

H-France Salon

Volume 14, Issue 8, #3

Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges and His Mother: An Epic

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HOMAGE TO CHEVALIER de SAINT-GEORGES

1.

For Paris sojourns I occupy an apartment
on rue du Chevalier de Saint-Georges,
its arrondissement plaque dedicated to
a man who lived 1739 until 1799, cited as
MUSICIEN ET CHEF D'ORCHESTRE,
COLONEL DE LA GARDE NATIONALE

Who was this man? I asked my neo-Parisian son.
He was a beautiful-blend, biracial, like me.
Too little a description, but enough intrigue
to have me seek stories of this chevalier who
knew fame and claimed a place in French history.

2.

The saga of le Chevalier de Saint-Georges began
at his birth to Nanon, belle of the Antilles, slave
and concubine of Georges de Bologne Saint-Georges,
a wealthy French planter in Guadeloupe, who sired
the boy, christened Joseph de Bologne, called
half-breed bastard by the scornful, yet seen
a privileged mulatto, cinnamon skin, curly hair,
evidence of wanton, decadent chambering.

Georges had a wife and young daughter,
six years older than Joseph, welcomed
as an acquisition to Georges' household,
for Madame de Bologne Saint-Georges
was said to accept Georges' divided
and dual family life, a colonial custom.

3.

The Creole chatter while cutting cane judged Nanon an enchantress, her son beyond their ken: *Sharp as a machete, fidgety but clever, can read their Bible and write his name; he sings their songs, likes that tinkly music the master plays more than ours. O, he's going to find his whiteness will darken his destiny.*

Joseph's destiny changed at age eight when Georges' sword-play, fatal for an adversary in a fencing duel, had him flee to France, where both his families joined him, though installed apart, wife and daughter in Agen, Nanon and son in the Paris of French gentry.

4.

Paris at the onset of winter beneath gloomy clouds sending sleet onto cobble stone streets, crowded with carriages stalled, their horses too cold to canter. Even so, Georges went about the city with his tawny-tinted progeny, visiting taverns: *They stare at us, Papa, and things they say!* Haughty gazes and crude slurs had the boy know his father's misalliance scorned, yet salon society embraced their audacity.

Nanon, shivering, refused exposure to the climate and the clientele of venues George frequented, fearing rebuff she dreaded being seen, regretted being brought to Paris, regretted being.

5.

Georges keen to train his *filis métis* for life amid French aristocracy, enrolled him in Boessière's academy for schooling in history, literature, philosophy, music, horsemanship and the art of fencing; other students, sons of nobility, asked, *Who is this gangly, dusky stranger?*

Soon they would know Joseph to be
best among them in fencing matches;
fierce and feared, his rapier at the ready,
his wrath and resentment sheathed.

Word of *Boessière's mulatto* spread to
Italy and England among fencers eager
for *en garde* to test Saint-Georges' finesse.

6.

He came of age in an era when mastering
the art of fencing was the key to celebrity;
invited to salons with aristocracy, hunts
with nobility; a guest at royal festivals
he fancied dancing with ladies of the court,
in elegant attire custom made for his
lean-limbed frame (his tailor gained fame);
he gained renown as a man about town
chevalier de nuit, his *intoxicant* emitted
among Parisians *who traveled the night*.*

Saint-Georges had rivals and enemies,
even more abundant than his admirers,
keeping him vigilant, always *en garde*.

7.

In his early years Saint-Georges played
the harpsicord and violin, the latter his
instrument of choice; returning to it
in performances, his bow as sprightly
as his sword, he won hearty applause,
spurring him to compose fast-paced
violin concertos, lively chamber music
commissioned by Marie-Antoinette,
and symphonies with Saint-Georges
on the podium as *chef d'orchestre*.

In the same epoch Mozart appeared
in Paris, where fans of Saint-Georges
proclaimed him their *Mozart noir*.

* Thanks to Danielle Georges.

8.

In the throes of the French Revolution
Saint-Georges' musical and fencing events
gave way to enlistment in the National Guard;
with a regiment of men of color designated
Légion nationale des Américains/Légion noire
under the command of Colonel Saint-Georges
and his friend Lieutenant Alexandre Dumas,
Lille was defended against a band of royalists,
their advance to Paris halted, *les noirs* heralded.

Heroes for an hour, then dispersed, dispatched
elsewhere, tension between the officers laid bare,
stirring suspicions of Saint-Georges' loyalty.

9.

Like a candle that glows, flickers, sputters 'til
its charred wick stands in darkness, the fame of
Saint-Georges went up in smoke, his past perused:
guest at Versailles festivals, genuflected the king,
entertained the queen, has a crest on his ring.
Arrested and imprisoned as *citoyen Georges*,
he endured confinement for nearly a year
in despair, under threat of being guillotined.
Music, I need music. Fetch my violin.
Request denied, his music *contre-révolutionnaire*.

Freed, charges against him dismissed,
free to join *le Cercle de l'Harmonie*, lift
the orchestra to new heights as its conductor
before he grew too weak to wave his baton.

10.

His Paris orbit diminished, his prestige tarnished,
could refuge and reward await in Guadeloupe?
Saint-Georges sailed westward to find disarray,
plantations abandoned, slaves uprising, rebelling,
his first home gone; he returned to his last home,
humble Paris lodgings, where his care-giver,
a *Légion noire* veteran, was to hear his *adieu*.
News of his death rippled through Paris:
A perfect gentleman, although mulatto. Worthy.
Versatile musician. His fencing years matchless.

Unlikely nobleman. An astonishing personage.
 A publisher rushed to print and issue copies
 of his concertos and sonatas, music his legacy.

My son's reflection: *The life of this chevalier who
 lived in Paris centuries ago has given me ease
 with my identity here. We have always been here.*
 Praise to Joseph Bologne Chevalier de Saint-Georges.

LA BELLE NANON

In the season of my twelfth hurricane
 I took notice of my body, new hair
 and breasts budding.

My mother, Khaya, a juju woman,
 gave warning: *Monsieur now
 takes much notice of you,*

*Calls you no more la petite Nanon
 but la belle Nanon, his look
 impure, the Madame in fear.*

Khaya's death soon followed
 her words and Monsieur came
 to console me with his body.

He consoled me often and I came to
 take pleasure in pleasing him,
 hearing his *merci, ma belle,*

Until the morning when tastes changed
 in my mouth, my nipples swollen,
 in my head a thunderstorm.

The trouble he cast into my body
 I prayed to Khaya to draw out,
 my tears like rains in hurricanes.

At night the babe, a boy, came to me.
 Joseph I named him for Jesus' father,
 a name in Monsieur's holy book.

First to come into my cabin to see him,
Madame who bent close: *Sa couleur,*
oui, il est un Bologne Saint-Georges.

Next day Monsieur came to embrace the baby,
gave me a rosary and *merci, ma belle.*
Oh, how I hated him and loved him!

2.

Moved her and the babe from the cane field cabin
into the béké's house! they shout from
plantation to plantation on Basse Terre.

Given frocks and pinafores Monsieur's late sister wore,
Nanon, in French disguise, wears like a crown
her three-pointed red madras plaid headdress.

Nanon helps the house maid, sweeping, cooking,
laundering, sewing, and heeds Madame's
talk of customs and mannerly conduct.

Like warp and weft in shared household chores
Nanon and her Madame weave a tapestry
of domesticity in black and white.

In harmony they eat the same yams, hope for good crops,
dread the hurricane season, and crave
the scent and caress of the same man.

3.

Nanon's Voyage

Sailing eastward from Basse Terre toward France
sailing with her son and their meager belongings;
sailing on a schooner shipping rum, cocoa, tobacco;
sailing with a brash crew, a priest and a stylish artist.

Crossing the murky ocean at the mercy of winds,
crossing but not moving in windless hours of fear;
crossing countless days and the darkest of nights,
crossing with fingers clutching a juju charm.

Hearing waves buffet the ship and splash the deck,

hearing the crew's tales of monsters and ghosts,
hearing in African tongues cries from the seabed,
hearing rats gnaw the cargo, claw her son's quilt.

Seeing the artist paint her face on a black swan;
seeing the priest offer all bread, wine and hope;
seeing her son's elation when riding whitecaps;
seeing at last a land mass, her destination – France.

4.

Nanon Summons Georges Bologne

Paris is not the paradise you promised.
Our gilded rooms are grand, but I am
amid gentry with no *bonjour* for me.
On the streets and lanes I traverse,
faces dark like mine are scarce,
one or two in the course of a day.

The sun is truant from the Paris sky.
I miss the light of the sun, forests of
bougainvillea, guavas, plantains and
warmth in all seasons. Winter is cold,
and colder are Parisian women, except
nuns in the order Our Lady of Calvary
who visit me, pray with me, pray for me.

You claimed you longed for me,
but brought me here to be alone.
You come to see me so rarely.
You pull my son away, push him
and his talent with sabre and bow
into fancy Paris society. His music
lifted and lit my soul; now he is
well known, so celebrated he has
no time to play for his mother.

Enough of solitary years in your fine prison.
Sisters in Our Lady of Calvary have offered
a community to calm what has so vexed me,
and comfort me with their pious company.

Adieu!

About the author: Florence Ladd's poems have appeared in *The Women's Review of Books*, *The Progressive*, *Rockhurst Review*, *Sweet Auburn*, *Beyond Slavery*, *Oberon*, *Transition*, *The Golden Shovel Anthology*, *MisFit*, *MUSE*, and *Renga for Obama*. Her chapbook, *Reclaiming Rose*, was published by Finishing Line Press. Her published novels are *Sarah's Psalm* and *The Spirit of Josephine*.

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H-France Salon

ISBN 2150-4873

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