

THE BOOK PREVIEW

In this new department of THE MERCURY there will be presented each month an advance excerpt from an important book scheduled for early publication. This Work in Progress will be the product of distinguished American authors, as well as new writers of promise. Both fiction — such as the extracts from new novels by William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, and Thomas Wolfe, which appeared in the August MERCURY — and non-fiction will be offered here.

LOOSE LADIES OF NEW ORLEANS

From The French Quarter, to be published this Fall by Knopf.

BY HERBERT ASBURY

THE fame of nineteenth-century New Orleans as the gayest place on the North American continent was spread by the ballrooms, the cafés and coffee-houses, the hotels and restaurants, the elegant gambling establishments, and the unrestrained merriment of the Mardi Gras festival. But the fact that at the same time the city was notorious throughout the world as a veritable cesspool of sin was principally due to the prevalence of prostitution, which in turn was due to the tolerance with which it was regarded by the authorities and the people generally. This attitude, eagerly embraced by the American politician

because of the protection it afforded to one of his most lucrative fields of graft, was based upon the Latin viewpoint that prostitution was a necessary evil, to be regulated rather than suppressed; it became such a definite municipal characteristic that it persisted until comparatively recent years. Up to the days of the World War, commercialized vice was the most firmly entrenched phase of underworld activity in New Orleans; it was not only big business on its own account, owning some of the best property in the city and giving employment to thousands, but was also the foundation upon which the keepers of the concert-saloons, caba-

rets, dance houses, and other low resorts reared their fantastic structures of prosperity. By 1870, when New Orleans had a population of approximately 190,000, bordellos of every degree of viciousness, from the ten-dollar parlor-house to the fifteen-cent Negro crib, were running wide open on almost every important street. Except in outlying districts, there was scarcely a block in the city which did not contain at least one brothel.

From the beginning of the American occupation, until open vice was officially abolished some twenty years ago, the bagnios, with little or no concealment, paid tribute to corrupt politicians, the police, and various officials of the state and city governments. The payments divided among the higher-ups varied with the prosperity of the brothels and the rapacity of the grafter; sometimes, especially during a Mardi Gras celebration, when the city was full of strangers and the strangers full of liquor, the rates were as high as \$200 a week for each of the large parlor-houses, and \$20 for the lowest crib. In times of depression, however, the canny politicians not only omitted their regular collections, but frequently advanced money to pay the running expenses of the establishments until business improved, when they shared heavily in the gross income. In addition, particularly during the Reconstruction period, when every conceivable source of graft was

thoroughly explored, the erection and equipment of many of the larger houses were financed by state and city officials and political leaders, and housewarmings were held which were attended by the chivalry of Louisiana politics, the flower having been left at home with the children.

The rank and file of the police force, and the petty precinct officers, seldom shared in the larger spoils which accrued to their political superiors. They imposed their own levies, usually twenty-five cents a week upon each inmate of a crib, and a dollar upon the prostitute domiciled in an elegant parlor-house. Payments for officials and politicians were customarily made through trusted saloonkeepers or civilian agents, although during the reign of the carpetbaggers many statesmen went from house to house making collections. The money for the cop on the beat was left on the stoop on designated nights. There are still many people in New Orleans who recall the days when little piles of quarters and dollars could be seen on the doorsteps of the brothels by early risers; and newspaper reporters who remember when policemen assigned to the red-light districts came into the station houses at weekly intervals with their pockets bulging with coins.

For sheer innocuity, the laws by which the authorities pretended to regulate the conduct of the "woman notoriously abandoned to lewdness",

as the old statutes described the practicing prostitute, have probably never been surpassed in an American city. Prostitution was not *per se* a crime; under an ordinance adopted in 1817, the harlot was subject to punishment only if she "shall occasion scandals or disturb the tranquillity of the neighborhood", when she could be fined \$25 or imprisoned for one month. Such laws, which were seldom enforced, were retained in substance on the statute books of New Orleans until nearly the beginning of the present century.

It was in 1857 that the Common Council passed the extraordinary Ordinance No. 3267, which marked the first and only attempt by an American municipality to license prostitution. Under the law's provisions, a prostitute might live, and a madam operate a brothel, above the first floor of any building in New Orleans if licenses were obtained from the office of the mayor. The annual fees were fixed at \$100 for a harlot and \$350 for the keeper of a *bordello*. Failure to procure a license was punishable by a fine of \$100, half of which went to the informer.

This unique ordinance was signed and adopted by Mayor Charles M. Waterman and the presidents of the Board of Aldermen and Board of Assistant Aldermen—H. M. Summers and John M. Hall. Within the next month and a half, sixteen women paid the taxes and received

licenses signed by the Mayor on engraved forms appropriately decorated with smiling Cupids. The seventeenth applicant was Mrs. Emma Pickett, who paid the fee of \$350 under protest, and immediately filed suit, financed by her sister madams, to test the legality of the law. The courts eventually held the law unconstitutional, and ordered the authorities to return the money which had been collected. Successive appeals having failed, the city abandoned the licensing law in 1859, and not until almost forty years later was a system devised which effectually regulated prostitution.

II

While a score of New Orleans streets acquired a great celebrity as abodes of vice during the Civil War and Reconstruction periods, and successfully maintained their reputations for many years thereafter, the giddy heights of world-wide notoriety were reached only by Basin Street.¹ Although it has long since vanished from the map of New Orleans, the glories of this thoroughfare are still celebrated in a popular blues song, often heard on the radio, which describes it as "heaven on earth", and "the place where the white and the black folks meet". As a matter of fact, Basin Street was never frequented by Negroes, and it certainly was not heaven, though of course

¹ Now Elk Place and Crozat Street.

opinion may differ on that point. But for more than half a century it was the principal artery of the red-light district, a scarlet thread through the heart of New Orleans. On both sides, the street was lined with the most pretentious, luxurious, and expensive brothels in the United States—three-story mansions of brick and brownstone, many of them built with the aid of politicians and state and city officials, and filled with mahogany and walnut furniture, Oriental rugs and carpets, silver door-knobs, grand pianos, carved marble fireplaces and mantels, and copies of famous paintings and statuary.

Only wine and champagne were served in these sumptuous places; the ladies wore evening gowns, and in many houses could be seen only by appointment; and between business conferences in the luxurious boudoirs, the harlots and their gentleman callers were entertained by strolling musicians, dancers, singers, and jugglers who nightly went from house to house offering refined performances. A few of the larger brothels were staffed by as many as thirty women, each of whom paid her madam from thirty to fifty dollars a week for board and lodging, and as much more for laundry and incidentals. The fees paid by customers ranged from five to twenty dollars for one amatory experience and from twenty to fifty dollars if a man wished to spend the night. The

latter prices included breakfast and, if necessary, cab-fare home.

The first of the big brothels was erected about 1866 by Kate Townsend on the present site of the Elks Club. According to an article in the New Orleans *Times* for September 22, 1870, signed "Suffering Property Holder", it was built at the joint expense of a high police official, a Recorder, and several members of the Common Council. "Indeed," the article continued, "we have understood that the lady of an Alderman, who heard that her husband visited the house, resolved to see for herself. She disguised herself and entered the house, where she found nearly the whole city government, with the president of the Board of Aldermen or the Mayor—we forget which—at the head of the table and her husband at the foot." There are, of course, no records to prove either the truth or the falsity of "Suffering Property Holder's" statements, but it is very likely that they were correct, for Kate Townsend was one of the most influential courtesans in the history of New Orleans, and for many years, particularly while the carpetbaggers were in power, her bordello was a favorite haunt of politicians and city officials.

Some of the prostitutes and brothel-keepers who followed Kate into Basin Street remained on that thoroughfare for many years; their names and memories of the manifold elegancies of their establishments are

still preserved in the traditions of the red-light district. A swarthy beauty who called herself Minnie Haha and claimed to be a descendant of the heroine of Longfellow's poem—she is said to have had an oil painting in her parlor labeled "Mr. and Mrs. Hiawatha, Ancestors of Minnie Haha"—opened a swanky place near the Townsend mansion. At the curb in front of the house she installed a huge granite hitching-block equipped with gilded iron rings, with her name chiseled upon it in large letters, and attended by a uniformed Negro boy—he wore a scarlet jacket with "Minnie Haha, Welcome," embroidered on the chest in gold—to take the gentlemen's carriages. For the horses, Minnie Haha provided daily a bag of apples.

A few doors from this picturesque house of sin, Leila Barton operated a brothel which was described by the *Times* in 1870 as "one of the most fashionable palaces of the demi-monde". It was the scene of considerable commotion on March 5 of that year, when, according to the *Times*, "Mrs. H., wife of a well-known merchant, walked in with a new six-shooter and fired at Blanche Russell", an inmate, who Mrs. H. said was her husband's mistress. Only one cartridge exploded, however, and no one was hurt.

Another big house was operated by Kitty Johnson, who was noted for the multiplicity of her lovers. Two of them, Billy Walsh and J. J. Heley,

fought a duel on the sidewalk in front of the house in 1882, while Kitty and her staff watched from the window, and in the kitchen the cook labored over a sumptuous dinner which the brothel-keeper had promised as a reward for the victor. Walsh was mortally wounded.

Josephine Killeen was madam of a brothel opposite Kate Townsend's, where the big attraction in 1870 was the ten-year-old daughter of Molly Williams, an inmate of the resort. Mother and child were sold jointly for \$50 a night. When the police said this was going a bit too far and took the girl away, Josephine denounced their action as an outrage; she protested that the child was simply helping her mother get along in the world. A similar plea was made a few weeks later by Kate Smith, who advertised by chastely engraved cards distributed in saloons that none of the girls in her establishment was more than seventeen years old. In March, 1870, during one of their rare periods of righteous wrath over what went on among the red lights, the police took two young girls from Kate Smith's dive, one of whom said that she had been a prostitute for four years, since she was twelve. The brothel-keeper said the girls were her sister's children, and that they were really entitled to great credit because they gave all their earnings to their mother and visited her every Sunday morning.

Another Basin Street establish-

ment of more than ordinary notoriety was the three-story brick mansion known as Twenty-One, which was operated by Hattie Hamilton, the mistress of Senator James D. Beares. Hattie had so impressed the statesman Beares with her beauty and skill at harlotry that he took her out of a resort of vice, bought her fine raiment, a red-wheeled carriage, and a matched pair of high-stepping horses, and installed her in style as the madam of 21 Basin Street, which she staffed with a score of beautiful and accomplished bawds. Under her expert management, Twenty-One became almost immediately one of the most popular brothels in the city, and for a while, owing to the influence of the Senator, seriously threatened to usurp the place of Kate Townsend's resort in the affections of the politicians. Once Twenty-One was in good running order, however, Hattie left its affairs largely in the hands of a housekeeper and began to spend much of her time at the home of Senator Beares on St. Charles Avenue, where she posed as his wife, and where they indulged in protracted drinking-bouts. On the night of May 26, 1870, the Senator and Hattie began drinking heavily after dinner, and several times during the night Beares' Negro butler, Robert Phillips, heard them scuffling about the room. About dawn the Negro heard a shot, and a few minutes later found the Senator lying on a couch dying from a bullet-

wound, while Hattie sat in a chair and regarded him with drunken gravity. On the floor between them was a pistol, which disappeared during the next few hours and was never found.

Subsequent procedure in the case was declared by the *Times* to be "altogether irregular" and was never satisfactorily explained; the investigation was finally dropped entirely. The general belief was that Hattie had become privy to so many of the Senator's secrets that his friends and relatives couldn't afford to go further into the circumstances of the killing. Business fell off at 21 Basin Street following the death, and after a year or so Hattie sold the resort. She died at Old Point Comfort on August 9, 1882, leaving \$719.20 as the total profits from a lifetime of vice.

III

Kate Townsend was perhaps the most celebrated of them all. In her later years she suffered from a glandular disorder and became grossly corpulent; she weighed 300 pounds when she died; but when Kate came to New Orleans, at the age of eighteen, she was an exceedingly handsome girl with a fine figure, and is said to have been the most popular young strumpet of her time. During her early years "on the turf", as the saying went, she was both thrifty and ambitious, and about 1863, when she was twenty-

four, she was able to build the three-story palace of marble and brown-stone at 40 Basin Street, which was probably the most luxurious brothel that ever opened its doors in the United States. For her own occupancy, Kate reserved a suite of large rooms on the Common Street side of the building, on the first floor, which she equipped in magnificent fashion at a reputed cost of \$40,000. The fireplaces and mantels were of white marble, and the furniture, upholstered in rep and damask, was of polished black walnut, as were the woodwork and the floors, which were covered by rich velvet carpets. Even the bedroom utensil common to the times is said to have been heavily gilded.

The house was furnished with the same gaudy magnificence; from cellar to garret there was a profusion of gilt, plate glass, velvet, plush, and damask. The building and its contents were said to have cost well over \$100,000, and that at a time when two dollars a day was a high wage for a carpenter, and when other labor, as well as materials, was correspondingly cheap. And the manner in which the brothel was conducted was in keeping with its appointments. Elegance and an excessive formality formed the keynote. High-class trade only was encouraged, and the rowdies who occasionally invaded the refined precincts were ejected by Kate in person; she was not only very strong, but when

aroused was a fierce fighter; throughout her career as a madam she acted as her own bouncer. The number of girls regularly on duty — each had one day off a week, which she usually spent at the theater or drinking in the cafés with her “fancy man” — varied from fifteen to twenty, and every one of them was a lady to her fingertips. Evening dress was the rule, and bawdy behavior was prohibited; a spade was never a spade in Kate Townsend’s bagnio. When a gentleman arrived he was met at the door by a uniformed Negro maid. If he was one of the steady clients, he was ushered into the drawing-room, where he was expected to buy wine — at \$15 a bottle — for the assembled company. If a stranger, he was shown into an ante-room and questioned by Kate, who also drank a glass of wine with him — at the modest price of \$2 a glass. If his credentials were in order, he was escorted into the drawing-room and formally presented to the ladies by his full name and style. If one of the girls struck his fancy, he communicated his desires to the madam, who conferred with the lucky strumpet. If the latter was willing — and there is no record that one of them was ever otherwise — she discreetly retired to her boudoir. Thither, after a seemly interval, the gentleman was conducted. The tariff for such an adventure was \$15, although a few of the more popular bawds received twenty. Kate herself was occasionally

available for the entertainment of a particularly distinguished client — at a price which is said to have been \$50 an hour.

The house suffered a severe though temporary setback in 1870 when Gus Taney, a young gambler who was noted for his personal armament—he habitually carried a derringer, a revolver, a bowie knife, a sling shot, and a gimlet-knife—was murdered in the drawing-room by Jim White, also a gambler. White stabbed the heavily-armed Taney in the heart with a knife—it had a nine-inch blade—which he carried beneath his armpit. The revolver was found on the floor by the police, who gave it and the knife to Kate as souvenirs. Thereafter she slept with the knife under her pillow and carried it in her reticule wherever she went. It was the weapon with which she was herself finally murdered by Treville Egbert Sykes.

The morning after her murder, the *Picayune* published an account of the tragedy under these headlines:

CARVED TO DEATH!

TERRIBLE FATE OF KATE TOWNSEND
AT THE HANDS OF TREVILLE SYKES
WITH THE INSTRUMENTALITY OF A
BOWIE KNIFE

HER BREASTS AND SHOULDERS LITER-
ALLY COVERED WITH STABS

The body of the famous madam, attired in a \$600 white silk dress, trimmed with lace at \$50 a yard, was laid out in the drawing-room, and

at the funeral all the furniture was covered by white silk instead of the usual linen. Champagne was served to the guests in accordance with Kate Townsend's request. She was buried in a \$400 casket, one corner of which bore a silver cross inscribed with her name. The body was followed to Metarie Cemetery by twenty carriages. There was not a man in any of them.

IV

After the abandonment of the curious licensing law of 1857, the authorities of New Orleans made no real attempt to control prostitution until early in 1897. On January 26 of that year, the City Council passed the famous ordinance introduced by Alderman Sidney Story, which set aside a considerable area in the old part of the city in which prostitution was to be permitted but not actually legalized. It was prohibited in the so-called American section, and the law thus spelled the doom of the gaudy brothels on that part of Basin Street which lay south of Canal Street, although North Basin Street continued to be the most important of all the thoroughfares devoted to vice.

The area thus determined upon as a quasi-legal red-light district comprised thirty-eight blocks occupied solely by brothels and assignation houses, and by saloons, cabarets, and other enterprises which de-

pended upon vice. By the middle of 1898 the new district, popularly known as Storyville, was operating full blast under the sheltering arm of the law, and particularly under the protection of Tom Anderson, a politician and saloonkeeper who was the big shot of brotheldom of the period. In theory, the bordellos of storyville were safe from interference by the police, but sensible madams and crib girls continued the custom of leaving money on the doorstep.

Within a few years Storyville had become the most celebrated red-light district in the United States. Within its confines flourished such celebrated madams as Josie Arlington, Countess Willie V. Piazza, Lulu White, Gertrude Dix, and Emma Johnson, whose establishments lost little in comparison with the mansions presided over by the Kate Townsends and Minnie Hahas of an earlier day. Despite the activities of various groups of suppressionists, the experiment was operated success-

fully for some twenty years, during which time there was comparatively little vice outside the prescribed area. The day when a New Orleans family might awaken any morning to find that the house next door had been transformed into a brothel ended with the adoption of the Story ordinance—and didn't return until Storyville was abolished by order of the War and Navy Departments in 1917.

The last of the prostitutes were driven out of the district at midnight on November 12, 1917, and a few days later, leading churchwomen and members of the Louisiana Federation of Women's Clubs held a meeting and appointed a committee to aid their fallen sisters. But none applied for succor. Few needed it, in fact; they had simply moved from Storyville into various residential and business sections and were doing very well.

For that matter, they still are today.



(NEXT MONTH — *Book Preview of Fighting Angel, by Pearl S. Buck.*)

THE LIBRARY

Diseases of the Great

BY JOHN W. THOMASON, JR.

IDOLS AND INVALIDS, by James
Kemble. \$3.00. *Doubleday, Doran.*

CHARLES the Bold was a splendid prince, the magnificent heir of a sovereign house, dealing familiarly with kings. He was of fine person and address, and comparable, in cultural interests, to the Italian lords of the Renaissance. In statecraft, his intelligence was sufficient to exact the most elaborate counterskill from the foxy Louis XI, and his designs were broad and high. His direction of events was distinguished—up to a certain point. But then, as the situation delicately approached fruition, he invariably blew up, and destroyed his own schemes by headlong folly. It was with reason that they called him the Bull of Burgundy.

The explanation of this fatal defect in his character surely lies in the note on the silly skirmish outside Nancy, after the disasters of Granson and Morat, where some casual pikeman cut him down, like any greasy mercenary. For it is related that, when his people came to look for him, they found a hacked and naked

carcass, half eaten by wolves, frozen in a ditch (it was about Christmas time, and bitter weather) and only by the decayed teeth were they able to identify the mortal remains of the great Duke of Burgundy. . . . You realize that the poor gentleman's grinders hurt him every day of his life; and how can you preserve a just diplomatic balance through the mazes of negotiation, when your maxillaries are jumping with hot wires of pain, and your half-chewed ration ferments in your stomach? There were immense possibilities in the House of Burgundy—but the fifteenth century lacked the refinements of dental science.

On the other hand, the annals are bright with important achievement by the halt, the maimed, and the ailing. Plutarch details considerable chronic suffering among the worthies of classical antiquity. Montaigne's gravel runs through all his essays: it may well have been the affliction that drove him into retirement and philosophy. Pepys had the stone, and was cut for it before the days of anesthetics. Samuel Johnson was scrofulous