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PART FIRST

PUBLIC READING ROOM  
THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

AN IDYL OF THE  
MISSISSIPPI

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PART FIRST

THE Mississippi was flaunting itself in the face of opposition along its southern banks. It had carried much before it in its downward path ere it reached New Orleans. A plantation here, a low-lying settlement there, a cotton-field in bloom under its brim, had challenged its waters and been taken in, and there was desolation in its wake.

In certain weak places above and below the city, gangs of men—negroes mostly—worked day and night, reinforcing suspicious danger-points with pickax and spade. At one place an imminent crevasse threatened life and property to such a degree that the workers were conscripted and held to

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their posts by promises of high wages, abetted by periodical passage along the line of a bucket and gourd dipper.

There was apparently nothing worse than mirth and song in the bucket. Concocted to appeal to the festive instinct of the dark laborers as much as to steady their hands and sustain courage, it was colored a fine pink and floated ice lumps and bits of lemon when served. Yet there was a quality in it which warmed as it went, and spurred pickax and spade to do their best—spurred their wielders often to jest and song, too, for there was scarcely a secure place even along the brimming bank where one might not, by listening, catch the sound of laughter or of rhythmic voices :

“Sing, nigger, sing! Sing yo’ hymn!  
De river, she ’s a-boomin’—she ’s a-comin  
*che-bim!*  
Swim, nigger, swim!

“Sing, nigger, sing! Sing yo’ rhyme!  
De waters is a-floodin’—dey ’s a-roarin’ on  
time!  
Climb, squirrel, climb!”

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At this particular danger-spot just below the city, a number of cotton-bales, contributed by planters whose fortunes were at stake, were placed in line against a threatening break as primary support, staked securely down and chained together.

Over these were cast everything available, to raise their height. It was said that even barrels of sugar and molasses were used, and shiploads of pig-iron, with sections of street railways ripped from their ties. Then barrels of boiling tar, tarpaulins, and more chains. And then—

And then there were prayers—and messages to the priests up at the old St. Louis Cathedral, where many of the wives were kneeling—and reckless gifts of money to the poor.

A few of the men who had not entered church for years were seen to cross themselves covertly; and one, a convivial creole of a rather racy reputation, was even observed, through the sudden turn of a lantern one night, to take

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from his pocket a miniature statue of St. Joseph, and to hold it between his eyes and the sky while he, too, crossed himself. And the boon companion who smiled at the sight did himself make upon his own breast a tiny sign of the cross in the dark, even as he moved toward his friend to chaff him. And when, in turning, he dimly descried the outline of a distant spire surmounted by a cross against the stars, he did reverently lift his hat.

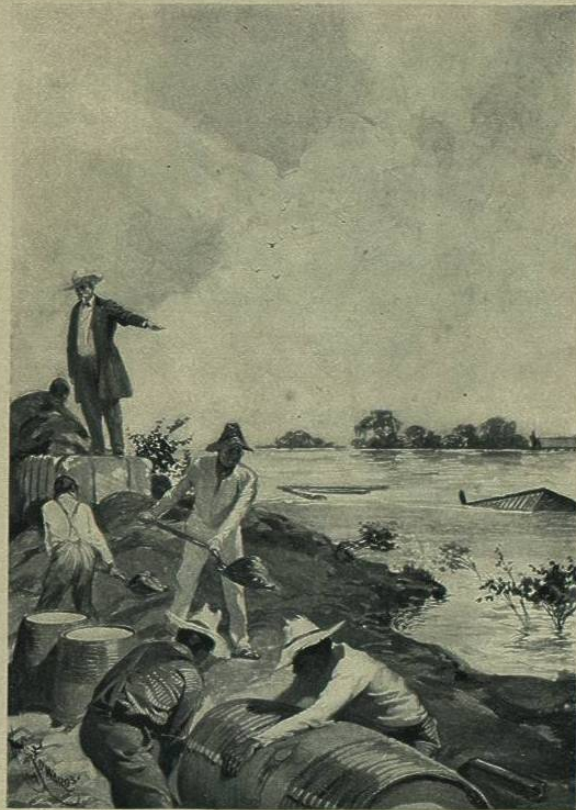
"It can't do any harm, anyhow," he apologized to himself; but when he had reached his friend, he remarked dryly:

"You don't mean to tell me, Felix, dat you pray to St. Joseph yet, you old sinner! Excuse me, but dose passing lantern, dey give you away."

"Pray to St. Joseph? I would pray to de devil to-night, me, Adolphe, if I believed he would drive de river down."

"Sh! Don't make comparison between St. Joseph an' de devil, Felix. Not to-night, anyhow."

"I di'n' done dat, Adolphe. No! *Pas*



"Gangs of men, reinforcing suspicious danger points with pickax and spade"

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*du tout*. Not at all. H'only, I say, me, I *would* pray to de devil *if* he could help us out."

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders as he added recklessly:

"Yas, I would be one mud-catfish caught on his forked tail—just for to-night—an' let him drag me behind him in de river, if—"

"But you mus' ricollec', de devil he don't play wid water, Felix. Fire is his—fire an' brimstone—"

"Ah-h-h! Bah, Adolphe! Who is trying to talk sense to-night? Dose row of warehouse yonder, dey are *all full*, an' on my one pair shoulder. *My li'l' crop* is not'ing. I got in doze warehouse, waiting for a *sure* rise in de market—all on my obstinate judgment—everyt'ing of *my brudder*, *my t'ree cousin*, *my wife*, *my mud'-in-law*,—just t'ink!—not to speak about t'irty-five or forty small consignment. Sure! I would pray to *anyt'ing* to-night—to save dem. I would pray to one *crawfish* not to work dis way. Dem crawfish hole is de devil.

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"But dat St. Joseph in my pocket! My mudder, I am sure she put it dere. She an' my sisters, dey will all kneel many hours at deir *prie-dieux* to-night—po' t'ings!"

"An' yo' wife—she also, of co'se—"

"My wife?" The man chuckled. "Pff! Ah, no! She is at de opera. She knows I am watching de river. She believe it cannot run over so long I watch it. I married her yo'ng. Dat 's de bes' way.

"*Mais*, tell de trut', Adolphe, I am going to church, me, after dis. Dere 's not'ing, after all, like God to stand in wid you! You hear me, I tell you to-night de rizen our women keep good an' happy—*it is faith*. You know da 's true."

"Yas, I believe you, Felix. An' me, I t'ink I will go, too. *Any'ow*, I 'll show up at Easter communion. An' dat 's a soon promise, too. T'ree week las' Sunday it will be here.

"All my yard is w'ite wid dem Easter lilies already. Dis soon spring compel

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dem. W'en you smell doze Bermudas above de roses in your garden in de middle of Lent, look out for Old Lady Mississippi. She is getting ready to spread her flounces over yo' fields—"

"Yas, an' to dance on yo' family graves. You may say w'at you like, Adolphe—de ruling lady of dis low valley country, it is not de Carnival Queen; it is not de first lady at de Governor's Mansion. It is—let us raise our hats—it is Old Lady Mississippi! *She is* de ruling lady of de Gulf country—old *mais* forever yo'ng.

"In my *riligion* I have no superstition. I swallow it whole—even w'en I mus' shut my nose—I mean hol' my eyes. W'at is de matter wid me? I cannot talk straight to-night. *Mais* to speak of de river, I mus' confess to you dat even w'en it is midsummer an' she masquerade like common dirty waters, I *propitiate* her.

"Once, I can tell you, I was rowing one skiff across by de red church, an' suddenly—for w'y I di' n' see immedi-

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ately—*mais* out of de still water, mixed into bubbles only by my oars, over my hand came one *big wave*. I looked quick, but I could see only de sun to blind my eyes. *Mais* you know w'at I did?

"Dat bright sun, it *reflect* a small stone in my ring, one diamond, an' quick I slip it off an' drop it. It was de river's *petition*, an' w'at is a sixty-five-dollar diamond to a man w'en—"

"Dey ain' got no *insanity* in yo' family, I don't t'ink, Felix? Otherwise—excuse me—I would be oneasy for you."

Adolphe was smiling, and he mischievously lifted one brow and drew up his lips as if to whistle.

Felix smiled, too, as he replied:

"You need n't fear for me, Adolphe. *Mais* strong-headed ancestors, dey are not'ing. Me, I could *start* a crazy line just as well as my great-gran'fodder. Everyt'ing mus' *begin somewhere*."

But he added more seriously:

"*Non*, I would do it again—if I was on *such a trip*. I tell you w'at time it was; it was—"

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He dropped his voice and looked over his shoulder.

"You want to know w'at, precisely, I was doing at de moment de river demand my ring? *I was praying to her! Sure!*" (This last in a whisper.)

"Oh-h-h!" Adolphe's face lit. "Yas, I understand. I *ricollec'*. You mean about five year pas'—dat time yo' sister los' 'er firs' 'usband, w'en—?"

"Yas, *exac'ly*. So you see dat *predicament* in w'ich I was placed wid de river. I never liked po' Jacques Renault—" He shrugged his shoulders. "I never *profess* to like him, *mais* he was my brud'-in-law; an' my po' sister—you know Felicité—she is my *twin*. She done not'ing but cry, cry, cry for fo' days an' nights, an' pay all 'er money in de poor-box to *find him*. An' dey tried every way to bring him up. So me, I say not'ing, *mais* w'en de fif' day is come I loan from my cousin Achilles his wide skiff, an' I start out, an' I row two mile below w'ere dey foun' 'is clo'es an' hat, an' den I pull up

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again—an' wid every stroke I pray to de river to grant me dat satisfaction to find po' Jacques an' to lay him in his grave.

"Tell you de trut', maybe I am a sinner to say it, *mais* I was half afraid in my heart dat maybe Jacques was playing 'possum an' some day he would come back; an' w'en somebody is dead—dat's one terrible dread, *yas*—to get such a surprise, especially for one widow, you understand. It is a *restriction*, more or less, according to— Well, never mind.

"You may b'lief me or not, *mais* w'en de river she *require* of me dat ring, laying her wet hand over my hand like to take it, at de same time she turn it to de sun—well, I am not stupid. I dropped it *quick* to her, an' den I looked *close*, *yas*, on de water, an' *immediately* I see one—"

"You said jus' now you saw only de glare of de sun—"

"*Exac'y*—an' den, naturally, one black spot befo' my eye, an' I t'ink it is de sun; *mais*—"

"Well, 't is a *disagreeable* picture.

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Never mind! De river she *give me de swap*, an' we had one fine funeral de nex' day; an' my po' sister Felicité had her consolation.

"So, like I say, w'at consideration was one small diamond ring for such a pleasure?"

"A widow widout a grave is like a wind in Feb'uary—crying always forever aroun' de house, wid nowhere to go, an' in her eyes are all kinds of weather. Bff!"

"It is great consolation, a grave. It is a half-way station between de home an' de church; an' a widow she need dat—for a w'ile.

"Tell you de trut', w'en I take time to t'ink, Adolphe, sometimes I am ashamed. So long I am prosperous I am all for dis worl'; den, w'en somet'ing come, like now, an' t'row me on my knees, I feel cheap befo' God, *yas*. *Mais*, wid de river so, w'at can a man *do* if he cannot *pray*? So, after to-night's *experience*, I am at home wid my li'l' family by eleven o'clock every night, *sure*."



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"'Ow much chillen you got now, Felix? You go too fas' for my 'rit'metic."

"Oh, no, not too fas'—just fas' enough. Only nine in over ten year—mos' eleven year. Only *six*, by *right*. I *engage* for six; *mais* w'at can a man do w'en his lady present him wid one *extra*, once in a w'ile! I am de las' one to make remark on her for dat, too, biccuse I come dat way myself—following behind Felicité. Twins, dey run in some families; an' you know now I am coming to like dem. Dey are so sociable, twins."

"Ah, my friend, you have plenty occasion to be one good man."

"*Occasion!* I am blessed. T'ink all I have got to be t'ankful! I got my mudder, my mud'-in-law, my fad'-in-law—all *riligious* people an' good—an' *nine litt' one*, like six stair-steps wid t'ree landings for de *accommodation* of de twins." He chuckled. "Yas, an' I am going to be good. No more dem soubrette supper for me. An' dem *danse de*—

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"*Mais wait! W'at is dat?*"

A bell had rung, and a voice was calling out the depth of the water as shown upon a graduated scale marked low down against the pier. The announcement was half-hourly now.

"W'at he say? T'irteen inches an' a—Dat 's a half-inch fall. T'ank God! Maybe St. Joseph an' our women dey save us yet, Adolphe."

"Yas, maybe. *Mais* I t'ink de winter is full broke in Minnesota, too. No more dat confoun' ice to melt. I looked *sure* for de water to fall down yesterday. Any'ow, one half-inch is hope. Here, take one cigar. I can smoke, me, on dat half-inch. You got any matches, Felix?"

In finding his match-box Felix's fingers came in contact with the tiny statue of St. Joseph in his pocket, but he was only half sensible of the fact in his nervous joy over the slight decline in the river.

"Hello! Here is Harold Le Duc!" he exclaimed, as, by the light of his match,

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he chanced to catch the presentment of a distant face in the darkness.

"Hello! Come along, Harry, an' smoke one cigar. We mus' celebratedat insinuation dat de river is falling. Less dan one inch, it does not count, except to prove she is hesitating; an' you know de ol' saying, 'She who hesitate'—' Hello, young man! You are good for sore eyes!"

The person addressed had come forward with extended hand.

When another match, lighting Adolphe's cigar, revealed the young man's face again, there was something so startling in its wonderful solemnity and beauty that both men were impressed.

"You won't smoke? An' w'y? Come! It is one great comfort, a li'p' smoke. Here, let me—"

He presented the cigars again.

"Well, I thank you, but excuse me now." Young Le Duc took a cigar with a smile. "I 'll enjoy it later, maybe; but not until we see a little further. As

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you say, a half-inch is only a hint, but it is a good one. I am going now up the coast, where trouble waits, and I may need a steady hand before morning. But I think the worst is over. Good night—and thank you. The folks—they are all well?"

"Fine, all fine, and asking always for w'y you don't come to see dem."

But he had gone.

The eyes of both men followed the retreating figure in silence.

It was Adolphe who spoke at last.

"Ah-h-h!" he sighed. "An' yet we complain sometimes, you an' me, eh? I am t'irty-seven years old an' I got t'irteen healt'y chillen an' two gran'-chillen, an' my wife—look at her, yo'nger an' happier wid every one—"

"Oh, I wonder, me, sometimes, dat God don't just snatch everyt'ing away jus' for spite, w'en we always complain so.

"Did you take occasion to notice dat w'ite hair against dat yo'ng face? An' dey say he never mention his trouble."

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"I tell you, like we said, Adolphe, dat river she is—she is—"

He threw up his right palm, as if in despair of adequate language.

"*T'ink* of coming home from de war, already robbed, to find *all* gone—home, wife, child, family, servants, *all* obliterate', an' only de river's mark, green mold an' mildew, on de walls above de mantel in de house; an' outside her still face under de sky to answer, an' she heed no questions. She is called de father of waters? In a sense, yas, *maybe*. *Mais*, no. She is, I tell you, de mother of trouble—*an'* pleasure, too.

"She is, after all, de queen of dis valley, an' no mistake—dat river. When she need fresh ermine for her robe, she throw it over our cotton fields—"

"Yas, an' de black spots, dey are our sorrows. Dat's not a bad resemblance, no."

The speaker looked at his watch.

"Pas' eleven," he said. "Da' 's good luck w'en she start to fall befo' midnight. Oh-h-h! *Mais* she is one great

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coquette, yas. She keep you crazy until she get tired wid you, an' den she slip away an' steal her beauty-sleep befo' de clock strike twelve."

"You t'ink she is going to sleep now? *Maybe* she fool us yet, Adolphe."

"Well, *maybe*. *Mais* I have great hope. She *begin* to nod, and w'en dat happen to a woman or a riv—"

Conversation was suddenly interrupted here by a great crash. The two men started, and, turning, saw an entire section of the improvised embankment fall landward.

Had the stress of the moment been less, they would involuntarily have hastened to the spot, but terror fixed them where they stood. There was but a moment of suspense,—of almost despair,—but it seemed an eternity, before relief came in a great shout which sent vibrations of joy far along the bank, even to those who watched and worked on the right bank of the stream.

It had been only a "dry break." The weights thrown in upon the cotton had

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been out of plumb, and had pitched the whole structure inward.

The uproar following this accident was long and loud, and had not subsided when the bell rang again, and, with tense nerves strained to listen, the line of men dropped speech. Instead of calling out the decreasing depth, as usual, the crier this time shouted:

*"Two inches down, thank God!"*

Screams of joy, not unmixed with tears, greeted this announcement. The strain was virtually over.

The two rich men who had stood and talked together mopped their foreheads and shook hands in silence.

Finally it was the older, whom we have called Adolphe,—which was not his name any more than was his companion's Felix,—finally, then, Adolphe remarked quite calmly, as he looked at his watch:

"I am glad dat cotton in de pile is saved, yas. 'T is not de first time de ol' city has fought a battle wid cotton-bales to help, eh, Felix? All doze founda-

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tion bales dey belong to Harold Le Duc. He *contribute* dem, an' make no condition. All dat trash on top de cotton, it catch de tar; so to-morrow we dig it out clean an' give it to him again—an'—an'—

"Well—"

He looked at his watch again, keeping his eyes upon it for a moment before he ventured, in a lower tone:

"Well, I say, Felix, my boy, w'at *you* say?"

"I di'n' spoke. W'at you say yourself, Adolphe?"

"Well,—dat's all I said; jus' 'well.' *Mais* I di'n' finish. I *begin* to say, I—Well, I was just t'inking. You know to-night it is de *las'* opera—don't you forget. No danger to make a *habit* on a *las' night*; ain't dat true? For w'y you don't say somet'ing?"

"Ah-h-h! Talk, ol' man! I am listening." Felix looked at his watch now. "An' maybe I am t'inking a li'l' bit, too. *Mais* go on."

"Well, I am t'inking of doze strange

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ladies. I am *sure* dey had many vacant box to-night. Don't you t'ink dey need a little encouragement—not to leave New Orleans wid dat *impression* of neglect? We don't want to place a stigma upon de gay ol' town. My carriage is here, an' it is yet time. One hour, an' we will forget all dis trouble. I need me some champagne myself."

Felix chuckled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah-h-h! Yi! An' me, too, Adolphe. I tol' you I was t'inking also. *Mais* let us sen' de good news home, an' let doze women off deir knees an' go to bed. My mud'-in-law she is de devil for prayin', an' she is poody stout, po' t'ing!

"We telegram it. Tell dem deir prayers are answered—de water is down—"

"An' our spirits are up, eh? An' we will be home in de morning, *w'en de valuable débris is removed.*"

Felix laughed and touched his friend in the ribs.

"You are one devil, Adolphe. *Mais* we mus' be good to our women."

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"Sure! I am going to return dat compliment you paid me jus' now. You say I am one devil, eh? *Bien!* An' in response, I say, Felix, you are one *saint*. You hear me! I say, one *saint—uncanonized!* Any man dat will telegram a message to save his rich mud'-in-law from maybe sudden apoplexy, he is one *saint, sure!* *Mais* you are right. We mus' be good to our women. A happy wife is a joy forever!"

He laughed again as he added :

"*Mais* de débris! Yi, yi! Dat make me smile. You ricollec' de las' débris, w'en Ma'm'selle Koko—"

"Ah, yes, Felix! Sure, I remember. I paid, me, I know, one good round sum for my share. Dat was one terrible smash-up. Two dozen champagne-glass; one crystal decanter; one chandelier, also crystal, every light on it broke, so we had to put off de gas; an'—well, de devil knows w'at else.

"Tell de trut', I don't like dat dancing on de supper-table, Felix. 'T is *superfluous*. De floor is good enough.

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An' you know, w'en a lady is dancing on a table, after a good supper, of co'se every glass is a temptation to her slipper. An' slippers an' wine-glasses—well, to say de least, de combination it is disastrous.

“So, I say, de floor it is good enough for me. It seem more *comme il faut*.

“*Mais* come along. We will be late.”

### PART SECOND