

## CHAPTER XI

### THE STRANGE CITY

NICK and I stood by the mast on the forward part of the cabin, staring at the distant, low-lying city, while Xavier sought for the entrance to the eddy which here runs along the shore. If you did not gain this entrance, — so he explained, — you were carried by a swift current below New Orleans and might by no means get back save by the hiring of a crew. Xavier, however, was not to be caught thus, and presently we were gliding quietly along the eastern bank, or levee, which held back the river from the lowlands. Then, as we looked, the levee became an esplanade shaded by rows of willows, and through them we caught sight of the upper galleries and low, curving roofs of the city itself. There, cried Xavier, was the Governor's house on the corner, where the great Miro lived, and beyond it the house of the Intendant; and then, gliding into an open space between the keel boats along the bank, stared at by a score of boatmen and idlers from above, we came to the end of our long journey. No sooner had we made fast than we were boarded by a shabby customs officer who, when he had seen our passports, bowed politely and invited us to land. We leaped ashore, gained the gravelled walk on the levee, and looked about us.

Squalidity first met our eyes. Below us, crowded between the levee and the row of houses, were dozens of squalid market-stalls tended by cotton-clad negroes. Beyond, across the bare Place d'Armes, a blackened gap in the line of houses bore witness to the devastation of the year gone by, while here and there a roof, struck by the

setting sun, gleamed fiery red with its new tiles. The levee was deserted save for the negroes and the river men.

"Time for siesta, Michié," said Xavier, joining us; "I will show you ze inn of which I spik. She is kep' by my fren', Madame Bouvet."

"Xavier," said Nick, looking at the rolling flood of the river, "suppose this levee should break?"

"Ah," said Xavier, "then some Spaniard who never have a bath — he feel what water is lak."

Followed by Benjy with the saddle-bags, we went down the steps set in the levee into this strange, foreign city. It was like unto nothing we had ever seen, nor can I give an adequate notion of how it affected us, — such a mixture it seemed of dirt and poverty and wealth and romance. The narrow, muddy streets ran with filth, and on each side along the houses was a sun-baked walk held up by the curved sides of broken flatboats, where two men might scarcely pass. The houses, too, had an odd and foreign look, some of wood, some of upright logs and plaster, and newer ones, Spanish in style, of adobe, with curving roofs of red tiles and strong eaves spreading over the *banquette* (as the sidewalk was called), casting shadows on lemon-colored walls. Since New Orleans was in a swamp, the older houses for the most part were lifted some seven feet above the ground, and many of these houses had wide galleries on the street side. Here and there a shop was set in the wall; a watchmaker was to be seen poring over his work at a tiny window, a shoemaker cross-legged on the floor. Again, at an open wicket, we caught a glimpse through a cool archway into a flowering court-yard. Stalwart negresses with bright kerchiefs made way for us on the *banquette*. Hands on hips, they swung along erect, with baskets of cakes and sweetmeats on their heads, musically crying their wares.

At length, turning a corner, we came to a white wooden house on the Rue Royale, with a flight of steps leading up to the entrance. In place of a door a flimsy curtain hung in the doorway, and, pushing this aside, we followed

Xavier through a darkened hall to a wide gallery that overlooked a court-yard. This court-yard was shaded by several great trees which grew there; the house and gallery ran down one other side of it; and the two remaining sides were made up of a series of low cabins, these forming the various outhouses and the kitchen. At the far end of this gallery a sallow, buxom lady sat sewing at a table, and Xavier saluted her very respectfully.

"Madame," he said, "I have brought you from St. Louis with Michié Gratiot's compliments two young American gentlemen, who are travelling to amuse themselves."

The lady rose and beamed upon us.

"From Monsieur Gratiot," she said; "you are very welcome, gentlemen, to such poor accommodations as I have. It is not unusual to have American gentlemen in New Orleans, for many come here first and last. And I am happy to say that two of my best rooms are vacant. Zoey!"

There was a shrill answer from the court below, and a negro girl in a yellow turban came running up, while Madame Bouvet bustled along the gallery and opened the doors of two darkened rooms. Within I could dimly see a walnut dresser, a chair, and a walnut bed on which was spread a mosquito bar.

"*Voilà, Messieurs,*" cried Madame Bouvet, "there is still a little time for a siesta. No siesta!" cried Madame, eyeing us aghast; "ah, the Americans they never rest — never."

We bade farewell to the good Xavier, promising to see him soon; and Nick, shouting to Benjy to open the saddle-bags, proceeded to array himself in the clothes which had made so much havoc at St. Louis. I boded no good from this proceeding, but I reflected, as I watched him dress, that I might as well try to turn the Mississippi from its course as to attempt to keep my cousin from the search for gallant adventure. And I reflected that his indulgence in pleasure-seeking would serve the more to divert any suspicions which might fall upon my own head. At last, when the setting sun was flooding the court-yard, he

stood arrayed upon the gallery, ready to venture forth to conquest.

Madame Bouvet's tavern, or hotel, or whatever she was pleased to call it, was not immaculately clean. Before passing into the street we stood for a moment looking into the public room on the left of the hallway, a long saloon, evidently used in the early afternoon for a dining room, and at the back of it a wide, many-paned window, capped by a Spanish arch, looked out on the gallery. Near this window was a gay party of young men engaged at cards, waited on by the yellow-turbaned Zoey, and drinking what evidently was claret punch. The sounds of their jests and laughter pursued us out of the house.

The town was waking from its siesta, the streets filling, and people stopped to stare at Nick as we passed. But Nick, who was plainly in search of something he did not find, hurried on. We soon came to the quarter which had suffered most from the fire, where new houses had gone up or were in the building beside the blackened logs of many of Bienville's time. Then we came to a high white wall that surrounded a large garden, and within it was a long, massive building of some beauty and pretension, with a high, latticed belfry and heavy walls and with arched dormers in the sloping roof. As we stood staring at it through the iron grille set in the archway of the lodge, Nick declared that it put him in mind of some of the châteaux he had seen in France, and he crossed the street to get a better view of the premises. An old man in coarse blue linen came out of the lodge and spoke to me.

"It is the convent of the good nuns, the Ursulines, Monsieur," he said in French, "and it was built long ago in the Sieur de Bienville's time, when the colony was young. For forty-five years, Monsieur, the young ladies of the city have come here to be educated."

"What does he say?" demanded Nick, pricking up his ears as he came across the street.

"That young men have been sent to the mines of Brazil for climbing the walls," I answered.

"Who wants to climb the walls?" said Nick, disgusted.

"The young ladies of the town go to school here," I answered; "it is a convent."

"It might serve to pass the time," said Nick, gazing with a new interest at the latticed windows. "How much would you take, my friend, to let us in at the back way this evening?" he demanded of the porter in French.

The good man gasped, lifted his hands in horror, and straightway let loose upon Nick a torrent of French invectives that had not the least effect except to cause a blacksmith's apprentice and two negroes to stop and stare at us.

"Pooh!" exclaimed Nick, when the man had paused for want of breath, "it is no trick to get over that wall."

"*Bon Dieu!*" cried the porter, "you are Kentuckians, yes? I might have known that you were Kentuckians, and I shall advise the good sisters to put glass on the wall and keep a watch."

"The young ladies are beautiful, you say?" said Nick.

At this juncture, with the negroes grinning and the porter near bursting with rage, there came out of the lodge the fattest woman I have ever seen for her size. She seized her husband by the back of his loose frock and pulled him away, crying out that he was losing time by talking to vagabonds, besides disturbing the good sisters. Then we went away, Nick following the convent wall down to the river. Turning southward under the bank past the huddle of market-stalls, we came suddenly upon a sight that made us pause and wonder.

New Orleans was awake. A gay and laughing throng paced the esplanade on the levee under the willows, with here and there a cavalier on horseback on the Royal Road below. Across the Place d'Armes the spire of the parish church stood against the fading sky, and to the westward the mighty river stretched away like a gilded floor. It was a strange throng. There were grave Spaniards in long cloaks and feathered beavers; jolly merchants and artisans in short linen jackets, each with his *tabatière*, the wives with bits of finery, the children laughing and shout-

ing and dodging in and out between fathers and mothers beaming with quiet pride and contentment; swarthy boatmen with their worsted belts, gaudy negresses chanting in the soft patois, and here and there a blanketed Indian. Nor was this all. Some occasion (so Madame Bouvet had told us) had brought a sprinkling of fashion to town that day, and it was a fashion to astonish me. There were fine gentlemen with swords and silk waistcoats and silver shoe-buckles, and ladies in filmy summer gowns. Greuze ruled the mode in France then, but New Orleans had not got beyond Watteau. As for Nick and me, we knew nothing of Greuze and Watteau then, and we could only stare in astonishment. And for once we saw an officer of the Louisiana Regiment resplendent in a uniform that might have served at court.

Ay, and there was yet another sort. Every flatboatman who returned to Kentucky was full of tales of the marvellous beauty of the quadroons and octoroons, stories which I had taken with a grain of salt; but they had not indeed been greatly overdrawn. For here were these ladies in the flesh, their great, opaque, almond eyes consuming us with a swift glance, and each walking with a languid grace beside her *duenna*. Their faces were like old ivory, their dress the stern Miro himself could scarce repress. In former times they had been lavish in their finery, and even now earrings still gleamed and color broke out irrepressibly.

Nick was delighted, but he had not dragged me twice the length of the esplanade ere his eye was caught by a young lady in pink who sauntered between an elderly gentleman in black silk and a young man more gayly dressed.

"Egad," said Nick, "there is my divinity, and I need not look a step farther."

I laughed.

"You have but to choose, I suppose, and all falls your way," I answered.

"But look!" he cried, halting me to stare after the girl, "what a face, and what a form! And what a carriage,

by Jove! There is breeding for you! And Davy, did you mark the gentle, rounded arm? Thank heaven these short sleeves are the fashion."

"You are mad, Nick," I answered, pulling him on, "these people are not to be stared at so. And once I present our letters to Monsieur de Saint-Gré, it will not be difficult to know any of them."

"Look!" said he, "that young man, lover or husband, is a brute. On my soul, they are quarrelling."

The three had stopped by a bench under a tree. The young man, who wore claret silk and a sword, had one of those thin faces of dirty complexion which show the ravages of dissipation, and he was talking with a rapidity and vehemence of which only a Latin tongue will admit. We could see, likewise, that the girl was answering with spirit,—indeed, I should write a stronger word than spirit,—while the elderly gentleman, who had a good-humored, fleshy face and figure, was plainly doing his best to calm them both. People who were passing stared curiously at the three.

"Your divinity evidently has a temper," I remarked.

"For that scoundel—certainly," said Nick; "but come, they are moving on."

"You mean to follow them?" I exclaimed.

"Why not?" said he. "We will find out where they live and who they are, at least."

"And you have taken a fancy to this girl?"

"I have looked them all over, and she's by far the best I've seen. I can say so much honestly."

"But she may be married," I said weakly.

"Tut, Davy," he answered, "it's more than likely, from the violence of their quarrel. But if so, we will try again."

"We!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, come on!" he cried, dragging me by the sleeve, "or we shall lose them."

I resisted no longer, but followed him down the levee, in my heart thanking heaven that he had not taken a fancy to an octoroon. Twilight had set in strongly, the gay crowd was beginning to disperse, and in the distance

the three figures could be seen making their way across the Place d'Armes, the girl hanging on the elderly gentleman's arm, and the young man following with seeming sullenness behind. They turned into one of the narrower streets, and we quickened our steps. Lights gleamed in the houses; voices and laughter, and once the tinkle of a guitar, came to us from court-yard and gallery. But Nick, hurrying on, came near to bowling more than one respectable citizen we met on the banquette, into the ditch. We reached a corner, and the three were nowhere to be seen.

"Curse the luck!" cried Nick, "we have lost them. The next time I'll stop for no explanations."

There was no particular reason why I should have been penitent, but I ventured to say that the house they had entered could not be far off.

"And how the devil are we to know it?" demanded Nick.

This puzzled me for a moment, but presently I began to think that the two might begin quarrelling again, and said so. Nick laughed and put his arm around my neck.

"You have no mean ability for intrigue when you put your mind to it, Davy," he said; "I vow I believe you are in love with the girl yourself."

I disclaimed this with some vehemence. Indeed, I had scarcely seen her.

"They can't be far off," said Nick; "we'll pitch on a likely house and camp in front of it until bedtime."

"And be flung into a filthy calaboose by a constable," said I. "No, thank you."

We walked on, and halfway down the block we came upon a new house with more pretensions than its neighbors. It was set back a little from the street, and there was a high adobe wall into which a pair of gates were set, and a wicket opening in one of them. Over the wall hung a dark fringe of magnolia and orange boughs. On each of the gate-posts a crouching lion was outlined dimly against the fainting light, and, by crossing the street, we could see the upper line of a latticed gallery under the