

Patricia Eakins

FROM “THE SAGE AND THE MEEMIE WORM”

PART THE FIFTH
OF THE WHOLE RELATION

THE MARVELOUS ADVENTURES OF PIERRE BAPTISTE
FATHER AND MOTHER
FIRST AND LAST

INCLUDING:

The Tribulations of Bondage in the Sugar Isles
Pierre’s Escape from Certain Harm to His Person
How He Was Marooned
His Friends & Religion
His True Wife & Fishy Consorts
His Children, Born from His Mouth Like Words
Physics and Metaphysics
Cyclopedish Histoire
Flora, Fauna, & Mysteriosi
Revenge and Devotion
Divinations
Commonplace Book

Being a true account of the life and times of an African man of letters,
a Son of Guinée born into bondage, whose ambitions were realized in
STRANGE AND UNEXPECTED WAYS, yet who made his PEACE with
several gods and established a REALM of Equality & Freedom & Bounty,
in which no creature lives from another’s labor.

PART THE FIFTH
THE SAGE AND THE MEEMIE WORM

YOU HAVE SEEN for yourself, Kind Reader, Pierre was an educated man, already a CORRESPONDENT, though by proxy, of the great BUFFON. I fancied I worked my way closer to him, by craft and subterfuge, the slave's safest means to any end. Yet, save for excursions to the factor in St. Domingue, I had never been away from the master's estate. Though I had seen white men in bag wigs with embroidered waistcoats, I had never seen the likes of the prodigal who now returned from France, viz., Pamphile, whose foretop was pomaded so high he must carry his hat beneath his arm, whilst on his other arm he wore a ribboned muff such as I had only seen a woman wear, and seen but a woman walk with an umbrella for a stick or wear red shoes, and patches on the face.

T'were well-nigh impossible to credit the notion the effete rogue Pamphile had been permitted to visit the illustrious philosophe who had translated Newton into French. Then again, two watches bulged the fob pocket of Pamphile's breeches, which watches kept the time in the physical and metaphysical realms, of numbers and music, respectively, which watches, moreover, Pamphile consulted with an ostentatious frequency, pursing his lips so knowingly that even his father, who had read so many books, credited him with having learned, in France, something of the new philosophy, though he be too great a dolt to learn it well. Yet if Pamphile could make no credible pretense to learning, he could make a great one to posturing. For this capacity, mayhap, to present himself as an ornament, a human ormolu, or exotic plume, Pierre had inveigled himself by preening and flattering into the graces of BUFFON,

WHO, Pamphile recounted, was large, tall, erect and muscular, pompous and deliberate in manner, with bright white hair daily set in the crimpety, old-fashioned style by an all-too-confiding dresser, who retailed most scandalous accounts of lust & vanity & diverse medlies of wickedness, whilst Buffon laughed in a hearty yet supercilious manner, his eyes popping like the eyes of a glutton who has spied an enormous roast.

"Do not picture him hunched as a scrivener over embryonic conceptions while the sun is climbing the sky"—here Pierre Baptiste cringes—"for he carries his notions in his head till he has got them fully fleshed"—here Pierre of the conjure house puffs himself up—"taking endless solitary

turns along the fragrant paths of his garden, attired in a sumptuous dressing gown of yellow-and-white-striped stuff sprigged with the most exquisite blue flowers. (I have tried to have the work copied but 'twas too complex for the blind old whores who would trust me to pay.) Swaggering with his walking stick, our bold philosophe treads the mazy paths 'twixt his manicured beds, his hand on his hip, like so, regarding from the superb vantage of eighty thousand pounds a year the shabby, sprawling world of flora and fauna that struggles outside his garden hedge. And daintily adjusting his sleeve ruffles, he composes his variations, dictating at intervals in perfect periods to his ever-patient secretary.

“He will not suffer anyone to beard him, in the musing, preoccupied hours of strolling and dictating, strolling and dictating, but waits 'till dinner to enjoy the company of his guests, who are dying of ennui, you may be sure. His horses are tame; no one he invites plays dice or cards or wagers even in jest. What a yawn! *Précieuses* and *sycophantes* mincing from chair to chair, trying their wit whilst sucking their snuff—he is the great cock among these hens, I swear.

“Into the room of gold and blue where his guests are sitting on the edges of their chairs, he makes a slow, grand entrance, a gliding sarabande. And lo, the democrat, turns to close the door himself with discreet and delicate flourish, before he turns to greet the assembly of twits.

“To those who attend his every word as grain-starved fowl some kernels of corn in the dust, he most graciously avows, ‘Today have I composed some passages of the most sublime elegance,’ winding his side curls around his little finger.

“Then does he read his draft to his guests, now squinting close to the page, now declaiming from memory, taking scrupulous note of the angle at which the meanest serving wench holds her ear to listen”—here Pierre winces at Pamphile’s tone of cynical badinage—“even once asking the opinion of a dog, thereby much putting out the tail-wagging priest who dogs him.” (Here Pamphile snickers in his green-gold sleeve.)

Pierre would have wagged his tail as Buffon’s dog, his dogged anonymous secretary, eying from the shadows the long-waisted pink and yellow dowagers primly packing their cheeks with snuff as the great man paces, a noble actor turning and turning to display his best-made side.

“It is well known,” Buffon declares, “that in the matter of testimony by witnesses the assertion of two possible witnesses to the effect that they

have seen something constitutes completely acceptable proof, whereas the testimony of a thousand or ten thousand negative witnesses, who merely assert that they have not seen something, suffices only to produce a slight doubt.”

Pierre yearns to be present, to cry, “Astonishing! Wonderful! Quintessentially marvelous!” He might dare suggest the great one refine a point, invert a phrase, to more vivid effect. In this way he would assert his superiority to his station, while flattering the sage.

My hopes were of a mythic ascent, like a god in a chair in a tragedy, such a divinity as one sees in the frontispiece of “Chloëthon,” rising to a heaven occupied by Buffon and his correspondents, where conversation be a most engaging and dramatic alternation of repartée and tirades, such as might have been written as parts for ideal nobles of noble ideals, illustri who are not moved by rude considerations, viz., lust & greed & gluttony, but desire only to increase the stock of knowledge and beauty in the world.

Would I not make a more elegant sycophant than the bald, lame priest Ignace, hobbling behind the great one, bobbing his fat round head, whining and begging “to be the one allowed to assert, before all others, my conviction before almighty God the present Author were a greater master of rhetoric & grammar & logic than any man who had ever lived, unless the King should turn his hand,” & etc. Fie on such fooforal unctious! Consider with what dignified courtesy I would have removed the great one’s napkin from his neck, always looking for the moment to mention my own shadow *histoire*, the people’s accounts of Guinée, of transportation, and of bondage, the airy pages stored in the drawers of the sugar-jewel chest in my crystal conjure house, so all that was lost in field & yard be preserved in the universal mind of Man. For my contribution to the cyclopedish completeness of knowledge, might I not look to be promoted, from napkin-tucker, to scribe, to secretary, to under-savant, to savant, to philosophe, to auteur, with no duties to perform but to think? So I was wont to lose myself in reverie, standing behind my master’s chair with his napkin over my arm.

And so my Vérité found herself saddled with a useless savant, who did not maintain the thatch or hoe yams or set snare for finch, except as

badgered by Apostle and by Squint, yet who ate from her bowls, and beseeched her to drape around his neck, before he supped, the scrap of sacking that was his napkin, to stand behind him as he ate and wait on him, so his manners would gentle.

Bare. Bare. Look down his nose at lice in our hair. With so much puff in him, how can he walk on the ground? Brass-buttons! Lace cravats! Will fancy-mince roll me in flour? Off to the tailor's. Stand when I enter the room. I sweat eau de mille fleurs, never step out of my chamber unless in my periwig, in the privvy drop roses of sugar.

Yet when Pélérine discovered an itch in her savant's side, an infection of the hideous MEEMIE-WORM, which afflicted the green boys from the tanks, she patiently dug out its head with a knife, having pacified Pierre with rum. She nailed the head of the cursed worm to a twig and twisted the twig a number of times, each day, for several days, wrapping the worm around it, until the nasty creature was pulled from its suppurating burrow under my skin. She spit tobacco juice on the wound to purify it, then dropped the worm in boiling water, to murder its body and soul. She unrolled its corpse to a grim, ghastly length of four feet, dried it, chopped it, & pounded it to dust. She wrapped a pinch of this dust in a shred of cloth from an old satin coat of M'sieu's, with lime, & lye, & a vulture's eye, & a worm made of sugar, that looked as my meemish persecutor had looked, and placed this packet in my talisman pouch, to protect me from the meemie worms, THE REVENGE OF GUINÉE for SWOLLEN PRIDE.

Later she dug up a paddle, carved in the shape of a turtle with the face of a man, she had buried under her bed, so no one would find it who searched her house for juju tricks. Rubbing the belly of the turtle with a small, flat stone, she sang in a low, sweet voice a song I had not heard before:

N'go-la-la ha-i-né
B'wa pa-d'ma ha-i-né
N'go la n'd'ha-i-né

This was a song in his tongue she had learn't from a frail old man on Ravenal's place, who had not enough words in the common speech to translate. Yet the strength of the words were as an amulet that exerted its power from mystery. Always, if a person who sang this song rubbed

the stone against the belly of the man-headed turtle, in the way the rubbing had always been done, lights appeared in the branches of the trees. Just so, the peaceful dead emerged, the shadow the past would cast on the future. When she saw these lights—and truly they came, for I saw them myself—she shook a gourd she kept hidden under her skirts. Squatting in the light of the cooking fire, she slowly tilted the gourd. From a hole near its top there rolled onto the ground the cowrie shells with which she divined, and falling silent among them, the fragile dry body of a horned beetle, yet without his horns.

When she saw the precise manner in which that headless, hornless bug had fallen amongst the shells, she started, and shivered, and gazed at me sideways, and shook her head.

Visitor up from the region of forgetting. Don't ask! Among open mouths he shakes down darkness. You suck an orange, fool of wrong wind. Tragedy is high game. How many nipples and how many toes? Sugar Fire burn his clothes off, invisible his bones. Visitor. No mouth knows his name. Visitor! Shhhhh!

One by one she dropped the cowries back into the gourd, but the beetle she left on the ground, only drawing a circle around it. She would not say what she had seen, but busied herself hiding the wooden turtle, which was the paddle we used to start the rafts of the dead out to sea. Then she took some yams we had been saving to break our fast and laid them before the hungry lights in the trees. Ever after, did I mention Buffon, or my shadow histoire, she shook her head. Did I look to the day when my fidelity had earned my freedom, or muse on the house in an orange grove I would dwell in then, she chuckled grimly.

For my part, I took the lights in the trees for the torches of maroons, whom chance had brought from some other isle to see what they could steal, yet I was discomfited by my wife's prophetic intimations, which had hatched in my innards a hidden brood of doubts that did consume me under my skin.

Yet I often woke at night to find she watched me as I slept; she would stroke my brow and rub my shoulders, soothing me to slumber, as if I had been a child. Did I but pass my hand across my brow, she did hasten to brew a sweet and soothing herbal decoction. And I saw she meant me very well. Her twisted body spoke a word of my godmothers' alphabet, spelling "tenderness" in their tongue. In time she unfolded HER TALE.

When she had been a gay, quick girl, her old master, Ravenal, of St. Hildebert, had taken her across the sea to Paris to be schooled as a cook, both ordinary and fine, and moreover as a sugar baker, to construct subtleties of almond paste mixed with rice & scented waters & various gums. And in the tangible closeness of travel he had taken her into his bed, hedging the expense of finding her. Once in Paris she had a cap with kissing strings and patched her face and went arm-in-arm with her master. She had an apron of lace as finely made as the greatest lady's, and rosettes on her shoes as large. She talked freely with all and soon surmised that under the laws she could not be held in bondage inside France. Yet rather than fleeing she told Ravenal she would fain take leave, to seek her fortune. Whereupon he fell to his knees and wrung his hands in her apron and wet her petticoat with his tears, begging her not to desert him, rolling his eyes most piteously. He was accustomed to her presence, he allowed, weeping copiously, besotted with passion, said he, pawing the muff she wore on her sleeve, moreover most bitterly mindful he had spent a fortune in training her to bake gilt sugar pies filled with live frogs that he might shew our islands as refined in the use of our own products and their subsequent manufactures, as any capital of Europe. She owed him a successor, that she must train from among her fellows; when she had indulged him thus, he would release her with perfervid gladness. And all this most sweet and reasonable entreaty did sway her. Moreover she pitied his pock-marked face, which the white girls mocked behind their fans.

Vérité returned with Ravenal to St. Hildebert. There she taught the people, not only spectacle, viz., a sugar stag that bleeds claret when its side is pierced, though she had never seen a stag, but delectations to tease Ravenal's palate. She confided the rule for peppercorn paté, for tarragon sauce and duck's-foot pudding, and later gave herself over to please a certain sugary little wife, who had very black teeth, and coughed up blood, and was rumored to have been sent on the packet boat, in the hold with some hounds. And Vérité taught that drab the use of sesame seeds and red pepper, that she might please her husband. Yet despite all Vérité's most pleasant compliance, when she went to her master to remind him of his promise to free her, averring she had fulfilled her part of the bargain most richly, he chuckled in his sleeve ruffle. "Now," he said. "We are home."

Toad eye in his stew! And droppings of birds in the bread dough! His I spoil and his and spoil! And the little blue shoes of his little blue wife!

Still faithless Ravenal bade Vérité come to his bed. Though she cursed and reviled him, he did but chortle and slap her, the heat of his temper increasing the heat of his passion. He tied her and took her like an animal, from the rear. He tore her gowns from spite and gave her uncouth smocks of coarse stuff that barely covered her knees. She fled into a swamp to be chased by plashing, barking hounds; shivering in the water, she betrayed herself with a sneeze and was driven home on a lead like an unruly horse he would break to his will. She began lifting her smock above her head in every corner, giving herself freely to the newest hands, desperate, sad, rough men, that did not speak a language she knew and gnashed their teeth in their sleep.

Suffer them—on me. My scent is up, my heat, they crawl from the holds and jump for meat. Alas! Too high! Hung too long and covered with flies born from what crawls in the flesh. And who will have the bones, the bones, who will have the bones?

When she gave birth, she smothered the babe as soon as she had bitten through the cord. She trussed its arms and legs tight and snug, and she stuffed it with sausage and leek, with plenty of lardons under the skin and a bitter manchineel apple in its mouth. And she entrusted it to no-one but turned it on the spit herself, in the middle of the night, when all the household were in bed. And when the skin was crackling and crisp, she set the roast on the bottom crust of a sugar pie-shell, with roasted finches all around. And when the top crust was nearly baked, she released under its dome forty-eight live finches, and baked them in. And she showed it herself before her master's company table, raising the platter high above her head and smiling when the guests praised the flight of singing birds that soared above their silent brothers. Then she cut the pie to nice bits and set the platter down in front of her master and his ringleted wife with a sauce of saffron and clove.

"So, Mistress, eat! I have already tasted."

But the lady saw a little hand, and she began to moan and pray. And the master heaved upon the table, though the provenance of the roasted meat was obscured in the brown of its crispy coat. Were it her master's brat the cook would not say, yet though Ravenal seized the whip from his overseer and flogged her himself till her flesh hung in strips from

her back. She would not say whose the babe, though with his own hands he rubbed her with salt till she fainted. Would not say whose babe though he rolled her in molasses and dusted her with golden pollen he had bidden the people, under pain of lashing, shake on her from those cursed orchids. Would not say though he tied her arms around a rail and hung her in the sun, sticky and wounded and gleaming, to be tortured by the feet and mouths of ants.

She was guarded by several half-shamed ragged little whites of the militia and some zealous house yellows hissing and taunting her for the privileges she had previously claimed. And Ravenal gave orders to leave her hanging while the sun crossed the sky and slipped into the ocean. Unless she say whose the babe, she would be given no food or drink.

And her guards knew she never would say and did not like these duties, for they feared the smell of her blood would bring rats and dogs and pigs and vultures, and they would have to fight them off. For the master had fancied the girl; though he be angry he would not want her body gnawed. Oh, he should have paid them more, for what they had to do. They sent one of their number to petition for rum and said they would leave their posts if they did not get all they wanted. They swore they drank to keep themselves awake, then passed out one by one; soon they were all asleep.

When clouds veiled the moon, some Xuacomac crept past the dozing guards to fill Vérité's mouth with sweet, fresh water and to press healing leaves on her wounds. And these solicitous friends cut the ropes that held her body and lowered her to the ground, where they made a ring of white pebbles around her, to keep the insects away. They prodded her awake to show her their sign, a peg driven into the ground, its upper end wedged into a split twig to form a tall triangle. She must make this sign wherever she was and so solicit their protection. Yet though she begged them, they did not take her away. They could not, for they were dead; her time had not yet come. And this began her instruction in the ways of those who serve Uncle Dio.

When her master found her on the ground in the morning, he whipped her guards, even the white ones. He pulled her out of the ring of pebbles to draw his smoking iron over her cheeks, her forehead, her lips, and chin, to make her entire face a scar; then he laid his iron over the sweet soft meat of her privvy parts.

“Now are you branded above and below,” he said. “And now I will sell you, not for a cook, but for a hand, to some impoverished planter whose kitchen is one rude pot he throws some birds in. Like as not he will work you to death in his rocky fields, for your face is ugly, your womb spoiled, your temper spiteful and vicious; you are a foul witch that has no heart.”

But when she came on the block, Ravenal’s coachman slipped a word to a postilion of our M’sieu, allowing this twisted creature were a trained cook and a baker of subtleties in sugar, worth a very high price, save for Ravenal’s wish for revenge. And she could be kept in the kitchen, so her disfigurement would not repulse the whites . . . And think of her gratitude, not to be sold to a pauper . . . and the savings to your M’sieu, the prestige of his table. . . . “Yet I do not wish to deceive; he must have the dishes tasted.”

And our M’sieu did suffer a poor client bid her low for him, to flout Ravenal, and bought Vérité for his estate, to boss his kitchen, and bake him jumballs in the shapes of fauna and flora, and kiss his buckled feet.

The press-down kettle weight the fly-stuck eye the skull they think cover all is grass, is grass, and smoke groan over the paving stones they have vaunted up—HA! I am patience, circle-hawk the coop, the chickens egg-cracked. So be. So. World spider come to us with tongue-twisted gut rope, smoke-red eyes—I will not be daunted down, will not be flaunted round. You cannot come without say-so. And who say so? Me. In my place, chink-spying all the sky say cry, cry, cry that ember in the stubble. Cinder and ash have whited him, but blow a little past his heart, he catch, he catch, and glow red and black. My talk falls one word dropping after another rain blurring light. Still all is rain.

Head patted, tears sopped, nose and arse wiped: my entire life I had known but the kindness of women. So many nursing mothers suckling me with their own babes, warmed my marrow with their own bones’ warmth, their voices flowing like molasses:

Ba-wal loo-mah ba-ha-wa loo-a-to

Ba-wal loo-mah ba-ha-wa ba-lu-ba wa!

Slung by day on the backs of cane-cutting women, by night passed among their huts, a cosseted child had grown to a cosseted man, a Goody who thrived on the careful ministrations of the female sex. Oh my! So heartily did I believe in the kindness of women, I could not be convinced my

wife be wicked, even when she told me she had murdered her child, for she had pulled the meemie from my side.

Yet her sleep were troubled with a haunting visitant, viz., the specter of the roasted infant, its flesh falling in hideous cutlets from its ribs. From the mouth of this piteous haunt there issued a whinny, a wail, a bleat, as if it cried out its suffering and laid it at her feet. When she woke up moaning, stuffing her fists in her mouth to stop her groans, I rocked her stiff and sob-wracked body in my arms as an affrighted child, singing her to sleep with her own lullaby:

Ba-wal loo-mah ba-ha-wa loo-a-to.

Pélerine Vérité—didn't she name herself, then? Didn't she? Before she was mutilated and came to Dufay's, she was called Beauty, a name Ravenal had given as well to one of his cows, so that, to distinguish between the woman and the cow, they called her "Beauty-Girl" or even "Beauty-Strumpet." Yet she was not distinguished from the cow in all respects, for, like cattle, we slaves were branded on the shoulder, and this were true, even on Dufay's estate. But only Beauty-Girl Ravenal branded all over her body, as to say it belonged all to him, cow and cow again. But she would not be cowed. Like a baptized sinner, she stepped re-born from her bath in her babe's blood and her own. She would answer only to her new name. Her fancy clothes stripped from her back, she crocheted for herself a tucker and neckerchief from cobweb strands, so she covered the neck of her chemise. And she crocheted a pinner with lappets that sat pert and pretty on her head. So they could not prevent her dressing herself dainty and carrying herself with grace, like a lady.

Her murder of her helpless babe I charge to the wretched institution, SLAVERY, which has hideously deformed the natural goodness of so many sons and daughters of Guinée, even as the iron had scarred to a twisted, close-eyed leer my Pélerine's face, the organ of expression, in which the delicate nostrils would otherwise expand and contract; the volatile lips curve and straighten; the forehead wrinkle and the eyes, the soul's lanterns, flicker and flare, sparkle and again be shuttered. Seared, all seared! And even so the iron had scarred her pudenda, the organ of generation, so that it was stiff and crooked, its several parts melted together, as a candle-mold that has been burned in a fire. Was my wife to blame for these afflictions?

The more I contemplated her miserable history, the more I distrusted my own good fortune, to work in the big house, so close to the whites. Though M'sieu had rescued Pélérine, I blamed him for Ravenal's cruelty. Our M'sieu, too, owned and used, with whatever reluctance, a silver iron. To M'sieu's benefit there turned a mill that had crushed whole men, and, yes, our M'sieu had sold their pulp with the rum, and would not sieve them out, so their grieving widows had no shred to send into the wave. Oh, this same M'sieu, guileless at his easel, filling an outline with chalk or wash, come nightfall joined his friends in revelry, planter among planters, white among whites. Oh then I saw Baron Skull!

His eyes glittered through the master's round amazed ones as he gave me for my wedding gift, not the garden that was customary, but a cast-off hat, only a little frayed at the edges, & breeches & a coat, which would have lent more dignity to my new estate had they been furnished with buttons or laces.

Yet I disguised my resentment as a servant must. I bore myself with the stolid mien that was meet for my station. As I could stand so quiet with my back to a wall for so many hours, waiting to change the plates or trim the wicks, M'sieu did frequently charge me to attend him when his friends assembled. And though I loathed that porcine company of sots, I feigned impassivity, not only to avoid punishment, but to hear of the world, retailed in gossip over cards.