The “Haunted House” in Royal Street

1831-82.

By George Washington Cable

I

AS IT STANDS NOW.

When you make that much-talked-of visit to New Orleans, by all means see early whatever evidences of progress and aggrandizement her hospitable citizens wish to show you; New Orleans belongs to the living present, and has serious practical relations with these United States and this great living world and age. And yet I want the first morning walk that you two take together and alone to be in the old French Quarter. Go down Royal street.

You shall not have taken many steps in it when, far down on the right-hand side, where the narrow street almost shuts its converging lines together in the distance, there will begin to rise above the extravagant confusion of intervening roofs and to stand out against the dazzling sky a square, latticed remnant of a belvedere. You can see that the house it surmounts is a large, solid, rectangular pile, and that it stands directly on the street at what residents call the “upper, river corner,” though the river is several squares away on the right. There are fifty people in this old rue Royale who can tell you their wild versions of this house’s strange true story against any one who can do this present writer the honor to point out the former residence of ‘Sieur George, Madame Délicieuse, or Doctor Mossy, or the unrecognizably restored dwelling of Madame Delphine.

I fancy you already there. The neighborhood is very still. The streets are almost empty of life, and the cleanness of their stone pavements is largely the cleanness of disuse. The house you are looking at is of brick, covered with stucco, which somebody may be lime-washing white, or painting yellow or brown, while I am saying it is gray. An uncovered balcony as wide as the sidewalk makes a deep arcade around its two street sides. The last time I saw it it was for rent, and looked as if it had been so for a long time; but that proves nothing. Every one of its big window-shutters was closed, and by the very intensity of their rusty silence spoke a hostile impenetrability. Just now it is occupied.

They say that Louis Philippe, afterwards king of the French, once slept in one of its chambers. That would have been in 1798; but in 1798 they were not building such tall buildings as this in New Orleans—did not believe the soil would uphold them. As late as 1806, when ’Sieur George’s house, upon the St. Peter street corner, was begun, people shook their heads; and this house is taller than ’Sieur George’s. I should like to know if the rumor is true. Lafayette, too, they say, occupied the same room. Maybe so. That would have been in 1824-25. But we know he had elegant apartments, fitted up for him at the city’s charge, in the old Cabildo. Still—

It was, they say, in those, its bright, early days, the property of the Pontalbas, a noble France-Spanish family; and I have mentioned these points, which have no close bearing upon our present story, mainly to clear the field of all mere they-says, and leave the ground for what we know to be authenticated fact, however strange.

The entrance, under the balcony, is in Royal street. Within a deep, white portal, the walls and ceiling of which are covered with ornamentations, two or three steps, shut off from the sidewalk

by a pair of great gates of open, ornamental iron-work with gilded tops, rise to the white door. This also is loaded with a raised work of urns and flowers, birds and fonts, and Phœbus in his chariot. Inside, from a marble floor, an iron-railed, winding stair ("said the spider to the fly") leads to the drawing-rooms on the floor even with the balcony. These are very large. The various doors that let into them, and the folding door between them, have carved panels. A deep frieze covered with raised work—white angels with palm branches and folded wings, stars, and wreaths—runs all around, interrupted only by high, wide windows that let out between fluted Corinthian pilasters upon the broad open balcony. The lofty ceilings, too, are beautiful with raised garlandry.

Measure one of the windows—eight feet across. Each of its shutters is four feet wide. Look at those old crystal chandeliers. And already here is something uncanny—at the bottom of one of these rooms, a little door in the wall. It is barely a woman's height, yet big hinges jut out from the jamb, and when you open it and look in you see only a small dark place without steps or anything to let you down to its floor below, a leap of several feet. It is hardly noteworthy; only neither you nor can make out what it ever was for.

The house is very still. As you stand a moment in the middle of the drawing-room looking at each other you hear the walls and floors saying those soft nothings to one another that they so often say when left to themselves. While you are looking straight at one of the large doors that lead into the hail its lock gives a whispered click and the door slowly swings open. No cat, no draft, you and exchange a silent smile and rather like the mystery; but do you know? That is an old trick of those doors, and has made many an emotional girl smile less instead of more; although I doubt not any carpenter could explain it.

I assume, you see, that you visit the house when it is vacant. It is only at such times that you are likely to get in. A friend wrote me lately: "Miss — and I tried to get permission to see the interior. Madame said the landlord had requested her not to allow visitors; that over three hundred had called last winter, and had been refused for that reason. I thought of the three thousand who would call if they knew its story." Another writes: "The landlord's orders are positive that no photographer of any kind shall come into his house."

The house has three stories and an attic. The windows farthest from the street are masked by long, green latticed balconies or "galleries," one to each story, which communicate with one another by staircases behind the lattices and partly overhang a small, damp, paved court which is quite hidden from outer view save from one or two neighboring windows. On your right as you hook down into this court a long, narrow wing stands out at right angles from the main house, four stories high, with the latticed galleries continuing along the entire length of each floor. It bounds this court on the southern side. Each story is a row of small square rooms, and each room has a single high window in the southern wall and a single door on the hither side opening upon the latticed gallery of that floor. Wings of that sort were once very common in New Orleans in the residences of the rich; they were the house's slave quarters. But certainly some of the features you see here never were common—locks seven inclines across; several windows without sashes, but with sturdy iron gratings and solid iron shutters. On the fourth floor the doorway communicating with the main house is entirely closed twice over, by *two pairs* of full length batten shutters held in on the side of the main house by iron hooks eighteen inches long, two to each shutter. And yet it was through this doorway that the ghosts—figuratively speaking, of course, for we are dealing with plain fact and history—got into this house.

Will you go to the belvedere? I went there once. Unless the cramped stair that reaches it has been repaired you will find it something rickety. The newspapers, writing fifty-five years ago in

the heat and haste of the moment, must have erred as to heavy pieces of furniture being carried up this last cramped flight of steps to be cast out of the windows into the street far below. Besides, the third-story windows are high enough for the most thorough smashing of anything dropped from them for that purpose.

The attic is cut up into little closets. Lying in one of them close up under the roof maybe you will still find, as I did, all the big iron keys of those big iron locks down-stairs. The day I stepped up into this belvedere it was shaking visibly in a squall of wind. An electric storm was coming out of the north and west. Yet overhead the sun still shone vehemently through the rolling white clouds. It was grand to watch these. They were sailing majestically hither and thither southward across the blue, leaning now this way and now that like a fleet of great ships of the line manœuvring for position against the dark northern enemy's already flashing and thundering onset. I was much above any neighboring roof. Far to the south and south-west the newer New Orleans spread away over the flat land. North-eastward, but near at hand, were the masts of ships and steamers, with glimpses here and there of the water, and farther away the open breadth of the great yellow river sweeping around Slaughterhouse Point under an air heavy with the falling black smoke and white steam of hurrying tugs. Closer by, there was a strange confusion of roofs, trees, walls, vines, tiled roofs, brown and pink, and stuccoed walls, pink, white, yellow, red, and every sort of gray. The old convent of the Ursalines stood in the a-midst, and against it the old chapel of St. Mary with a great sycamore on one side and a willow on the other. Almost under me I noticed some of the semicircular arches of rotten red brick that were once a part of the Spanish barracks. In the north the "Old Third" (third city district) lay, as though I looked down upon it from a cliff—a tempestuous gray sea of slate roofs dotted with tossing green tree-tops. Beyond it, not far away, the deep green, ragged line of cypress swamp half encircled it and gleamed weirdly under a sky packed with dark clouds that flashed and growled and boomed and growled again. You could see rain falling from one cloud over Lake Pontchartrain; the strong gale brought the sweet smell of it. Westward, yonder, you may still descry the old calaboose just peeping over the tops of some lofty trees; and that bunch a little at the left is Congo Square; but the *old,* old calaboose—the one to which this house was once strangely related—is hiding behind the cathedral here on the south. The street that crosses Royal here and makes the corner on which the house stands is Hospital street; and yonder, westward, where it bends a little to the right and runs away so bright, clean, and empty between two long lines of groves and flower gardens, it is the old Bayou Road to the lake. It was down that road that the mistress of this house fled in her carriage from its door with the howling mob at her heels. Before you descend from the belvedere turn and note how the roof drops away in eight different slopes; and think—from whichever one of these slopes it was—of the little fluttering, befrocked lump of terrified childhood that leaped from there and fell clean to the paved yard below. A last word while we are still here: there are other reasons—one, at least, besides tragedy and crime—that make people believe this place is haunted. This particular spot is hardly one where a person would prefer to see a ghost, even if one knew it was but an optical illusion; but one evening, some years ago, when a bright moon was mounting high and swinging well around to the south, a young girl who lived near by and who had a proper skepticism for the marvels of the gossips passed this house. She was approaching it from an opposite sidewalk, when, glancing up at this belvedere outlined so loftily on the night sky, she saw with startling clearness, although pale and misty in the deep shadow of the cupola,—"It made me shudder," she says, "until I reasoned the matter out,"—a single, silent, motionless object; the figure of a woman leaning against its lattice. By careful scrutiny she made it out to be only a sorcery of moonbeams that fell aslant from the farther side through the

skylight of the belvedere's roof and sifted through the lattice. Would that there were no more reality to the story before us.

II.

MADAME LALAURIE.

On the 30th of August, 1831, before Octave de Armas, notary, one E. Soniat Dufossat sold this property to a Madame Lalaurie. She may have dwelt in the house earlier than this, but here is where its tragic history begins. Madame Lalaurie was still a beautiful and most attractive lady, though bearing the name of a third husband. Her surname had been first McCarty,—a genuine Spanish-Creole name, although of Irish origin, of course,—then Lopez, or maybe first Lopez and then McCarty, and then Blanque. She had two daughters, the elder, at least, the issue of her first marriage.

The house is known to this day as Madame Blanque's house,—which, you notice, it never was,—so distinctly was she the notable figure in the household. Her husband was younger than she. There is strong sign of his lesser importance in the fact that he was sometimes, and only sometimes, called doctor—Dr. Louis Lalaurie. The graces and graciousness of their accomplished and entertaining mother quite outshone his step-daughters as well as him. To the frequent and numerous guests at her sumptuous board these young girls seemed comparatively unanimated, if not actually unhappy. Not so with their mother. To do her full share in the upper circles of good society, to dispense the pleasures of drawing-room and dining-room with generous frequency and captivating amiability, was the eager pursuit of a lady who nevertheless kept the management of her money affairs, real estate, and slaves mainly in her own hands. Of slaves she had ten, and housed most of them in the tall narrow wing that we have already noticed.

We need not recount again the state of society about her at that time. The description of it given by the young German duke whom we quoted without date in the story of "Salome Muller" belongs exactly to this period. Grymes stood at the top and front of things. John Slidell was already shining beside him. They were co-members of the Elkin Club, then in its glory. It was trying energetically to see what incredible quantities of Madeira it could drink. Judge Mazereau was "avocat-général" and was being lampooned by the imbecile wit of the singers and dancers of the calinda in Congo Square. The tree-planted levee was still populous on summer evenings with promenaders and loungers. The quadroon caste was in its dying splendor, still threatening the moral destruction of private society, and hated—as only woman can hate enemies of the hearthstone—by the proud, fair ladies of the Creole pure-blood, among whom Madame Lalaurie shone brilliantly. Her elegant house, filled with "furniture of the most costly description,"—says the "New Orleans Bee" of a date which we shall come to,—stood central in the swirl of "downtown" gayety, public and private. From Royal into Hospital street, across Circus street—rue de la Cirque—that was a good way to get into Bayou Road, white, almost as snow, with its smooth, silent pavement of powdered shells. This road followed the slow, clear meanderings of Bayou St. Jean, from red-roofed and embowered suburb St. Jean to the lake, the swamp of giant, grizzly bearded cypresses hugging it all the way, and the whole five miles teeming with gay, swift carriages, some filled with smokers, others with ladies and children, the finest equipage of all being, as you may recollect, that of John Fitz Miller. He was at that very time master of Salome Müller, and of "several others fairer than Salome." He belongs in the present story only

here in this landscape, and here not as a typical, but only as an easily possible, slaveholder. For that matter, Madame Lalaurie, let it be plainly understood, was only another possibility, not a type. The two stories teach the same truth: that a public practice is answerable for whatever can happen easier with it than without it, no matter whether it must, or only may, happen. However, let the moral wait or skip it entirely if you choose: a regular feature of that bright afternoon throng was Madame Lalaurie's coach with the ever-so-pleasant Madame Lalaurie inside and her sleek black coachman on the box.

"Think," some friend would say, as he returned her courteous bow—"think of casting upon that woman the suspicion of starving and maltreating her own house-servants! Look at that driver; his skin shines with good keeping. The truth is those jealous Americans"—

There was intense jealousy between the Americans and the Creoles. The Americans were just beginning in public matters to hold the odds. In private society the Creoles still held power, but it was slipping from them even there. Madame Lalaurie was a Creole. Whether Louisiana or St. Domingo born was no matter; she should not be criticised by American envy! Nor would the Creoles themselves go nosing into the secretest privacy of her house.

"Why, look you, it is her common practice, even before her guests, to leave a little wine in her glass and hand it, with some word of kindness, to the slave waiting at her back. Thin and hollow-chested—the slaves? Yes, to be sure; but how about your rich uncle, or my dear old mother; are they not hollow-chested? Well!"

But this kind of logic did not satisfy everybody, not even every Creole; and particularly not all her neighbors. The common populace too had unflattering beliefs.

"Do you see this splendid house? Do you see those attic windows? There are slaves up there confined in chains and darkness and kept at the point of starvation."

A Creole gentleman, M. Montreuil, who seems to have been a neighbor, made several attempts to bring the matter to light, but in vain. Yet rumors and suspicious indications grew so rank that at length another prominent citizen, an "American" lawyer, who had a young Creole studying law in his office, ventured to send him to the house to point out to Madame Lalaurie certain laws of the State. For instance there was Article XX. of the old Black Code: "Slaves who shall not be properly fed, clad, and provided for by their masters, may give information thereof to the attorney-general or the Superior Council, or to all the other officers of justice of an inferior jurisdiction, and may put the written exposition of their wrongs into their hands; upon which information, and even ex officio, should the information come from another quarter, the attorney-general shall prosecute said masters," etc. But the young law student on making his visit was captivated by the sweetness of the lady whom he had been sent to warn against committing unlawful misdemeanors, and withdrew filled with indignation against any one who could suspect her of the slightest unkindness to the humblest living thing.

II.

A TERRIBLE REVELATION.

The house that joined Madame Lalaurie's premises on the eastern side had a staircase window that looked down into her little courtyard. One day all by chance the lady of that adjoining house was going up those stairs just when the keen scream of a terrified child resounded from the next yard. She sprung to the window, and, looking down, saw a little negro girl about eight years old

run wildly across the yard and into the house, with Madame Lalaurie, a cow-hide whip in her hand, following swiftly and close upon her.

They disappeared; but by glimpses through the dark lattices and by the sound of the tumult, the lady knew that the child was flying up stairway after stairway, from gallery to gallery, hard pressed by her furious mistress. Soon she heard them rise into the belvedere and the next instant they darted out upon the roof. Down into its valleys and up over its ridges the little fugitive slid and scrambled. She reached the sheer edge, the lady at the window hid her face in her hands, there came a dull, jarring thud in the paved court beneath, and the lady, looking down, saw the child lifted from the ground and borne out of sight, limp, silent, dead.

She kept her place at the window. Hours passed, the day waned, darkness settled down. Then she saw a torch brought, a shallow hole was dug,—as it seemed to her; but in fact a condemned well of slight depth, a mere pit, was uncovered,—and the little broken form was buried. She informed the officers of justice. From what came to light at a later season, it is hard to think that in this earlier case the investigation was more than superficial. Yet an investigation was made, and some legal action was taken against Madame Lalaurie for cruelty to her slaves. They were taken from her and—liberated? Ah! no. They were sold by the sheriff, bid in by her relatives, and by them sold back to her. Let us believe that this is what occurred, or at least was shammed; for unless we do we must accept the implication of a newspaper statement of two or three years afterwards, and the confident impression of an aged Creole gentleman and notary still living who was an eye-witness to much of this story, that all Madame Lalaurie ever suffered for this part of her hideous misdeeds was a fine. Lawyers will doubtless remind us that Madame Lalaurie was not legally chargeable with the child's death. The lady at the window was not the only witness who might have been brought. A woman still living, who after the civil war was for years a domestic in this "haunted house," says her husband, now long dead, then a lad, was passing the place when the child ran out on the roof, and he saw her scrambling about on it seeking to escape. But he did not see the catastrophe that followed. No one saw more than what the law knows as assault; and the child was a slave.

Miss Martineau, in her short account of the matter, which she heard in New Orleans and from eye-witnesses only a few years after it had occurred, conjectures that Madame Lalaurie's object in buying back these slaves was simply to renew her cruelties upon them. But a much easier, and even kinder, guess would be that they knew things about her that had not been and must not be told, if she could possibly prevent it. A high temper, let us say, had led her into a slough of misdoing to a depth beyond all her expectation, and the only way out was on the farther side.

Yet bring to bear all the generous conjecture one can, and still the fact stands that she did starve, whip, and otherwise torture these poor victims. She even mistreated her daughters for conveying to them food which she had withheld. Was she not insane? One would hope so; but we cannot hurry to believe just what is most comfortable or kindest. That would be itself a kind of "emotional insanity." If she was insane, bow about her husband? For Miss Martineau, who was told that he was no party to her crimes, was misinformed; he was as deep in the same mire as passive complicity could carry him. If she was insane her insanity stopped abruptly at her plump, well-fed coachman. He was her spy against all others. And if she was insane, then why did not her frequent guests at table suspect it?

All that society knew was that she had carried her domestic discipline to excess, had paid dearly for it, and no doubt was desisting and would henceforth desist from that kind of thing. Enough allowance can hardly be made in our day for the delicacy society felt about prying into

one of its own gentleman or lady member's treatment of his or her own servants. Who was going to begin such an inquiry—John Fitz Miller?

And so time passed, and the beautiful and ever sweet and charming Madame Lalaurie—whether sane or insane we leave to the doctors, except Dr. Lalaurie—continued to drive daily, yearly, on the gay Bayou Road, to manage her business affairs, and to gather bright groups around her tempting board, without their suspicion that she kept her cook in the kitchen by means of a twenty-four-foot chain fastened to her person and to the wall or floor.

And yet let this be said to the people's credit, that public suspicion and indignation steadily grew. But they were still only growing when one day, the 10th of April, 1834, the aged cook,—she was seventy,—chained as she was, purposely set the house on fire. It is only tradition that, having in a dream the night before seen the drawing-room window curtains on fire, she seized the happy thought and made the dream a reality. But it is in the printed record of the day that she confessed the deed to the mayor of the city.

The desperate stratagem succeeds. The alarm of fire spreads to the street and a hundred men rush in, while a crowd throngs the streets. Some are neighbors, some friends, some strangers. One is M. Montreuil, the gentleman who has so long been watching his chance to bring the law upon the house and its mistress. Young D—, a notary's clerk, is another. And another is Judge Canonge—Aha! And there are others of good and well-known name!

The fire has got a good start; the kitchen is in flames; the upper stories are filling with smoke. Strangers run to the place whence it all comes and fall to fighting the fire. Friends rally to the aid of Monsieur and Madame Lalaurie. The pretty lady has not lost one wit—is at her very best. Her husband is as passive as ever.

"This way," she cries; "this way! Take this—go, now, and hurry back, if you please. This way!" And in a moment they are busy carrying out, and to places of safety, plate, jewels, robes, and the lighter and costlier pieces of furniture. "This way, please, gentlemen; that is only the servants' quarters."

The servants' quarters—but where are the servants?

Madame's answers are witty but evasive. "Never mind them now—save the valuables!"

Somebody touches Judge Canonge—"Those servants are chained and locked up and liable to perish."

"Where?"

"In the garret rooms."

He hurries towards them but fails to reach them, and returns, driven back and nearly suffocated by the smoke. He looks around him—this is no sketch of the fancy; we have his deposition sworn before a magistrate next day—and sees some friends of the family. He speaks to them:

"I am told"—so and so—"can it be? Will you speak to Monsieur or to Madame?" But the friends repulse him coldly.

He turns and makes fresh inquiries of others. He notices two gentlemen near him whom he knows. One is Montreuil. "Here, Montreuil, and you, Fernandez, will you go to the garret and search? I am blind and half smothered." Another—he thinks it was Felix Lefebre—goes in another direction, most likely towards the double door between the attics of the house and wing. Montreuil and Fernandez come back saying they have searched thoroughly and found nothing. Madame Lalaurie begs them, with all her sweetness, to come other ways and consider other things. But here is Lefebre. He cries, "I have found some of them! I have broken some bars, but the doors are locked!"

Judge Canonge hastens through the smoke. They reach the spot.

"Break the doors down!" Down come the doors. The room they push into is a "den." They bring out two negresses. One has a large heavy iron collar at the neck and heavy irons on her feet. The fire is subdued now, they say, but the search goes on. Here is M. Guillotte; he has found another victim in another room. They push aside a mosquito-net and see a negro woman, aged, helpless, and with a deep wound in the head.

Some of the young men lift her and carry her out.

Judge Canonge confronts Doctor Lalaurie again:

"Are there slaves still in your garret, Monsieur?" And the doctor "replies with insulting tone that 'There are persons who would do much better by remaining at home than visiting others to dictate to them laws in the quality of officious friends.' "

The search went on. The victims were led or carried out. The sight that met the public eye made the crowd literally groan with horror and shout with indignation. "We saw," wrote the editor of the "Advertiser" next day, "one of these miserable beings. The sight was so horrible that we could scarce look upon it. The most savage heart could not have witnessed the spectacle unmoved. He had a large hole in his head; his body from head to foot was covered with scars and filled with worms! The sight inspired us with so much horror that even at the moment of writing this article we shudder from its effects. Those who have seen the others represent them to be in a similar condition." One after another, seven dark human forms were brought forth, gaunt and wild-eyed with famine and loaded with irons, having been found chained and tied in attitudes in which they had been kept so long that they were crippled for life.

It must have been in the first rush of the inside throng to follow these sufferers into the open air and sunlight that the quick-witted Madame Lalaurie clapped to the doors of her house with only herself and her daughters—possibly the coachman also—inside, and nothing but locks and bars to defend her from the rage of the populace. The streets under her windows—Royal street here, Hospital yonder—and the yard were thronged. Something by and by put some one in mind to look for buried bodies. There had been nine slaves besides the coachman; where were the other two? A little digging brought their skeletons to light—an adult's out of the soil, and the little child's out of the "condemned well"; there they lay. But the living seven, the indiscreet crowd brought them food and drink in fatal abundance, and before the day was done two more were dead. The others were tenderly carried—shall we say it?—to prison;—to the calaboose. Thither "at least two thousand people" flocked that day to see, if they might, these wretched sufferers.

A quiet fell upon the scene of the morning's fire. The household and its near friends busied themselves in getting back the jewelry, plate, furniture, and the like, the idle crowd looking on in apathy and trusting, it may be, to see arrests made. But the restoration was finished and the house remained close barred; no arrest was made. As for Dr. Lalaurie, he does not appear in this scene. Then the crowd, along in the afternoon, began to grow again; then to show anger and by and by to hoot and groan, and cry for satisfaction.

IV.

THE LADY'S FLIGHT.

The old Bayou Road saw a strange sight that afternoon. Down at its farther end lay a little settlement of fishermen and Spanish moss gatherers, pot-hunters, and shrimpers, around a custom-house station, a lighthouse, and a little feint. There the people who drove out in carriages were in the habit of alighting and taking the cool air of the lake, and sipping lemonades, wines,

and ices before they turned homeward again along the crowded way that they had come. In after years the place fell into utter neglect. The customs station was removed, the fort was dismantled, the gay carriage people drove on the "New Shell Road" and its tributaries, Bienville and Canal streets, Washington and Carrollton avenues, and sipped and smoked in the twilights and starlights of Carrollton Gardens and the "New Lake End." The older haunt, once so bright with fashionable pleasure-making, was left to the sole illumination of "St. John Light" and the mongrel life of a bunch of cabins branded Crabtown, and became, in popular superstition at least, the yearly rendezvous of the voodoos. Then all at once in latter days it bloomed out in electrical, horticultural, festal, pyrotechnical splendor as "Spanish Fort," and the carriages all came rolling back.

So, whenever you and visit Spanish Fort and stroll along the bayou's edge on the fort side, and watch the broad schooners glide out through the bayou's mouth and into the open water, you may say: "Somewhere just along this bank, within the few paces between here and yonder, must be where *that* schooner lay, moored and ready to sail for Mandeville the afternoon that Madame Lalaurie, fleeing from the mob," etc.

For on that afternoon, when the people surrounded the house, crying for vengeance, she never lost, it seems, her cunning. She and her sleek black coachman took counsel together, and his plan of escape was adopted. The early afternoon dinner-hour of those times came and passed and the crowd still filled the street, but as yet had done nothing. Presently, right in the midst of the throng, her carriage came to the door according to its well-known daily habit at that hour, and at the same moment the charming Madame Lalaurie, in all her pretty manners and sweetness of mien, stepped quickly across the sidewalk and entered the vehicle.

The crowd was taken all aback. When it gathered its wits the coach-door had shut and the horses were starting. Then her audacity was understood.

"She is getting away!" was the cry, and the multitude rushed upon her. "Seize the horses!" they shouted, and dashed at the bits and reins. The black driver gave the word to his beasts, and with his coach whip lashed the faces of those who sprung forward. The horses reared and plunged, the harness held, and the equipage was off. The crowd went with it.

"Turn the coach over!" they cry, and attempt it, but fail. "Drag her out!"

They try to do it, again and again, but in vain; away it rattles! Away it flashes! down Hospital street, past Bourbon, Dauphine, Burgundy, and the Rampart, with the crowd following, yelling, but fast growing thin and thinner.

"Stop her! Stop her! Stop that carriage! Stop that *carriage!"*

In vain! On it spins! Out upon the Bayou Road come the pattering hoofs and humming wheels—not wildly driven, but just at their most telling speed—into the whole whirling retinue of fashionable New Orleans out for its afternoon airing. Past this equipage; past that one; past half a dozen; a dozen; a score! Their inmates sit chatting in every sort of mood over the day's sensation, when—what is this? A rush from behind, a whirl of white dust, and—"As I live, there she goes. now, on her regular drive! What scandalous speed! and—see here! they are after her!" Past fifty gigs and coaches; past a hundred; around this long bend in the road; around that one. Good-bye, pursuers! Never a chance to cut her off, the swamp forever on the right, the bayou on the left; she is getting away, getting away! the crowd is miles behind!

The lake is reached. The road ends. What next? The coach dashes up to the bayou's edge and stops. Why just here? Ah! because just here so near the bayou's mouth a schooner lies against the bank. Is Dr. Lalaurie's hand in this? The coachman parleys a moment with the schooner-master and hands him down a purse of gold. The coach-door is opened, the lady alights, and is

presently on the vessel's deck. The lines are cast off, the great sails go up, the few lookers-on are there without reference to her and offer no interruption; a little pushing with poles lets the wind fill the canvas, and first slowly and silently, and then swiftly and with a grateful creaking of cordage and spars, the vessel glides out past the lighthouse, through the narrow opening, and stands away towards the northern horizon, below which, seine thirty miles away, lies the little watering-place of Mandeville with roads leading as far away northward as one may choose to fly. Madame Lalaurie is gone!

The brave coachman—one cannot help admiring the villain's intrepidity—turned and drove back towards the city. What his plan was is not further known. No wonder if he thought he could lash and dash through the same mob again. But he mistook. He had not reached town again when the crowd met him. This time they were more successful. They stopped the horses—killed them. What they did with the driver is not told; but one can guess. They broke the carriage into bits. Then they returned to the house.

They reached it about 8 o'clock in. the evening. The two daughters had just escaped by a window. The whole house was locked and barred; "hermetically sealed," says "L'Abeille" of the next morning. The human tempest fell upon it, and "in a few minutes," says "The Courier," "the doors and windows were broken open, the crowd rushed in, and the work of destruction began." "Those who rush in are of all classes and *colors,"* continues "The Courier" of next day; but "No, no!" says a survivor of to-day who was there and took part; "we would n't have allowed that!" In a single hour everything movable disappeared or perished. The place was rifled of jewelry and plate; china was smashed; the very stair-balusters were pulled piece from piece; hangings, bedding and table linen were tossed into the streets and the elegant furniture, bedsteads, wardrobes, buffets, tables, chairs, pictures, "pianos," says the newspaper, were taken with pains to the third-story windows, burled out and broken—"smashed into a thousand pieces"—upon the ground below. The very basements were emptied, and the floors, wainscots, and iron balconies damaged as far as at the moment they could be. The sudden southern nightfall descended, and torches danced in the streets and through the ruined house. The debris was gathered into hot bonfires, feather-beds were cut open, and the pavements covered with a thick snow of feathers. The night wore on, but the mob persisted. They mounted and battered the roof; they defaced the inner walls. Morning found them still at their senseless mischief, and they were "in the act of pulling down the walls when the sheriff and several citizens interfered and put an end to their work."

It was proposed to go at once to the houses of others long suspected of like cruelties to their slaves. But against this the highest gentility of the city alertly and diligently opposed themselves. Not at all because of sympathy with such cruelties. The single reason has its parallel in our own day. It was the fear that the negroes would be thereby encouraged to seek by violence those rights which their masters thought it not expedient to give them. The movement was suppressed, and the odious parties were merely warned that they were watched.

Madame Lalaurie, we know by notarial records, was in Mandeville ten days after, when she executed a power of attorney in favor of her New Orleans business agent, in which act she was "authorized and assisted by her husband, Louis Lalaurie." So he disappears.

His wife made her way to Mobile—some say to the North—and thence to Paris. Being recognized and confronted there, she again fled. The rest of her story is tradition, but comes very directly. A domestic in a Creole family that knew Madame Lalaurie—and slave women used to enjoy great confidence and familiarity in. the Creole households at times—tells that one day a letter from France to one of the family informed them that Madame Lalaurie, while spending a

season at Pau, had engaged with a party of fashionable people in a boar-hunt, and somehow meeting the boar while apart from her companions had been set upon by the infuriated beast, and too quickly for any one to come to her rescue had been torn and killed. If this occurred after 1836 or 1837 it has no disagreement with Harriet Martineau's account, that at the latter date Madame Lalaurie was supposed to be still "skulking about some French province under a false name."

The house remained untouched for at least three years, "ornamented with various writings expressive of indignation and just punishment." The volume of "L'Abeille" containing this account seems to have been abstracted from the city archives. It was in the last week of April or the first week of May, 1836, that Miss Martineau saw the house. It "stands," she wrote about a year later, "and is meant to stand, in its ruined state. It was the strange sight of its gaping windows and empty walls, in the midst of a busy street, which excited my wonder, and was the cause of my being told the story the first time. I gathered other particulars afterwards from eye-witnesses."

So the place came to be looked upon as haunted. In March, 1837, Madam Lalaurie's agent sold the house to a man who held it but a little over three months and then sold it at the same price that he had paid—only fourteen thousand dollars. The notary who made the earlier act of sale must have found it interesting. He was one of those who had helped find and carry out Madame Lalaurie's victims. It did not change hands again for twenty-five years. And then—in what state of repair I know not—it was sold at an advance equal to a yearly increase of but six-sevenths of one per cent on the purchase price of the gaping ruin sold in 1837. There is a certain poetry in notarial records. But we will not delve for it now. Idle talk of strange sights and sounds crowded out of notice any true history the house may have had in those twenty-five years, or until war had destroyed that slavery to whose horridest possibilities the gloomy pile, even when restored and renovated, stood a ghost-ridden monument. Yet its days of dark romance were by no means ended.

V.

A NEW USE.

The era of political reconstruction came. The victorious national power decreed that they who had once been master and slave should enter into political partnership on terms of civil equality. The slaves grasped the boon; but the masters, trained for generations in the conviction that public safety and private purity were possible only by the subjection of the black race under the white, loathed civil equality as but another name for private companionship, and spurned, as dishonor and destruction in one, the restoration of their sovereignty at the price of political copartnership with the groveling race they had bought and sold and subjected easily to the leash and lash.

What followed took every one by surprise. The negro came at once into a larger share of power than it was ever intended he should or expected he would attain. His master, related to him long and only under the imagined necessities of plantation government, vowed the issue must and should be, not How shall the two races share public self-government in prosperous amity? but, Which race shall exclusively rule the other, race by race?

The necessities of national authority tipped the scale, and the powers of legislation and government and the spoils of office tumbled, all together, into the freedman's ragged lap. Thereupon there fell upon New Orleans, never well governed at the best, a volcanic shower of corruption and misrule.

And yet when history's calm summing-up and final judgment comes, there must this be pointed out, which was very hard to see through the dust and smoke of those days: that while plunder and fraud ran riot, yet no serious attempt was ever made by the freedman or his allies to establish any un-American principle of government, and for nothing else was he more fiercely, bloodily opposed than for measures approved by the world's best thought and in full harmony with the national scheme of order. We shall see now what these things have to do with our strange true story.

In New Orleans the American public school system, which, recognizes free public instruction as a profitable investment of the public funds for the common public safety, had already long been established. The negro adopted and enlarged it. He recognized the fact that the relation of pupils in the public schools is as distinctly a public and not a private relation as that of the sidewalk, the market, the public park, or the street-car. But recognizing also the impracticabilities of place and time, he established separate schools for whites and blacks. In one instance, however, owing mainly to smallness of numbers, it seemed more feasible to allow a common enjoyment of the civil right of public instruction without separation by race than to maintain two separate schools, one at least of which would be very feeble for lack of numbers. Now, it being so decided, of all the buildings in New Orleans which one was chosen for this experiment but the "haunted house" in Royal street!

I shall never forget the day—although marked by no startling incident—when I sat in its lofty drawing-rooms and heard its classes in their annual examination. It was June, and the teachers and pupils were clad in recognition of the special occasion and in the light fabrics fitted to the season. The rooms were adorned with wreaths, garlands, and bouquets. Among the scholars many faces were beautiful, and all were fresh and young. Much Gallic blood asserted itself in complexion and feature, generally of undoubted, unadulterated "Caucasian" purity, but sometimes of visible and now and then of preponderating African tincture. Only two or three, unless I have forgotten, were of pure negro blood. There, in the rooms that had once resounded with the screams of Madame Lalaurie's little slave fleeing to her death, and with the hootings and maledictions of the enraged mob, was being tried the experiment of a common enjoyment of public benefits by the daughters of two widely divergent races, without the enforcement of private social companionship.

From such enforcement the school was as free as any school is or ought to be. The daily discipline did not require any two pupils to be social, but only every one to be civil, and civil to all. These pages are written, however, to tell a strange true story, and not to plead one cause or another. Whatever the story itself pleads, let it plead. Outside the "haunted house," far and near, the whole community was divided into two fiercely hostile parties, often at actual war with each other, the one striving to maintain government upon a co-citizenship regardless of race in all public relations, the other sworn to make race the supreme, sufficient, inexorable condition of supremacy on the one part and subjection on the other. Yet for all this the school prospered.

Nevertheless, it suffered much internal unrest. Many a word was spoken that struck like a club, many a smile stung like a whip-lash, many a glance stabbed like a knife; even in the midst of recitations a wounded one would sometimes break into sobs or silent tears while the aggressor crimsoned and palpitated with the proud indignation of the master caste. The teachers met all such by-play with prompt, impartial repression and concentration upon the appointed duties of the hour.

Sometimes another thing restored order. Few indeed of the pupils, of whatever racial purity or preponderance, but held more or less in awe the ghostly traditions of the house; and at times it

chanced to be just in the midst of one of these ebullitions of scorn, grief, and resentful tears that noiselessly and majestically the great doors of the reception-rooms, untouched by visible hands, would slowly swing open, and the hushed girls would call to mind Madame Lalaurie.

Not all who bore the tincture of the despised race suffered alike. Some were fierce and sturdy, and played a savage tit-for-tat. Some were insensible. A few bore themselves inflexibly by dint of sheer nerve; while many, generally much more white than black, quivered and winced continually under the contumely that fell, they felt, with peculiar injustice and cruelty upon them.

Odd things happened from time to time to remind one of the house's early history. One day a deep hidden well that no one had suspected the existence of was found in the basement of the main house. Another time—But we must be brief.

Matters went on thus for years. But at length there was a sudden and violent change.

VI.

EVICTIONS.

The "Radical" party in Louisiana, gorged with private spoils and loathed and hated by the all but unbroken ranks of well-to-do society, though it held a *creed* as righteous and reasonable as any political party ever held, was going to pieces by the sheer weakness of its own political corruption. It was made mainly of the poor and weak elements of the people. Had it been ever so pure it could not have made headway against the strongest ranks of society concentrating against it with revolutionary intent, when deserted by the power which had called it to responsibility and—Come! this history of a house must not run into the history of a government. It is a fact in our story, however, that in the "Conservative" party there, sprung up the "White League," purposing to wrest the State government from the "Radicals" by force of arms.

On the 14th of September, 1874, the White League met and defeated the Metropolitan Police in a hot and bloody engagement of infantry and artillery on the broad steamboat landing in the very middle of New Orleans. But the Federal authority interfered. The "Radical" government resumed control. But the White League survived and grew in power. In November elections were held, and the State legislature was found to be Republican by a majority of only two.

One bright, spring-like day in December, such as a northern March might give in its best mood, the school had gathered in the "haunted house" as usual, but the hour of duty had not yet struck. Two teachers sat in an upper class-room talking over the history of the house. The older of the two had lately heard of an odd new incident connected with it, and was telling of it. A distinguished foreign visitor, she said, guest at a dinner-party in the city the previous season, turned unexpectedly to his hostess, the talk being of quaint old New Orleans houses, and asked how to find "the house where that celebrated tyrant had lived who was driven from the city by a mob for maltreating her slaves." The rest of the company sat aghast, while the hostess silenced him by the severe coldness with which she replied that she "knew nothing about it." One of Madame Lalaurie's daughters was sitting there, a guest at the table.

When the teacher's story was told her companion made no comment. She had noticed a singular sound that was increasing in volume. It was out-of-doors—seemed far away; but it was drawing nearer. She started up, for she recognized it now as a clamor of human voices, and remembered that the iron gates had not yet been locked for the day. They hurried to the window, looked down, and saw the narrow street full from wall to wall for a hundred yards with men

coming towards them. The front of the crowd had already reached the place and was turning towards the iron gates.

The two women went quickly to the hall, and, looking down the spiral staircase to the marble pavement of the entrance three stories below, saw the men swarming in through the wide gateway and doorway by dozens. While they still leaned over the balustrade, Marguerite, one of their pupils, a blue-eyed blonde girl of lovely complexion, with red, voluptuous lips, and beautiful hair held by a carven shell comb, came and bent over the balustrade with them. Suddenly her comb slipped from its hold, flashed downward, and striking the marble pavement flew into pieces at the feet of the men who were about to ascend. Several of them looked quickly up.

"It was my mother's comb!" said Marguerite, turned ashy pale, and sunk down in hysterics. The two teachers carried her to a remote room, the bed-chamber of the janitress, and then obeyed an order of the principal calling her associates to the second floor. A band of men were coming up the winding stair with measured, military tread towards the handing, where the principal, with her assistants gathered around her, stood to confront them.

She was young, beautiful, and of calm temper. Her skin, says one who was present, was of dazzling clearness, her abundant hair was golden auburn, and in happy hours her eyes were as "soft as velvet." But when the leader of the band of men reached the stair-landing, threw his coat open, and showed the badge of the White League, her face had blanched and hardened to marble, and her eyes darkened to black as they glowed with indignation.

"We have come," said the White Leaguer, "to remove the colored pupils. You will call your school to order." To which the principal replied:

"You will permit me first to confer with my corps of associates." He was a trifle disconcerted.

"Oh, certainly."

The teachers gathered in the principal's private room. Some were dumb, one broke into tears, another pleaded devotion to the principal, and one was just advising that the *onus* of all action be thrown upon the intruders, when the door was pushed open and the White Leaguer said:

"Ladies, we are waiting. Assemble the school; we are going to clean it out."

The pupils, many of them trembling, weeping, and terrified, were with difficulty brought to order in the assembly room. This place had once been Madame Lalaurie's dining-hall. A frieze of angels ran round its four walls, and, oddly, for some special past occasion, a legend in crimson and gold on the western side bore the words, "The Eye of God is on us."

"Gentlemen, the school is assembled," said the principal.

"Call the roll," was the reply, "and we will challenge each name."

It was done. As each name was called its young bearer rose and confronted her inquisitors. And the inquisitors began to blunder. Accusations of the fatal taint were met with denials and withdrawn with apologies. Sometimes it was truth, and sometimes pure arrogance and falsehood, that triumphed over these champions of instinctive racial antagonism. One dark girl shot up haughtily at the call of her name—

"I am of Indian blood, and can prove it!"

"You will not be disturbed."

"Coralie—," the principal next called. A thin girl of mixed blood and freckled face rose and said:

"My mother is white."

"Step aside!" commanded the White Leaguer.

"But by the law the color follows the mother, and so *I* am white."

"Step aside!" cried the man, in a fury. (In truth there was no such law.)

"Octavie—."

A pretty, Oriental looking girl rises, silent, pale, but self-controlled.

"Are you colored?"

"Yes; I am colored." She moves aside.

"Marie O—."

A girl very fair, but with crinkling hair and other signs of negro extraction, stands up and says:

"I am the sister of the Hon. —." naming a high Democratic official," and I shall not leave this school."

"You may remain; your case will be investigated."

"Eugénie—."

A modest girl, visibly of mixed race, rises, weeping silently.

"Step aside."

"Marcelline V—."

A bold-eyed girl of much African blood stands up and answers:

"I am not colored! We are Spanish, and my *brother will call on you and prove it."* She is allowed to stay.

At length the roll-call is done. "Now, madam, you will dismiss these pupils that we have set aside, at once. We will go down and wait to see that they come out. The men tramped out of the room, went down-stairs, and rejoined the impatient crowd that was clamoring in the street.

Then followed a wild scene within the old house. Restraint was lost. Terror ruled. The girls who had been ordered into the street sobbed and shrieked and begged:

"Oh, save us! We cannot go out there; the mob will kill us! What shall we do?"

One girl of grand and noble air, as dark and handsome as an East Indian princess, and standing first in her class for scholarship, threw herself at her teacher's feet, crying, "Have pity on me, Miss —!"

"My poor Léontine," replied the teacher, "what can I do? There are good 'colored' schools in the city; would it not have been wiser for your father to send you to one of them?"

But the girl rose up and answered:

"Must I go to school with my own servants to escape an unmerited disdain?" And the teacher was silent, while the confusion increased.

"The shame of it will kill me!" cried gentle Eugénie —. And thereupon, at last, a teacher, commonly one of the sternest in discipline, exclaimed:

"If Eugénie goes, Marcelline shall go, if I have to put her out myself! Spanish, indeed! And Eugénie a pearl by the side of her!

Just then Eugénie's father came. He had forced his way through the press in the street, and now stood bidding his child have courage and return with him the way he had come.

"Tie your veil close, Eugénie," said the teacher, "and they will not know you." And so they went, the father and the daughter. But they went alone. None followed. This roused the crowd to noisy anger.

"Why don't the rest come?" it howled. But the teachers tried in vain to inspire the panic-stricken girls with courage to face the mob, and were in despair, when a school official arrived, and with calm and confident authority bade the expelled girls gather in ranks and follow him through the crowd. So they went out through the iron gates, the great leaves of which closed after them with a rasping of their key and shooting of their bolts, while a teacher said:

"Come; the reporters will soon be here. Let us go and see after Marguerite."

They found her in the room of the janitress, shut in and fast asleep.

"Do you think," one asked of the janitress, "that mere fright and the loss of that comb made this strong girl ill?"

"No. I think she must have guessed those men's errand, and her eye met the eye of some one who knew her."

"But what of that?"

"She is 'colored.' "

"Impossible!"

"I tell you, yes!"

"Why, I thought her as pure German as her name."

"No, the mixture is there; though the only trace of it is on her lips. Her mother—she is dead now—was a beautiful quadroon. A German sea-captain loved her. The law stood between them. He opened a vein in his arm, forced in some of her blood, went to court, swore he had African blood, got his license, and married her. Marguerite is engaged to be married to a white man, a gentleman who does not know this. It was like life and death, so to speak, for her not to let those men turn her out of here."

The teacher turned away, pondering.

The eviction did not, at that time, hold good. The political struggle went on, fierce and bitter. The "Radical" government was doomed, but not dead. A few weeks after the scene just described the evicted girls were reinstated. A long term of suspense followed. The new year became the old and went out. Twice this happened. In 1877 there were two governors and two governments in Louisiana. In sight from the belvedere of the "haunted house," eight squares away up Royal street, in the State House, the *de facto* government was shut up under close military siege by the *de jars* government, and the Girls' High School in Madame Lalaurie's old house, continuing faithfully their daily sessions, knew within as little certainty to which of the two they belonged as though New Orleans had been some Italian city of the fifteenth century. But to guess the White League, was not far from right, and in April the Radical government expired.

A Democratic school-board came in. June brought Commencement day, and some of the same girls who had been evicted in 1874 were graduated by the new Board in 1877. During the summer the schools and school-laws were overhauled, and in September or October the high school was removed to another place, where each pupil suspected of mixed blood was examined officially behind closed doors and only those who could prove white or *Indian* ancestry were allowed to stay. A "colored" high school was opened in Madame Lalaurie's house with a few pupils. It lasted one session, maybe two, and then perished.

In 1882 the "haunted house" had become a Conservatory of Music. Chamber concerts were frequent in Madame Lalaurie's old dining-hall. On a certain sweet evening in the spring of that year there sat among those who had gathered to hear the haunted place filled with a deluge of sweet sounds one who had been a teacher there when the house had been, as some one—Conservative or Radical, who can tell which?—said on the spot, "for the second time purged of its iniquities." The scene was "much changed," says the auditor; but the ghosts were all there, walking on the waves of harmony. And thickest and fastest they trooped in and out when a passionate song thrilled the air with the promise that

> "Some day—some day
> Eyes clearer grown the truth may see."