

## CHAPTER X

### THE KEEL BOAT

WE were embarked on a strange river, in a strange boat, and bound for a strange city. To us Westerners a halo of romance, of unreality, hung over New Orleans. To us it had an Old World, almost Oriental flavor of mystery and luxury and pleasure, and we imagined it swathed in the moisture of the Delta, built of quaint houses, with courts of shining orange trees and magnolias, and surrounded by flowering plantations of unimagined beauty. It was most fitting that such a place should be the seat of dark intrigues against material progress, and this notion lent added zest to my errand thither. As for Nick, it took no great sagacity on my part to predict that he would forget Suzanne and begin to look forward to the Creole beauties of the Mysterious City.

First, there was the fur-laden keel boat in which we travelled, gone forever now from Western navigation. It had its rude square sail to take advantage of the river winds, its mast strongly braced to hold the long tow-ropes. But tow-ropes were for the endless up-river journey, when a numerous crew strained day after day along the bank, chanting the voyageurs' songs. Now we were light-manned, two half-breeds and two Canadians to handle the oars in time of peril, and Captain Xavier, who stood aft on the cabin roof, leaning against the heavy beam of the long, curved tiller, watching hawklike for snag and eddy and bar. Within the cabin was a great fireplace of stones, where our cooking was done, and bunks set round for the men in cold weather and rainy. But in these fair nights we chose to sleep on deck.

Far into the night we sat, Nick and I, our feet dangling over the forward edge of the cabin, looking at the glory of the moon on the vast river, at the endless forest crown, at the haze which hung like silver dust under the high bluffs on the American side. We slept. We awoke again as the moon was shrinking abashed before the light that glowed above these cliffs, and the river was turned from brown to gold and then to burnished copper, the forest to a thousand shades of green from crest to the banks where the river was licking the twisted roots to nakedness. The south wind wafted the sharp wood-smoke from the chimney across our faces. In the stern Xavier stood immovable against the tiller, his short pipe clutched between his teeth, the colors of his new worsted belt made gorgeous by the rising sun.

"*B' jour*, Michié," he said, and added in the English he had picked up from the British traders, "the breakfas' he is ready, and Jean make him good. Will you have the grace to descen'?"

We went down the ladder into the cabin, where the odor of the furs mingled with the smell of the cooking. There was a fricassee steaming on the crane, some of Zéron's bread, brought from St. Louis, and coffee that Monsieur Gratiot had provided for our use. We took our bowls and cups on deck and sat on the edge of the cabin.

"By gad," cried Nick, "it lacks but the one element to make it a paradise."

"And what is that?" I demanded.

"A woman," said he.

Xavier, who overheard, gave a delighted laugh.

"*Parbleu*, Michié, you have right," he said, "but Michié Gratiot, he say no. In Nouvelle Orléans we find some."

Nick got to his feet, and if anything he did could have surprised me, I should have been surprised when he put his arm coaxingly about Xavier's neck. Xavier himself was surprised and correspondingly delighted.

"Tell me, Xavier," he said, with a look not to be resisted, "do you think I shall find some beauties there?"

"Beauties!" exclaimed Xavier, "La Nouvelle Orléans



— it is the home of beauty, Michié. They promenade themselves on the levee, they look down from ze gallerie, *mais* —”

“But what, Xavier?”

“But, *mon Dieu*, Michié, they are *vair' difficile*. They are not like Englis' beauties, there is the father and the mother, and — the convent.” And Xavier, who had a wen under his eye, laid his finger on it.

“For shame, Xavier,” cried Nick; “and you are balked by such things?”

Xavier thought this an exceedingly good joke, and he took his pipe out of his mouth to laugh the better.

“Me? *Mais non*, Michié. And yet ze Alcalde, he mek me afraid. Once he put me in ze calaboose when I tried to climb ze balcon'.”

Nick roared.

“I will show you how, Xavier,” he said; “as to climbing the balconies, there is a *convenance* in it, as in all else. For instance, one must be daring, and discreet, and nimble, and ready to give the law a presentable answer, and lacking that, a piastre. And then the fair one must be a fair one indeed.”

“*Diable*, Michié,” cried Xavier, “you are ze mischief.”

“Nay,” said Nick, “I learned it all and much more from my cousin, Mr. Ritchie.”

Xavier stared at me for an instant, and considering that he knew nothing of my character, I thought it extremely impolite of him to laugh. Indeed, he tried to control himself, for some reason standing in awe of my appearance, and then he burst out into such loud haw-haws that the crew poked their heads above the cabin hatch.

“Michié Reetchie,” said Xavier, and again he burst into laughter that choked further speech. He controlled himself and laid his finger on his wen.

“You don't believe it,” said Nick, offended.

“Michié Reetchie a gallant!” said Xavier.

“An incurable,” said Nick, “an amazingly clever rogue at device when there is a petticoat in it. Davy, do I do you justice?”

Xavier roared again.

“*Quel maître!*” he said.

“Xavier,” said Nick, gently taking the tiller out of his hand, “I will teach you how to steer a keel boat.”

“*Mon Dieu*,” said Xavier, “and who is to pay Michié Gratiot for his fur? The river, she is full of things.”

“Yes, I know, Xavier, but you will teach me to steer.”

“*Volontiers*, Michié, as we go now. But there come a time when I, even I, who am twenty year on her, do not know whether it is right or left. Ze rock — he *vair' hard*. Ze snag, he grip you like dat,” and Xavier twined his strong arms around Nick until he was helpless. “Ze bar — he hol' you by ze leg. An' who is to tell you how far he run under ze yellow water, Michié? I, who speak to you, know. But I know not how I know. Ze water, sometime she tell, sometime she say not'ing.”

“*A bas*, Xavier!” said Nick, pushing him away, “I will teach you the river.”

Xavier laughed, and sat down on the edge of the cabin. Nick took easily to accomplishments, and he handled the clumsy tiller with a certainty and distinction that made the boatmen swear in two languages and a patois. A great water-logged giant of the Northern forests loomed ahead of us. Xavier sprang to his feet, but Nick had swung his boat swiftly, smoothly, into the deeper water on the outer side.

“*Saint Jacques*, Michié,” cried Xavier, “you mek him better zan I thought.”

Fascinated by a new accomplishment, Nick held to the tiller, while Xavier with a trained eye scanned the troubled, yellow-glistening surface of the river ahead. The wind died, the sun beat down with a moist and venomous sting, and northeastward above the edge of the bluff a bank of cloud like sulphur smoke was lifted. Gradually Xavier ceased his jesting and became quiet.

“Looks like a hurricane,” said Nick.

“*Mon Dieu*,” said Xavier, “you have right, Michié,” and he called in his rapid patois to the crew, who lounged forward in the cabin's shade. There came to my mind



the memory of that hurricane at Temple Bow long ago, a storm that seemed to have brought so much sorrow into my life. I glanced at Nick, but his face was serene.

The cloud-bank came on in black and yellow masses, and the saffron light I recalled so well turned the living green of the forest to a sickly pallor and the yellow river to a tinge scarce to be matched on earth. Xavier had the tiller now, and the men were straining at the oars to send the boat across the current towards the nearer western shore. And as my glance took in the scale of things, the miles of bluff frowning above the bottom, the river that seemed now like a lake of lava gently boiling, and the wilderness of the western shore that reached beyond the ken of man, I could not but shudder to think of the conflict of nature's forces in such a place. A grim stillness reigned over all, broken only now and again by a sharp command from Xavier. The men were rowing for their lives, the sweat glistening on their red faces.

"She come," said Xavier.

I looked, not to the northeast whence the banks of cloud had risen, but to the southwest, and it seemed as though a little speck was there against the hurrying film of cloud. We were drawing near the forest line, where a little creek made an indentation. I listened, and from afar came a sound like the strumming of low notes on a guitar, and sad. The terrified scream of a panther broke the silence of the forest, and then the other distant note grew stronger, and stronger yet, and rose to a high hum like unto no sound on this earth, and mingled with it now was a lashing like water falling from a great height. We grounded, and Xavier, seizing a great tow-rope, leaped into the shallow water and passed the bight around a trunk. I cried out to Nick, but my voice was drowned. He seized me and flung me under the cabin's lee, and then above the fearful note of the storm came cracklings like gunshots of great trees snapping at their trunk. We saw the forest wall burst out—how far away I know not—and the air was filled as with a flock of giant birds, and boughs crashed on the roof of the cabin and tore the

water in the darkness. How long we lay clutching each other in terror on the rocking boat I may not say, but when the veil first lifted there was the river like an angry sea, and limitless, the wind in its fury whipping the foam from the crests and bearing it off into space. And presently, as we stared, the note lowered and the wind was gone again, and there was the water tossing foolishly, and we lay safe amidst the green wreckage of the forest as by a miracle.

It was Nick who moved first. With white face he climbed to the roof of the cabin and idly seizing the great limb that lay there tried to move it. Xavier, who lay on his face on the bank, rose to a sitting posture and crossed himself. Beyond me crowded the four members of the crew, unhurt. Then we heard Xavier's voice, in French, thanking the Blessed Virgin for our escape.

Further speech was gone from us, for men do not talk after such a matter. We laid hold of the tree across the cabin and, straining, flung it over into the water. A great drop of rain hit me on the forehead, and there came a silver-gray downpour that blotted out the scene and drove us down below. And then, from somewhere in the depths of the dark cabin, came a sound to make a man's blood run cold.

"What's that?" I said, clutching Nick.

"Benjy," said he; "thank God he did not die of fright." We lighted a candle, and poking around, found the negro where he had crept into the farthest corner of a bunk with his face to the wall. And when we touched him he gave vent to a yell that was blood-curdling.

"I'se a bad nigger, Lo'd, yes, I is," he moaned. "I ain't fit fo' jedgment, Lo'd."

Nick shook him and laughed.

"Come out of that, Benjy," he said; "you've got another chance."

Benjy turned, perforce, the whites of his eyes gleaming in the candle-light, and stared at us.

"You ain't gone yit, Marse," he said.

"Gone where?" said Nick.



"I'se done been tole de quality 'll be jedged fust, Marse," said Benjy.

Nick hauled him out on the floor. Climbing to the deck, we found that the boat was already under way, running southward in the current through the misty rain. And gazing shoreward, a sight met my eyes which I shall never forget. A wide vista, carpeted with wreckage, was cut through the forest to the river's edge, and the yellow water was strewn for miles with green boughs. We stared down it, overwhelmed, until we had passed beyond its line.

"It is as straight," said Nick, "as straight as one of her Majesty's alleys I saw cut through the forest at Saint-Cloud."

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Had I space and time to give a faithful account of this journey it would be chiefly a tribute to Xavier's skill, for they who have not put themselves at the mercy of the Mississippi in a small craft can have no idea of the dangers of such a voyage. Infinite experience, a keen eye, a steady hand, and a nerve of iron are required. Now, when the current swirled almost to a rapid, we grazed a rock by the width of a ripple; and again, despite the effort of Xavier and the crew, we would tear the limbs from a huge tree, which, had we hit it fair, would have ripped us from bow to stern. Once, indeed, we were fast on a sand-bar, whence (as Nick said) Xavier fairly cursed us off. We took care to moor at night, where we could be seen as little as possible from the river, and divided the watches lest we should be surprised by Indians. And, as we went southward, our hands and faces became blotched all over by the bites of mosquitoes and flies, and we smothered ourselves under blankets to get rid of them. At times we fished, and one evening, after we had passed the expanse of water at the mouth of the Ohio, Nick pulled a hideous thing from the inscrutable yellow depths,—a slimy, scaleless catfish. He came up like a log, and must have weighed seventy pounds. Xavier and his men and myself made two good meals of him, but Nick would not touch the meat.

The great river teemed with life. There were flocks of herons and cranes and water pelicans, and I know not what other birds, and as we slipped under the banks we often heard the paroquets chattering in the forests. And once, as we drifted into an inlet at sunset, we caught sight of the shaggy head of a bear above the brown water, and leaping down into the cabin I primed the rifle that stood there and shot him. It took the seven of us to drag him on board, and then I cleaned and skinned him as Tom had taught me, and showed Jean how to put the caul fat and liver in rows on a skewer and wrap it in the bear's handkerchief and roast it before the fire. Nick found no difficulty in eating this—it was a dish fit for any gourmand.

We passed the great, red Chickasaw Bluff, which sits facing westward looking over the limitless Louisiana forests, where new and wondrous vines and flowers grew, and came to the beautiful Walnut Hills crowned by a Spanish fort. We did not stop there to exchange courtesies, but pressed on to the Grand Gulf, the grave of many a keel boat before and since. This was by far the most dangerous place on the Mississippi, and Xavier was never weary of recounting many perilous escapes there, or telling how such and such a priceless cargo had sunk in the mud by reason of the lack of skill of particular boatmen he knew of. And indeed, the Canadian's face assumed a graver mien after the Walnut Hills were behind us.

"You laugh, Michié," he said to Nick, a little resentfully. "I who speak to you say that there is four foot on each side of ze bateau. Too much *tafia*, a little too much excite—" and he made a gesture with his hand expressive of total destruction; "ze tornado, I would sooner have him—"

"Bah!" said Nick, stroking Xavier's black beard, "give me the tiller. I will see you through safely, and we will not spare the *tafia* either." And he began to sing a song of Xavier's own:—

"*Marianson, dame jolie,  
Où est allé votre mari?*"



"*Ah, toujours les dames!*" said Xavier. "But I tell you, Michié, *le diable*,—he is at ze bottom of ze Grand Gulf and his mouth open—so." And he suited the action to the word.

At night we tied up under the shore within earshot of the mutter of the place, and twice that night I awoke with clinched hands from a dream of being spun fiercely against the rock of which Xavier had told, and sucked into the devil's mouth under the water. Dawn came as I was fighting the mosquitoes,—a still, sultry dawn with thunder muttering in the distance.

We breakfasted in silence, and with the crew standing ready at the oars and Xavier scanning the wide expanse of waters ahead, seeking for that unmarked point whence to embark on this perilous journey, we floated down the stream. The prospect was sufficiently disquieting on that murky day. Below us, on the one hand, a rocky bluff reached out into the river, and on the far side was a timber-clad point round which the Mississippi doubled and flowed back on itself. It needed no trained eye to guess at the perils of the place. On the one side the mighty current charged against the bluff and, furious at the obstacle, lashed itself into a hundred sucks and whirls, their course marked by the flotsam plundered from the forests above. Woe betide the boat that got into this devil's caldron! And on the other side, near the timbered point, ran a counter current marked by forest wreckage flowing up-stream. To venture too far on this side was to be grounded or at least to be sent back to embark once more on the trial.

But where was the channel? We watched Xavier with bated breath. Not once did he take his eyes from the swirling water ahead, but gave the tiller a touch from time to time, now right, now left, and called in a monotone for the port or starboard oars. Nearer and nearer we sped, dodging the snags, until the water boiled around us, and suddenly the boat shot forward as in a mill-race, and we clutched the cabin's roof. A triumphant gleam was in Xavier's eyes, for he had hit the channel squarely. And then, like a monster out of the deep, the scaly, black

back of a great northern pine was flung up beside us and sheered us across the channel until we were at the very edge of the foam-specked, spinning water. But Xavier saw it, and quick as lightning brought his helm over and laughed as he heard it crunching along our keel. And so we came swiftly around the bend and into safety once more. The next day there was the Petite Gulf, which bothered Xavier very little, and the day after that we came in sight of Natchez on her heights and guided our boat in amongst the others that lined the shore, scowled at by lounging Indians there, and eyed suspiciously by a hatchet-faced Spaniard in a tawdry uniform who represented his Majesty's customs. Here we stopped for a day and a night that Xavier and his crew might get properly drunk on *tafa*, while Nick and I walked about the town and waited until his Excellency, the commandant, had finished dinner that we might present our letters and obtain his passport. Natchez at that date was a sufficiently unkempt and evil place of dirty, ramshackle houses and gambling dens, where men of the four nations gamed and quarrelled and fought. We were glad enough to get away the following morning, Xavier somewhat saddened by the loss of thirty livres of which he had no memory, and Nick and myself relieved at having the passports in our pockets. I have mine yet among my papers.

"Natchez, 29 de Junio, de 1789.

"*Concedo libre y seguro pasaporte a Don David Ritchie para que pase a la Nueva Orleans por Agna. Pido y encargo no se le ponga embarazo.*"

A few days more and we were running between low shores which seemed to hold a dark enchantment. The rivers now flowed out of, and not into the Mississippi, and Xavier called them bayous, and often it took much skill and foresight on his part not to be shot into the lane they made in the dark forest of an evening. And the forest,—it seemed an impenetrable mystery, a strange tangle of fantastic growths: the live-oak (*chêne vert*), its wide-spreading limbs hung funereally with Spanish moss and



twined in the mistletoe's death embrace; the dark cypress swamp with the conelike knees above the yellow backwaters; and here and there grew the bridelike magnolia which we had known in Kentucky, wafting its perfume over the waters, and wondrous flowers and vines and trees with French names that bring back the scene to me even now with a whiff of romance, *bois d'arc*, *lilac*, *grande volaille* (water-lily). Birds flew hither and thither (the names of every one of which Xavier knew), — the whistling *papabot*, the mournful bittern (*garde-soleil*), and the night-heron (*grosbeck*), who stood like a sentinel on the points.

One night I awoke with the sweat starting from my brow, trying to collect my senses, and I lay on my blanket listening to such plaintive and heart-rending cries as I had never known. Human cries they were, cries as of children in distress, and I rose to a sitting posture on the deck with my hair standing up straight, to discover Nick beside me in the same position.

"God have mercy on us," I heard him mutter, "what's that? It sounds like the wail of all the babies since the world began."

We listened together, and I can give no notion of the hideous mournfulness of the sound. We lay in a swampy little inlet, and the forest wall made a dark blur against the star-studded sky. There was a splash near the boat that made me clutch my legs, the wails ceased and began again with redoubled intensity. Nick and I leaped to our feet and stood staring, horrified, over the gunwale into the black water. Presently there was a laugh behind us, and we saw Xavier resting on his elbow.

"What devil-haunted place is this?" demanded Nick.

"Ha, ha," said Xavier, shaking with unseemly mirth, "you have never heard ze alligator sing, Michié?"

"Alligator!" cried Nick; "there are babies in the water, I tell you."

"Ha, ha," laughed Xavier, flinging off his blanket and searching for his flint and tinder. He lighted a pine knot, and in the red pulsing flare we saw what seemed to be a

dozen black logs floating on the surface. And then Xavier flung the cresset at them, fire and all. There was a lashing, a frightful howl from one of the logs, and the night's silence once more.

Often after that our slumbers were disturbed, and we would rise with maledictions in our mouths to fling the handiest thing at the serenaders. When we arose in the morning we would often see them by the dozens, basking in the shallows, with their wide mouths flapped open waiting for their prey. Sometimes we ran upon them in the water, where they looked like the rough-bark pine logs from the North, and Nick would have a shot at them. When he hit one fairly there would be a leviathan-like roar and a churning of the river into suds.

At length there were signs that we were drifting out of the wilderness, and one morning we came in sight of a rich plantation with its dark orange trees and fields of indigo, with its wide-galleried manor-house in a grove. And as we drifted we heard the negroes chanting at their work, the plaintive cadence of the strange song adding to the mystery of the scene. Here in truth was a new world, a land of peaceful customs, green and moist. The soft-toned bells of it seemed an expression of its life, — so far removed from our own striving and fighting existence in Kentucky. Here and there, between plantations, a belfry could be seen above the cluster of the little white village planted in the green; and when we went ashore amongst these simple French people they treated us with such gentle civility and kindness that we would fain have lingered there. The river had become a vast yellow lake, and often as we drifted of an evening the wail of a slave dance and monotonous beating of a tom-tom would float to us over the water.

At last, late one afternoon, we came in sight of that strange city which had filled our thoughts for many days.