herself and with contemplative serenity added:

"Pity nobody else can play so well as that tiresome fellow. It was positively silly, the way some girls stood listening to him last night. I'd be ashamed, or, rather, too proud, to flatter such a high-headed care-for-nobody. I wish he wasn't my cousin!"

Bonaventure, still incensed, remarked with quiet intensity that he knew why she wished 'Thanase was not a cousin.

"It's no such a thing!" exclaimed Zoséphine so forcibly that Madame Sosthène's sunbonnet turned around, and a murmur of admonition came from it. But the maiden was smiling and saying blithely to Bonaventure:

"Oh, you—you can't even guess well." She was about to say more, but suddenly hushed. Behind them a galloping horse drew near, softly pattering along the turfy road. As he came abreast, he dropped into a quiet trot.

The rider was a boyish yet manly figure in a new suit of gray home-made linsey, the pantaloons thrust into the tops of his sturdy russet boots, and the jacket ending underneath a broad leather belt that carried a heavy revolver in its holster at one hip. A Campeachy hat shaded his face and shoulders, and a pair of Mexican spurs tinkled their little steel bells against their [Pg 14] huge five-spiked rowels on his heels. He scarcely sat in the saddle-tree—from hat to spurs you might have drawn a perpendicular line. It would have taken in shoulders, thighs, and all.

"Adjieu," said the young centaur; and Sosthène replied from the creaking calèche, "Adjieu, 'Thanase," while the rider bestowed his rustic smile upon the group. Madame Sosthène's eyes met his, and her lips moved in an inaudible greeting; but the eyes of her little daughter were in her lap. Bonaventure's gaze was hostile. A word or two passed between uncle and nephew, including a remark and

admission that the cattle-thieves were getting worse than ever; and with a touch of the spur, the young horseman galloped on.

It seems enough to admit that Zoséphine's further remarks were silly without reporting them in full.

"Look at his back! What airs! If I had looked up I should have laughed in his face!" etc. "Well," she concluded, after much such chirruping, "there's one comfort—he doesn't care a cent for me. If I should die to-morrow, he would forget to come to the funeral. And you think I wouldn't be glad? Well, you're mistaken, as usual. I hate him, and I just know he hates me! Everybody hates me!"

The eyes of her worshipper turned upon her. But she only turned her own away across the great plain to the vast arching sky, and patted the calèche with a little foot that ached for deliverance from its Sunday shoe. Then her glance returned, and all the rest of the way home she was as sweet as the last dip of cane-juice from the boiling battery.

[Pg 15]

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE CONSCRIPT OFFICER.

By and by 'Thanase was sixteen. Eighteen was the lowest age for conscription, yet he was in the Confederate uniform. But then so was his uncle Sosthène; so was his father. It signified merely that he had been received into the home guard. The times were sadly unsettled. Every horseman, and how much more every group of horsemen, that one saw coming across the prairie, was watched by anxious eyes, from the moment they were visible specks, to see whether the uniform would turn out to be the blue or the gray. Which was the more unwelcome I shall not say, but this I can, that the blue meant invasion and the gray meant conscription. Sosthène was just beyond the limit of age, and 'Thanase two years below it; but 'Thanase's father kept a horse saddled all the time, and slept indoors only on stormy nights.

Do not be misled: he was neither deserter nor coward; else the nickname which had quite blotted out his real name would not have