

New Orleans

BY CHARLES HENRY WHITE

A GREAT open street fringed by two and three story buildings of nameless architecture; crowded trolley-cars and two policemen; a wide expanse of hazy sky and yellow clouds of dust hovering over an idle crowd that shuffles slowly back and forth beneath the arcades, going nowhere in particular. Such is one's first impression of New Orleans, for it seems inevitable that every stranger must make his initial entrance to the Crescent City through Canal Street. But if Mardi Gras is not far distant one will lose sight of the banalities of this great thoroughfare in the personnel of its floating population.

Race-track touts, book-makers, jockeys, commercial travellers, a few long-shoremen from the levee, "viveurs" from the neighboring cities, German marines on shore leave from the visiting battle-ships, a few clubmen making for their afternoon at the "Pickwick" or "Boston," naval officers with shimmering epaulets—in short, one is apt to see here at some hour of the day anybody from a St. Louis capitalist to the man who came the night before with no change of linen, and seven dollars sewn in his waistcoat. One would take this to be the greatest idling community in America; as a matter of fact it is—for out-of-town people like oneself. The representative Orleanais does not loiter here; he merely passes through with a definite purpose.

If you were to follow Royal Street, a few steps over the border-line would take you from the confused clatter of an active modern commercial centre into the pastoral quiet of an eighteenth-century byway.

This is the genuine New Orleans, glowing with luminous color, steeped in romantic legend and tradition, with rare vistas of faded stucco, and its heavy batten shutters securely bolted across the high French windows, and graceful

spiked balconies of corroded wrought iron, each with the former owner's insignia cunningly twisted into the general design, running like ivy over the crumbling stucco of the houses. Bordering the street are the narrow shops of antiquarians, thickly coated with fine strata of yellow dust, wearing a mournful air of excommunication, and here and there you may pass some gloomy wareroom littered with old mahogany, crystal, and Sheffield plate, dismantled possibly from these very houses across the street—eloquent suggestions of more prosperous days and of the desperate means resorted to by the *ancien régime* to stem the changing of the tides.

One's first impression—that of an utterly abandoned neighborhood — is soon relinquished when through the open wicket in some ponderous *porte-cochère* one catches a glimpse of a cool arcaded court with high-arched mullioned windows peeping above the heavy magnolia foliage. The great Spanish earthenware pots bristling with tropical plants, the roses running wild over the golden stucco, and the ruin of what may once have been a fountain relieved against the dull-red pavement, with its dainty sculpture stained to a deep umber, form an ensemble not unworthy of the most exacting of the Versailles monarch's inamoratas.

Many a modest disciple of Omar Khayyam still resides in Royal Street, for it is honeycombed with similar courtyards. To sit in one's quiet court far from the sounds of an outer world, to chuckle contentedly when a basketful of last century's stucco detaches itself from beneath the eaves-trough and falls with a gentle thud on the busy pedestrian without, to hear his oath and receding footsteps come muffled through the grilled wicket, and, when the shadows have enveloped everything except the graceful arches of the Spanish windows—the familiar ring, the rustle of a skirt,

and tête-à-tête at the little table beneath the magnolia blossoms—surely this is living!

In early days this was the Faubourg St.-Germain of New Orleans; indeed, even as late as the "fifties" the old St. Louis Hotel, a few streets below, poured into this narrow channel its clientele of wealthy planters, and Royal Street echoed to the cheerful hum of an active, prosperous thoroughfare. Yet even the popularity of the St. Louis began to wane; bad management and the gradual shifting of the business centre up-town may have been responsible for this—howbeit Royal Street closed her great batten shutters, bolted the heavy *porte-cochères*, and settled down to a long Arcadian summer. To-day, when you come upon a yellow wilderness fringed by two-story buildings, where as late as 1903 many of the most beautiful and historic landmarks of New Orleans had stood since 1813, and see stretching across the entire width of this deserted square the old St. Louis, with its mighty colonnade and yellow façade, all stains, seams, and broken window-panes, still defiantly holding its ground in the midst of this desolation, you feel strangely alone and out of place.

If you enter this ancient hostelry quietly on Royal Street—the main entrance is securely bolted—you pass from the glare of high noon into a cellar damp and twilight gloom; for even at midday the light penetrates with difficulty the intricate network of abandoned spider-webs festooned across the windows. A spacious stairway leads to the floor above, with its labyrinth of gloomy corridors and endless rooms, where a heavy silence weighs on one like a pall. At rare intervals the distant rattle of falling plaster reaches the ear faintly, and, as you grope your way in the obscurity of some blind corridor, a door may open violently behind you with a tinkling of falling glass, as a sudden gust sweeps from the great yellow expanse of the Mississippi and bursts through a window-pane, carrying the dust in whirling eddies in its headlong race through the passageway, like the disembodied spirit of some former guest searching for an exit. It has a restless atmosphere.

Few things in New Orleans are associated with more graceful tradition than the old ballroom on this floor, with its high pier-glasses spotted with mildew and shimmering with pale reflections. The famous subscription balls of antebellum days were held here, and even the most prosaic Philistine must feel a little moved by the vast changes that have taken place, and catch himself striving to people the old ballroom with its former life and movement: the stately minuets, the rustling crinolines, the old gallants in high stocks, the endless Virginia reels, and the warm glow of soft candle-light playing over the white shoulders of former belles that moved rhythmically across the well-waxed floors to strains of music long since forgotten.

More corridors, suites of rooms, and twisting staircases, with a cat racing in terror at your approach, and you are making the descent into the cryptlike atmosphere of the old rotunda. In early days this was the main entrance, and its great circle of Corinthian columns carried the eye upward until it rested on an imposing cupola, frescoed by a nephew and pupil of Canova. The effect was that of a lofty cathedral nave, and put to shame the barbaric display of gold-leaf and overelaboration of the pretentious modern hotel. If in its present ruin you are tempted to doubt the brilliancy of its former patronage, run your eye over the old registry-books—they are still there—and you will find—but why stir up the dead? Henry Clay, General Boulanger, even President McKinley, passed beneath the portico. Before the war this was used as a prominent slave-mart. A large stone slab is still in its place between two of the massive columns and served as an auction-block; even the name of the slave-dealer is still visible on the gray stones above, and it requires little effort of the imagination to evoke the old rotunda, with its by-gone clientele of wealthy planters, prominent professional men, and the Southern *jeunesse dorée* that crowded about, making the gray walls echo with their spirited bidding, when many a beautiful quadroom ascended the rostrumlike platform and stood framed between the noble Corinthian columns like some pagan goddess, to be sold to the highest bidder.



J. H. S. 86

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(Etched out-of-doors directly on copper by C. H. White)

A FRENCH COURTYARD IN NEW ORLEANS

In Charles Street there is a balcony—of course there are balconies everywhere in this delightful city; a man must have his bit of wrought iron if only to hang his parrot on, where he may curse in his broad Southern accent the day when first the innovations began in the old town—but this particular balcony has a sentimental interest to me, entirely apart from the beauty of its design, or the fact that the sombre *porte-cochère* beneath it leads to the most picturesque spot in the United States. It will always remain associated with the person of a tall, active fellow who suddenly emerged from the shadows of the wide gallery, hurriedly stepped into the clear sunlight, crossed the street, anticipated my intention when I opened my camp-stool, and prevented me from putting in an active day's work. Had I seen the courtyard? No. Well then I must follow him immediately. There was an ease

and cordiality in his manner, together with a cheerful devil-may-care way of taking things for granted, that made a refusal out of the question. His name was D'Armas; he was a creole and wished it distinctly understood that he was not colored. Having thus introduced himself we crossed the street.

"Better keep to the right and move lively," he advised, when we had passed the threshold of the *porte-cochère* and penetrated half-way through the damp tunnel-like entrance to the courtyard. "Some day those bricks are coming down," he explained, pointing to the dilapidated arch above us. "and the man who catches a bunch of them on the top of his head will be laid out in a nice clean white shirt with some one moving slow behind him next morning." And now, had I seen Beau Brummel? This was the second question put to me in this drowsy ruin of a beautiful court,



(Etched out-of-doors directly on copper by C. H. White)

IN THE FRENCH QUARTER

after my host had offered me a cigarette, the freedom of the house, and a soap-box to sit on.

"Once in New York," I answered, letting my eyes wander from the pale cobalt of the Franco-Spanish window to the green jalousied gallery above us, saturating myself with the perfection of the place: the great fantastic blots on its dilapidated walls, the rambling galleries twining their way to the jalousie above. Venice or Paris in their most unusual phases cannot surpass the beauty of New Orleans in her finer moods, and yet all this is in America!

"I see you don't understand," he put in, after a decent pause, bringing me out of my reverie with a start. "I mean *our* Beau Brummel; lives up there in that hole in the wall above the gallery, and never has been known to do a stroke of work . . . pays two dollars a month, and is as regular as clockwork. Some people think he has money," he continued, whistling a few bars from *La Bohème*. His name? Oh yes. Last year it was Monsieur d'Albert, and now it is Monsieur d'Etainville, but that was common in Chartres Street. D'Armas bent over and whispered, "He may sell lottery tickets; in fact once—" Here my host ended his rambling narrative abruptly by digging me in the ribs, for a door had opened on the gallery above, and a figure emerged, as he had said, from a mere crevice in the wall. A narrow mirror swung on the outside of the door, for a man must have infinite resource to live comfortably in a closet seven feet by five, with no window. It was the figure of a man advanced in years, with white hair and a bristling mustache, muffled to the eyes in a heavy coat. Spectacles, so strong that they magnified his deep-set eyes, and a large felt hat completed the costume. No man ever was more hypercritical about his person than this elderly tenant on the gallery above, as he stood before his narrow strip of glass performing the last rites of an exquisite toilet, brushing the threadbare coat with renewed fury, flicking a possible microbe from his coat lapels, peering anxiously at the dim reflection within, until he became exacting to the point of morbidness, seeming to demand of his mirror the very soul of its quicksilver.

"Year in and year out it's just the same," my host observed, sadly,—after the elderly recluse had descended the dilapidated staircase from the gallery and swept past us with a ceremonious "*Bon soir, 'ssieurs*";—"and mark my words," he continued, gravely, "he'll keep on brushing until he brushes himself silly." There is little sympathy for a tidy man on Chartres Street.

If you were to follow the emerald-green span of the gallery connecting this wing with the main portion of the house, you would find, sprawled on the floor of a cavity in the wall even smaller than that occupied by Monsieur d'Albert, the antithesis of the latter's cold formality, in the person of the unknown tenant—a Gascon—who pays one dollar a month, expects nothing of anybody, and in turn imparts nothing. Where Monsieur d'Albert is brushed to excess the tenant above is very much dishevelled; rises late when he does rise, and spends his time at the "*Rendezvous des Amies de l'Art Culinaire*," a few doors below, in Chartres Street. The ample curves of his midriff speak of the fleeting nature of his investments. He is a bachelor, usually intoxicated, and extremely happy.

In spite of its beauty and varied interest this was a demoralizing place to work in. Even when you had ceased to listen to the broad French oaths coming in fits and starts from the mansard room, or to the confused babble of French and Spanish patois of the cigarette-girls on the floor above, there was always an idler or two to smoke with you in the court and make life interesting if not productive. Then, of course, there was always the possibility of D'Armas appearing on the scene, approaching you with a knowing wink and whispering: "Let me put your things in the desk where they'll be safe. I've got the wagon and am going to show you something." This was corrupting because you knew that he could.

These were golden days, when, as we rolled down Chartres Street, my host drew from his rich and unassorted store of information concerning men, women, and their intimate affairs many a precious and spicy item, and imparted them to me between the violent lurching of the wagon over the deep furrows of the old

Spanish pavement. Here at the corner was the house the creole "sang-pur" had built for Napoleon, but the English had fixed that, as I knew; and across the street in that very garden I admired so much I might see, if it were only summer-time, old Pierre Besan planting a few dozen brass candlesticks, to be excavated in the winter for the antique stores on Royal Street. I had come at a poor time, he said, for him to show me anything. And now, while we were passing it, I might take note that on the first floor of the old house with the fine monogram in iron I could sleep in Lafayette's

bed and never knew the difference; but personally he preferred to sleep on the floor above, for reasons that must be whispered, as he did, and not written.

Here was a man whose antecedents entitled him to the highest consideration eking out an existence in the most humble position. He was waiting for something decent to turn up, he said. The family plate, mahogany, and crystal had long since passed through the dealers' hands in Royal Street, but he assured me that he still had a small legacy, some real estate. We visited it together. It was chaste and simple, with

Ionic fluted pilasters framing a weather-beaten marble tablet, beautifully spaced with quaint French inscriptions, and dated 1830. It stands in the old St. Louis Cemetery and is as fine a tomb as any man could desire. Cases like this are not uncommon among the creoles. Generations of ancestors in whom the art of living had reached a meridian of perfection have left them an inherited taste for the finer elements of a well-rounded existence and poorly equipped to cope with present conditions. To the creole, music, for instance, has ceased to be a luxury; it is as much a necessity as the claret with the *déjeuner*, and must be included in the household expense account. The small boy passes you warbling an aria from *Faust* in the same spontaneous manner as the Northern gamin whistles his "rag-time." Indeed, such is the demand for good music in New Orleans, that I know of a case where an extremely plain and worthy woman spent many years in Bourbon Street without a suitor, until she obtained the ice-water privilege at the Opera House, when she



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ROYAL STREET



(Etched out-of-doors directly on copper by C. H. White)

THERE IS LITTLE SYMPATHY FOR A TIDY MAN IN CHARTRES STREET

was courted and married immediately. The admission, of course, is gratuitous to her husband, and he never misses a night. If you would see where many a modest hoard of pennies is depleted, go to this old French Opera House and take a seat in the *troisième* or *paradis*, and observe the densely packed galleries. You will notice many early patrons of the house: venerable old men and feeble women with a faint air of the "sixties" in the cut of their clothes; and indolent creole belles, with boys and girls, all spell-bound, breathlessly intent, devouring a

delicate piece of orchestration, and rising spontaneously at a stirring climax with shouts of "Bis!" . . . "Encore!" and sonorous "Bravos!"

The creole would rather do without a few meals than miss a good opera with a fine cast; nor does this admirable spirit merely apply to the middle classes. Many a charming little creole lady who might point to a Marigny on her escutcheon would not hesitate, if hard pressed, to do her own housework in order to be able to blossom out at night in her proper place—radiant and exquisite—in a *loge grillé* at the Opera.

It matters little in New Orleans to what unfortunate straits adversity may have driven a lady; even though she may do typewriting for people whom she meets socially, there are enough noble-minded people of the *ancien régime* who will help her to forget the pinch of poverty and see that she receives the greatest consideration. This inbred chivalry is one of the most marked and endearing traits of the Southern character, lending to the South an atmosphere free from our parasitical flunkeyism over mere money or its insignia.

Much of the social life of New Orleans is centred in this old playhouse, which, though built in 1860, still remains the best-designed opera-house in America. On either side of the parquet are the *baignoires*, or covered boxes, shaped very much like a bathing-chair, and the first tier above is composed of the *loges découvertes* (open boxes), separated by comfortable aisles. Behind these, forming a second horseshoe, are the quaint *loges grillées*, in the form of miniature *baignoires*, and until quite recently equipped with grill-work which might be opened or shut according to the requirements within. With the grills closed it was considered quite proper for a lady in deep mourning to attend the opera. These delightful contrivances have gone the way of most of our fine old customs.

In the week preceding Mardi Gras, the exquisite balls of the numerous carnival organizations are given here; and to appreciate their significance in New Orleans one must realize that the mere fact of being seen at one of these functions gives one a certain distinction or standing. It is the social Parnassus to which all whose ambitions are of a worldly or fashionable trend look forward anxiously through the idle summer months; and the influence that has made it possible to sustain the ever-increasing interest in the carnival festivities, since the first parade in 1827, may be found in the one word—mystery. Apart from the knowledge that the maskers of each organization are recruited from the gentry of New Orleans, little is known; and it is as futile to-day to speculate upon the identity of the present maskers as it was in the early "forties." A masonic secrecy puts an impenetrable barrier to every available source of information.

Such is the reticence of these organizations that in the event of one's desiring to become a member he can find nobody to whom he may apply. He must trust to the chance of being overheard expressing his desire to become a masker by some member, who, if he thinks him desirable, submits his name to the committee of expulsion, the personnel of which is unknown even to the maskers themselves. It is rumored that this is composed of three men, prominently representative of the professional, business, and social world, but this is mere hearsay. Their word is final, and in case of an adverse decision one had better take the first car up Canal Street to the station and buy a through ticket to the North if one has social aspirations in New Orleans. If, however, the name has been passed upon favorably, the applicant will receive an anonymous letter, stating an hour and place where he may meet a member who will give him further instructions. It is not unlikely that the member will prove to be one of your most staid and elderly business friends, the last man you could possibly conceive of as lending himself to the public impersonation of a chubby Cupid in the street procession. He, in turn, presents you to other members, and after having sworn never to reveal any of the secrets of the organization or your connection with it, you are measured for a costume, and are thenceforth subject to the orders of the Captain of the Krewe. The member enjoys the privilege of issuing twenty invitations and three "call-out" cards—the greatest favor a masker can confer upon a lady—which are all subject to being ruled out by the secret triumvirate.

And so ever since the "thirties" the pretty little Orleanaises have danced into the small hours of the morning without a clue to their partners' identity, for with wig and mask completely covering the head, the masker's incognito may well defy detection. Indeed, even if a lady were able to recognize a masker through some peculiarity of his speech, she would be careful to keep her discovery to herself. Frequently, I am told, extremely droll incidents have resulted from a crafty expedient resorted to by married men to keep their wives in doubt regarding their whereabouts on

the night of the ball. This usually consists of an agreement between two maskers to call out their respective wives. Not long ago two gentlemen who had formed a similar pact danced through the night without either of the ladies suspecting their identity, when the one masker—a doctor—pleased with the way the scheme was progressing, and seeing his wife glide past on the arm of his partner's husband, chose to add an additional convincing note to the deception by exclaiming, "Why, there goes the doctor's wife!"

"Yes," replied his pretty partner, examining his wife with a hypercritical eye; "isn't she an *awful* mess?"

It is the special privilege of ladies possessing the distinction of a "call-out" card to dance the first six or eight dances with maskers only on the floor, and the only flaw one might find in the brilliant management of the carnival balls is the number of dances the maskers of each organization reserve for themselves only, making it necessary for ladies not hold-

ing a special card to wait almost until midnight, watching their hosts and more fortunate sisters enjoying themselves, before being permitted to participate. Indeed, this prevailing weakness has made present conditions such that it is almost impossible to get a lady who is accustomed to the "call-out" distinction to attend a ball with the ordinary invitation.

Yet one is in a poor position to criticize the masker. He pays one hundred dollars for the privilege of dancing one night, and if he belongs to only four organizations his expense account of four hundred dollars is a rather large item for one week's merriment, as this does not include the handsome favors for the ladies. Yet a man must belong to several of these if he would not feel cramped during carnival week. Why will he pay so much for his pleasure? Possibly for the reason that he may reserve his privilege of calling out the lady of his choice until the night of the ball, when, having searched the boxes with



(Etched out-of-doors directly on copper by C. H. White)

THE FRENCH OPERA HOUSE



St. J. Stude.

White etching.
1896

(Etched out-of-doors directly on copper by C. H. White)

THE OLD SPANISH PRISON

a careful eye, he may turn to a floor-committeeman and whisper, "Just beside the Corinthian column to the left there is a little creole."

"The one in pink?"

"No, in gray . . . black hair, with the lovely shoulders and lorgnette."

"Her name?"

"I don't know, but please bring her to me." And the committeeman will

take the steps leading to the tier of boxes above like an ambulance surgeon on an emergency call, for the masker is a privileged character. It is safe to say that when she appears the whiteness of her cheek will betray a slight flush, for to be singled out from the floor is a more noticeable distinction than the "call-out" card, and once beneath the white ribbon there is no way of making her return.

The Informer

BY JOSEPH CONRAD

MR. X came to me with a letter of introduction from a good friend of mine in Paris, specifically to see my collection of Chinese bronzes and porcelain.

My friend in Paris is a collector too. He collects neither porcelain, nor bronzes, nor pictures, nor medals, nor stamps, nor anything that could be profitably dispersed under an auctioneer's hammer. He would reject, with unaffected surprise, the name of a collector. Nevertheless, that is what he is by temperament. He collects acquaintances. It is a delicate work. He brings to it the patience, the passion, the determination of a true collector of curiosities. His collection does not contain any royal personages. I don't think he considers them sufficiently rare and interesting; but, with that exception, he has met and talked with every one worth knowing on any conceivable ground. He observes them, listens to them, penetrates them, measures them, and puts the memory away in the galleries of his mind. He has schemed, plotted, and travelled all over Europe in order to add to his collection of distinguished personal acquaintances.

As he is wealthy, well connected, and unprejudiced, his collection is pretty complete, including objects (or should I say subjects?) whose value is unappreciated by the vulgar, and often unknown to popular fame. Of those specimens my friend is naturally the most proud.

He wrote to me of X. "He is the greatest insurgent (*révolté*) of modern times. The world knows him as a revolutionary writer whose savage irony has laid bare the rottenness of the most respectable institutions. He has scalped every venerated head, and has mangled at the stake of his wit every received opinion and every recognized principle of conduct and policy. Who does not remember those flaming red revolutionary pamphlets whose sudden swarmings used

to overwhelm the powers of every Continental police like a sudden plague of crimson gadflies? But this extreme writer has been also a man of action, the inspirer of secret societies, the mysterious unknown Number One of desperate conspiracies suspected and unsuspected, matured or baffled. And the world at large has never had an inkling of that fact. This accounts for him going about amongst us to this day, a veteran of many subterranean campaigns, standing aside now, safe within his reputation of merely the greatest destructive publicist that ever lived."

Thus wrote my friend, adding that Mr. X was an enlightened connoisseur of bronzes and china, and asking me to show him my collection.

X turned up in due course. My treasures are disposed in three large rooms without carpets and curtains. There is no other furniture than the glass cases and the *étagères* whose contents shall be worth a fortune to my heirs. I allow no fires to be lighted, for fear of accidents, and a fire-proof door separates them from the rest of the house.

It was a bitter cold day. We kept on our overcoats and hats. Middle-sized and spare, his eyes alert in a long, Roman-nosed countenance, X walked on neat little feet, with short steps, and looked at my collection intelligently. I hope I looked at him intelligently too. A snow-white mustache and imperial made his nut-brown complexion appear darker than it really was. In his fur coat and shiny tall hat that terrible man looked fashionable. I believe he belonged to a noble family, and could have called himself *Vicomte X de la Z* if he chose. We talked nothing but bronzes and porcelain. He was remarkably appreciative. We parted on cordial terms.

Where he was staying I don't know. I imagine he must have been a lonely man. Anarchists, I suppose, have no fam-