

FLOOD AND PLAGUE IN NEW ORLEANS.

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I.

INUNDATIONS.

THE people of New Orleans take pride in Canal street. It is to the modern town what the Place d'Armes was to the old. Here stretch out in long parade, in variety of height and color, the great retail stores, displaying their silken and fine linen and golden seductions; and the fair Creole and American girls, and the self-depreciating American mothers, and the majestic Creole matrons, all black lace and alabaster, swarm and hum and push in and out and flit here and there among the rich things and fine things, the novelties and the bargains. Its eighteen-feet sidewalks are roofed from edge to edge by verandas that on gala-days are stayed up with extra scantlings and yet seem ready to come splintering down under the crowd of parasoled ladies sloping upward on them from front to back in the fashion of the amphitheater. Its two distinct, granite-paved roadways are each forty feet wide, and the tree-bordered "neutral ground" between measures fifty-four feet across. It was "neutral" when it divided between the French quarter and the American at the time when their "municipality" governments were distinct from each other.

In Canal street, well-nigh all the street-car lines in town begin and end. The Grand Opera House is here; also, the Art Union. The club-houses glitter here. If Jackson Square has one bronze statue, Canal street has the only other. At the base of Henry Clay's pedestal, the people rally to hear the demagogues in days of political fever, and the tooth-paste orator in nights of financial hypertrophy. Here are the grand reviews. Here the resplendent Mystic Krewe marches by calcium lights on carnival nights up one roadway and down the other, and

"Perfume and flowers fall in showers,
That lightly rain from ladies' hands."

Here is the huge granite custom-house, that "never is but always to be" finished. Here is a row of stores monumental to the sweet memory of the benevolent old Portu-

guese Jew whom Newport, Rhode Island, as well as New Orleans, gratefully honors—Judah Touro. Here sit the flower *marchandes*, making bouquets of jasmines and roses, clove-pinks, violets, and lady-slippers. Here the Creole boys drink mead, and on the verandas above maidens and their valentines sip sherbets in the starlight. Here only, in New Orleans, the American "bar" puts on a partial disguise. Here is the way to West End and to Spanish Fort, little lakeside spots of a diminished Coney Island sort. The gay carriage-parties turn north-westward, scurrying away to the races. Yea, here the funeral train breaks into a trot toward the cemeteries of Metairie Ridge. Here is Christ's Church, with its canopied weddings. Here the ring-politician mounts perpetual guard. Here the gambler seeks whom he may induce to walk around into his parlor in the Rue Royale or St. Charles street. And here, in short, throng the members of the great New Orleans Creole-American house of Walker, Doolittle and Co.

One does not need to be the oldest resident to remember when this neutral ground in Canal street was still a place of tethered horses, roaming goats, and fluttering lines of drying shirts and petticoats. In those days an old mule used to drag his dejected way slowly round and round in an unchanging circle on the shabby grassed avenue, just behind the spot where the statue of Henry Clay was later erected by good Whigs in 1856. An aged and tattered negro was the mule's ring-master, and an artesian well was the object of his revolution.

No effort deeply to probe the city's site had ever before been made, nor has there been any later attempt thus to draw up the prehistoric records of the Delta. The alluvial surface deposit is generally two or three feet thick, and rests on a substratum of uniform and tenacious blue clay. The well in Canal street found this clay fifteen feet deep. Below it lay four feet more of the same clay mixed with woody matter. Under this was a mixture of sand and clay ten feet thick, resembling the annual deposits of the river. Beneath this was found, one after another, continual, irregular alternations of these clay

strata, sometimes a foot, sometimes sixty feet thick, and layers of sand and shells and of mixtures of these with clay. Sometimes a stratum of quicksand was passed. At five hundred and eighty-two feet was encountered a layer of hard pan; but throughout no masses of rock were found, only a few water-worn pebbles and some contorted and perforated stones. No abundance of water flowed. Still, in the shabby, goat-haunted neutral ground above, gaped at by the neutral crowd, in the wide, blinding heat of mid-summer, the long lever continued to creak round its tremulous circle. At length it stopped. At a depth of six hundred and thirty feet the well was abandoned—for vague reasons left to the custody of tradition; some say the mule died, some say the negro.

However, the work done was not without value. It must have emphasized the sanitary necessity for an elaborate artificial drainage of the city's site, and it served to contradict a very prevalent and solicitous outside belief that New Orleans was built on a thin crust of mud, which she might at any moment break through, when towers, spires, and all would ingloriously disappear. The continual alternations of tough clay and loose sand and shells in such variable thicknesses gave a clear illustration of the conditions of delta soil that favor the undermining of the Mississippi banks and their fall into the river at low stages of water, levees being often carried with them.

These cavings are not generally *crevasses*. A crevasse is commonly the result of the levee yielding to the pressure of the river's waters, heaped up against it often to the height of ten or fifteen feet above the level of the land. But the caving-in of old levees requires their replacement by new and higher ones on the lower land farther back, and a crevasse often occurs through the weakness of a new levee which is not yet solidified, or whose covering of tough Bermuda turf has not yet grown. The fact is widely familiar, too, that when a craw-fish has burrowed in a levee, the water of the river may squirt in and out of this little tunnel, till a section of the levee becomes saturated and softened, and sometimes slides shoreward bodily from its base, and lets in the flood,—roaring, leaping, and tumbling over the rich plantations and down into the swamp behind them, leveling, tearing up, drowning, destroying, and sweeping away as it goes.

New Orleans may be inundated either by a crevasse or by the rise of backwater on its northern side from lake Pontchartrain. Bayou St. John is but a prehistoric crevasse minus only the artificial levee. A long-prevailing

south-east wind will obstruct the outflow of the lake's waters through the narrow passes by which they commonly reach the gulf of Mexico, and the rivers and old crevasses emptying into the lake from the north and east will be virtually poured into the streets of New Orleans. A violent storm blowing across Pontchartrain from the north produces the same result. At certain seasons, the shores of river, lake, and canals have to be patrolled day and night to guard the wide, shallow basin in which the city lies from the insidious encroachments of the waters that overhang it on every side.

It is difficult, in a faithful description, to avoid giving an exaggerated idea of these floods. Certainly, large portions of the city are inundated; miles of streets become canals. The waters rise into yards and gardens and then into rooms. Skiffs enter the poor man's parlor and bedroom to bring the morning's milk or to carry away to higher ground his goods and chattels. All manner of loose stuff floats about the streets; the house-cat sits on the gate-post; huge rats come swimming, in mute and loathsome despair, from that house to this one, and are pelted to death from the windows. Even snakes seek the same asylum. Those who have the choice avoid such districts, and the city has consequently lengthened out awkwardly along the higher grounds down, and especially up, the river shore.

But the town is not engulfed; life is not endangered; trade goes on in its main districts mostly dry-shod, and the merchant goes and comes between his home and his counting-room as usual in the tinkling street-cars, merely catching glimpses of the water down the cross streets.

The humbler classes, on the other hand, suffer severely. Their gardens and poultry are destroyed, their houses and household goods are damaged; their working days are discounted. The rich and the authorities, having defaulted in the ounce of preventive, come forward with their ineffectual pound of cure; relief committees are formed and skiffs ply back and forth distributing bread to the thus doubly humbled and doubly damaged poor.

No considerable increase of sickness seems to follow these overflows. They cannot more completely drench so ill-drained a soil than would any long term of rainy weather; but it hardly need be said that neither condition is healthful under a southern sky.

In the beginning of the town's existence, the floods came almost yearly, and for a long time afterward they were frequent. The old moat and palisaded embankment around the Spanish town did not always keep them out.

There was a disastrous one in 1780, when the Creoles were strained to the utmost to bear the burdens of their daring young Governor Galvez's campaigns against the British. Another occurred in 1785, when Mirò was governor; another in 1791, the last year of his incumbency; another in 1799. All these came from river crevasses above the town. The last occurred near where Carrollton, now part of New Orleans, was afterward built. Another overflow, in 1813, came from a crevasse only a mile or two above this one.

Next followed the noted overflow of May, 1816. The same levee that had broken in 1799 was undermined by the current, which still strikes the bank at Carrollton with immense power; it gave way and the floods of the Mississippi poured through the break. On the fourth day afterward, the waters had made their way across sugar-fields and through swamps and into the rear of the little city, had covered the suburbs of Gravier, Trémé, and St. Jean with from three to five feet of their turbid, yellow flood, and were crawling up toward the front of the river-side suburbs—Montegut, La Course, Ste. Marie, and Marigny. In those days, the corner of Canal and Chartres streets was only some three hundred yards from the river shore. The flood came up to it. One could take a skiff at that point and row to Dauphine street, down Dauphine to Bienville, down Bienville to Burgundy, in Burgundy to St. Louis street, from St. Louis to Rampart, and so throughout the rear suburbs, now the Quadroon quarter.

The breach was stopped by sinking in it a three-masted vessel. The waters found vent through Bayous St. John and Bienveau to the lake; but it was twenty-five days before they were quite gone. This twelvemonth was the healthiest in a period of forty years.

In 1831, a storm blew the waters of Lake Pontchartrain up to within six hundred yards of the levee. The same thing occurred in October, 1837, when bankruptcy as well as back waters swamped the town. The same waters were driven almost as far in 1844 and again in 1846.

It would seem as if town pride alone would have seized a spade and thrown up a serviceable levee around the city. But town pride in New Orleans was only born about 1836, and was a puny child. Not one American in five looked on the place as his permanent home. As for those who did, the life they had received from their fathers had become modified. Some of them were a native generation. Creole contact had been felt. The same influences, too, of climate, landscape, and institutions, that had made the Creole unique was

de-Saxonizing the American of the "Second Municipality," and giving special force to those two traits which everywhere characterized the slave-holder—improvidence, and that feudal self-completeness which looked with indolent contempt upon public coöperative measures.

The Creole's answer to suggestive inquiry concerning the prevention of overflows, it may easily be guessed, was a short, warm question: "How?" He thought one ought to tell him. He has ten good "cannots" to one small "can"—or once had; the proportion is better now, and so is the drainage; and still, heat, moisture, malaria, and provincial exile make a Creole of whoever settles down beside him.

In 1836, a municipal draining company was formed, and one draining wheel erected at Bayou St. John. In 1838, a natural drain behind the American quarter was broadened and deepened into the foul ditch known as Melpomene canal. And, in 1849, came the worst inundation the city has ever suffered.

II.

SAUVÉ'S CREVASSE.

ON the 3d of May, 1849, the Mississippi was higher than it had been before in twenty-one years. Every here and there it was licking the levee's crown, swinging heavily around the upper end of its great bends, gliding in wide, enormous volume down upon the opposite bank below, heaving its vast weight and force against the earthen barrier, fretting, quaking, recoiling, boiling like a pot, and turning again and billowing away like a monstrous yellow serpent, crested with its long black line of drift-wood, to throw itself once more against the farther bank in its mad, blind search for outlet.

Everywhere, in such times, the anxious Creole planter may be seen, broad-hatted and swarthy, standing on his levee's top. All night the uneasy lantern of the patrol flits along the same line. Rills of seepage water wet the road—which in Louisiana always runs along against the levee's inner side—and here and there make miry places. "Cribs" are being built around weak spots. Sand-bags are held in readiness. The huge, ungainly cane-carts, with their high, broad-tired wheels and flaring blue bodies, each drawn by three sunburned mules abreast, come lumbering from the sugar-house yard with loads of *bagasse*, with which to give a fibrous hold to the hasty earth-works called for by the hour's emergency. Here at the most dangerous spot the muscular strength of the estate is grouped;

a saddled horse stands hitched to the roadside fence; the overseer is giving his short, emphatic orders in the negro French of the plantations, and the black man, glancing ever and anon upon him with his large brown eye, comes here and goes there, *li vini 'ci, li courri là*. Will they be able to make the levee stand? Nobody knows.

In 1849, some seventeen miles above New Orleans by the river's course, and on the same side of the stream, was Sauv e's plantation. From some cause, known or unknown,—sometimes the fact is not even suspected,—the levee along its river-front was weak. In the afternoon of the 3d of May, the great river suddenly burst through it, and, instantly defying all restraints, plunged down over the land, roaring, rolling, writhing, sprawling, whirling over pastures and cane-fields and rice-fields, through groves and negro quarters and sugar-houses, slipping through rose-hedged lanes and miles of fence, gliding through willow jungles and cypress forests, on and on, to smite in rear and flank the city that, seventeen miles away, lay peering alertly over its front breastworks. The people of the town were not, at first, concerned. They believed and assured each other the water would find its way across into Lake Pontchartrain without coming down upon them. The Americans exceeded the Creoles in absolute torpor. They threw up no line behind their municipality. Every day that passed saw the swamp filling more and more with yellow water; presently it crawled up into the suburbs, and when the twelfth day had gone by, Rampart street, the old town's rear boundary, was covered.

The Creoles, in their quarter, had strengthened the small levee of canal Carondelet on its lower side and shut off the advancing flood from the district beyond it; but Lafayette and the older American quarter were completely exposed. The water crept on daily for a fortnight longer. In the suburb Boulogny, afterward part of Jefferson or the Sixth District, it reached to Camp street. In Lafayette, it stopped within thirty yards of where these words are being written, and withdrawing toward the forest, ran along behind Bacchus (Baronne) street, sometimes touching Carondelet, till it reached Canal street, crossed that street between Royale and Bourbon, and thence stretched downward and backward to the Old Basin. "About two hundred and twenty inhabited squares were flooded, more than two thousand tenements surrounded by water, and a population of nearly twelve thousand souls driven from their homes or compelled to live an aquatic life of much privation and suffering."

In the meantime, hundreds of men, white and black, were constantly at the breach in the levee, trying to close it. Pickets, sand-bags, *bagasse*, were all in vain. Seven hundred feet of piling were driven, but unskillfully placed; a ship's hull was filled with stone and sunk in the half-closed opening, but the torrent burrowed around it and swept away the works. Other unskilled efforts failed, and only on the third of June was professional scientific aid called in, and seventeen days afterward the crevasse was closed.

At length, the long submerged streets and sidewalks rose slimily out of the retreating waters, heavy rains fell opportunely and washed into the swamp the offensive deposits that had threatened a second distress, and the people set about repairing their disasters. The streets were in sad dilapidation. The Second Municipality alone levied, in the following year, four hundred thousand dollars to cover "actual expenditures on streets, wharves, and crevasses." The wharves were, most likely, in the main, new work. A levee was thrown up behind the municipality along the line of Claiborne street and up Felicity road to Carondelet street.

Still overflows came, and came, and overcame. A serious one occurred only two years ago.* At such times, the fortunate are nobly generous to the unfortunate; but the distress passes, the emotional impulses pass with it, and precautions for the future are omitted or soon fall into neglect. The inundation of 1880 simply overran the dilapidated top of a neglected levee on the town's lake side. The uneconomical habits of the old South still cling. Private burdens are but faintly recognized, and the next norther may swamp the little fortunes of the city's hard-working poor.

The hopeful in New Orleans look for an early day when a proper drainage system shall change all this,—a system which shall include underground sewerage and complete the levee, already partly made, which is to repeat on a greatly enlarged scale, above and below the city and along the lake shore behind it, the old wall and moat that once surrounded the Spanish town in Canal, Rampart, and Esplanade streets. The present system consists merely of a poor and partial surface drainage in open street-gutters, emptying into canals at whose further end the waters are lifted over the rear levees by an appliance of old Dutch paddle-wheel pumps run by steam. Even the sudden heavy showers that come with their singeing lightnings and ear-cracking peals of thunder, are enough, at present, to overflow the streets of the whole town,

* 1880.

often from sill to sill of opposite houses and stores, holding the life of a great city water-bound for hours, making strange arch-way and door-way groups of beggar and lady, clerk, fop, merchant, artisan, fruit-peddler, negro porter, priest, tattered girl, and every other sort of fine or pitiful human nature.

An adequate system, comprising a thorough under-drainage, would virtually raise the city's whole plain ten feet, and give a character of soil under foot incalculably valuable for the improvement it would effect in the health and energies of the people. Such a system is entirely feasible, is within the people's means, has been tested elsewhere, extensively and officially approved, and requires only the subscription of capital.

But we go astray. We have got out upon the hither side of those volcanoes of civil war and reconstruction which it were wiser to stop short of. Let us draw back once more for a last view of the "Crescent City's" earlier and calmer, though once tumultuous and all too tragic past.

III.

THE DAYS OF PESTILENCE.

THE New Orleans resident congratulates himself—and he does well—that he is not as other men are, in other great cities, as to breathing-room. The desperate fondness with which the Creole still clings to domestic isolation has passed into the sentiment of all types of the city's life; and as the way is always open for the town, with just a little river-sand filling, to spread farther and farther, there is no huddling in New Orleans, or only a very little here and there.

There is assurance of plenty not only as to space, but also as to time. Time may be money, but money is not everything, and so there never has been much crowding over one another's heads about business centers, never any living in sky-reaching strata. The lassitude which loads every warm, damp breeze that blows in across the all-surrounding marsh and swamp has always been against what an old New Orleans writer calls "knee-cracking stairways." Few houses lift their roofs to dizzy heights, and a third-story bedroom is not near enough to be coveted by many.

Shortly before the war—and the case is not materially changed in New Orleans today—the number of inmates to a dwelling was in the proportion of six and a half to one. In St. Louis, it was seven and three-quarters; in Cincinnati, it was more than eight; in Boston, nearly nine; and in New York, over thirteen and a half. The number of persons to

the acre was a little more than forty-five. In Philadelphia, it was eighty; in Boston, it was eighty-two; in New York, it was one hundred and thirty-five.

The climate never would permit such swarming in New Orleans. Neither would the badly scavenged streets or the soil which, just beneath, reeks with all the foul liquids that human and brute life can produce in an unsewered city. It is fortunate that the average New Orleans dwelling is loosely thrown together, built against sun and rain, not wind and frost. This, with the ample spacings between houses and an open plain all round, insures circulation of air—an air that never blows extremes of hot or cold.

Once only the thermometer has been known to sink to sixteen degrees Fahrenheit. Only three times since 1819 has it risen to one hundred degrees, and never beyond. Whatever wind prevails comes tempered by the waters and wet lands over which it has blown. Its humidity, however, is against strong vitality, its diminished evaporating powers make it less cooling to man and beast in summer and more chilling in winter than drier winds at greater and lower temperatures would be, and it comes always more or less charged with that uncanny quality which Creoles, like all other North Americans, maintain to be never at home, but always next door—malaria.

The city does not tremble with ague; but malarial fevers stand high in the annual tables of mortality, almost all complaints are complicated by more or less malarial influence, and the reduction of vital force in the daily life of the whole population is such as few residents, except physicians, appreciate. Lately, however,—we linger in the present but a moment,—attention has turned to the fact that the old Creole life, on ground floors, in a damp, warm climate, over an undrained clay soil, has given more victims to malarial and tubercular diseases than yellow fever has claimed, and efforts to remove these conditions or offset their ill effects are giving a yearly improving public health.

What figures it would require truthfully to indicate the early insalubrity of New Orleans it would be hard to guess. Governor Perier, in 1726, and the Baron Carondelet, toward the close of the last century, stand alone as advocates for measures to reduce malarial and putrid fevers. As times wore on, partial surface drainage, some paving, some improvement in house-building, wiser domestic life, the gradual retreat of the dank forest and undergrowth, a better circulation of air, and some reduction of humidity, had their good effects. Drainage canals—narrow,

shallow, foul, ill-placed things—began to be added one by one. When a system of municipal cleansing came in, it was made as vicious as ingenuity could contrive it; or, let us say, as bad as in other American cities of the time.

Neither the Creole nor the American ever accept sepulture in the ground of Orleans Parish. Only the Hebrew, whose religious law will not take no for an answer, and the pauper, lie down in its undrained soil. The tombs stand above ground. They are now made of brick or stone only; but in earlier days wood entered into their construction, and they often fell into decay so early as to expose the bones of the dead. Every day the ground, which the dead shunned, became more and more poisonous, and the city spread out its homes of the living more and more over the poisoned ground. In 1830, the population of New Orleans was something over forty-six thousand; her life was busy, her commerce great, her precautions against nature's penalties for human herding about equal to nothing. She was fully ripe for the visitation that was in store.

In that year the Asiatic cholera passed around the shores of the Caspian Sea, entered European Russia, and moved slowly westward, preceded by terror and followed by mourning. In October, 1831, it was in England. In January, 1832, it swept through London. It passed into Scotland, into Ireland, France, Spain, Italy. It crossed the Atlantic and ravaged the cities of its western shore; and, on the 25th of October, it reached New Orleans.

An epidemic of yellow fever had been raging, and had not yet disappeared. Many of the people had fled from it. The population was reduced to about thirty-five thousand. How many victims the new pestilence carried off can never be known; but six thousand fell in twenty days. On some days five hundred persons died. For once, the rallying ground of the people was not the Place d'Armes. The cemeteries were too small. Trenches took the place of graves; the dead were hauled to them uncoffined in cart-loads and dumped in. Large numbers were carried by night to the river-side, weighted with stones from the ballast-piles abreast the idle shipping, and thrown into the Mississippi. The same mortality in New Orleans with its present population, would carry off, in three weeks, thirty-nine thousand victims. The New Basin was being dug by hand. Hundreds of Irish were standing here in water and mud and sun, throwing up the corrupted soil with their shovels, and the havoc among them, says tradition, was awful.

The history of the town shows that years of much summer digging have always been years of great mortality. In 1811, when Carondelet's old canal was cleaned out, seven per cent. of the people died. In 1817, when it was cleaned out again, seven per cent. again died. In 1822, when its cleaning out was again begun, eight and a half per cent. died. In 1833, when, the year after the great cholera fatality, the New Canal was dug to the lake, eight and a half per cent. again died. In 1837, when many draining trenches were dug, seven per cent. died. In 1847, there was much new ditching, Melpomene Canal was cleaned out, and over eight per cent. of the people died. The same work went on through '48 and '49, and seven and eight per cent. died. But never before or after 1832 did death recruit his pale armies by so frightful a conscription, in this plague-haunted town, as marked that year of double calamity, when, from a total population of but fifty-five thousand, present and absent, over eight thousand fell before their Asian and African destroyers.

IV.

THE GREAT EPIDEMIC.

THREE-QUARTERS of a century had passed over the little Franco-Spanish town, hidden under the Mississippi's downward-retreating bank in the edge of its delta swamp on Orleans island, before the sallow specter of yellow fever was distinctly recognized in her streets and in her darkened chambers.

That it had come and gone earlier, but unidentified, is altogether likely. In 1766 especially, the year in which Ulloa came with his handful of Havanese soldiers to take possession for Spain, there was an epidemic which at least resembled the great West Indian scourge. Under the commercial concessions that followed, the town expanded into a brisk port. Trade with the West Indies grew, and in 1796, the yellow fever was confronted and called by name.

From that date it appeared frequently if not yearly, and between that date and the present day twenty-four lighter and thirteen violent epidemics have marked its visitations. At their own horrid caprice they came and went. In 1821, a quarantine of some sort was established, and it was continued until 1825; but it did not keep out the plague, and it was then abandoned for more than thirty years. Between 1837 and 1843, fifty-five hundred deaths occurred from the fever. In the summer and fall of 1847, over twenty-eight hundred people perished by it. In the second half of 1848,



A CREVASSE. (STORY'S PLANTATION, 1882.)

eight hundred and seventy-two were its victims. It had barely disappeared when cholera entered again and carried off forty-one hundred. A month after its disappearance,—in August, 1849,—the fever returned; and when, at the end of November, it had destroyed seven hundred and forty-four persons, the cholera once more appeared; and by the end of 1850 had added eighteen hundred and fifty-one to the long rolls.

In the very midst of these visitations, it was the confident conviction and constant assertion of the average New Orleans citizen, Creole or American, on his levee, in the St.

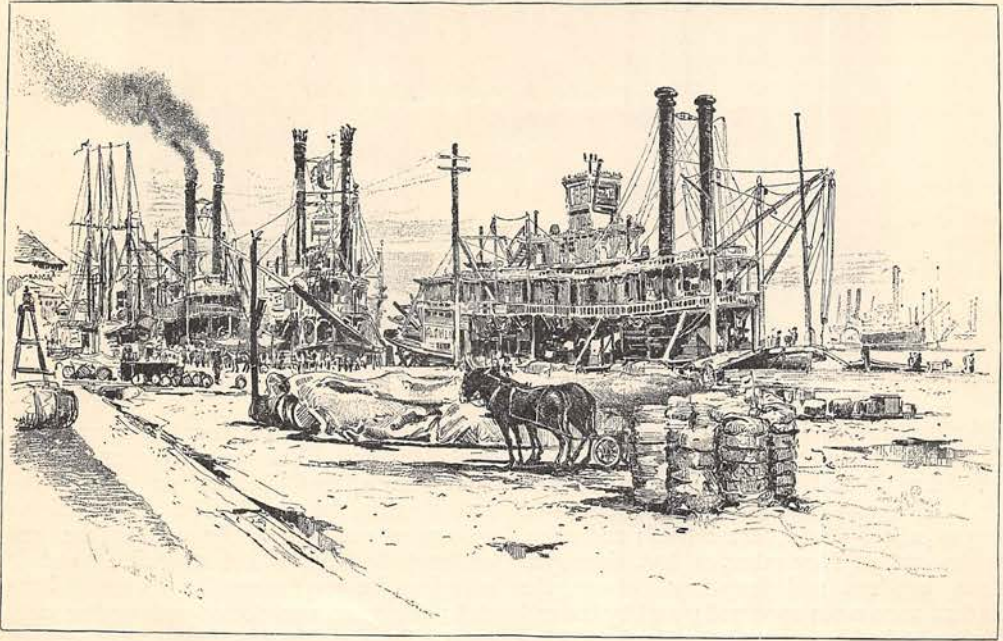
Charles rotunda, at his counting-room desk, in the columns of his newspaper, and in his family circle, that his town was one of the healthiest in the world. The fatality of the epidemics was principally among the un-acclimated. He was not insensible to their sufferings, he was famous for his care of the sick; the town was dotted with orphan asylums. But in this far-away corner crucial comparisons escaped him. The Creole did not readily take the fever, and, taking it, commonly recovered. He had, and largely retains still, an absurd belief in his entire immunity from attack. When he has it, it is



A FULL RIVER. (LOWER FRONT CORNER OF THE OLD TOWN.)

something else. As for strangers,—he threw up his palms and eyebrows,—nobody asked them to come to New Orleans. The mind of the American turned only to commerce; and the commercial value of a well-authenticated

meet this libel with facts." But he gave no figures. In January, 1851, the mayor officially pronounced the city "perfectly healthy during the past year," etc., omitting to say that the mortality had been three times as high as



THE "PICAYUNE TIER."

low death-rate he totally overlooked. Every summer might bring plague—granted; but winter brought trade, wealth. It thundered and tumbled through the streets like a surf. The part of a good citizen seemed to be to shut his eyes tightly and drown comment and debate with loud assertions of the town's salubrity.

It was in these days that a certain taste for books showed itself, patronized and dominated by commerce. De Bow's excellent monthly issue, the "Commercial Review of the South and West," was circulating its invaluable statistics and its pro-Southern deductions in social and political science. Judah P. Benjamin wrote about sugar; so did Valcour-Aimé; Riddell treated of Mississippi river deposits, etc.; Maunsell White gave reminiscences of flat-boat navigation; Chief-Justice Martin wrote on contract of sale; E. J. Forstall on Louisiana history in French archives; and a great many "ladies" and "gentlemen," "of New Orleans" and elsewhere, upon the absorbing topic of slavery, to while away the time, as it were. "New Orleans, disguise the fact as we may," wrote De Bow in 1846, "has had abroad the reputation of being a great charnel-house. * * * We

a moderate death-rate would have been. A few medical men alone,—Barton, Symonds, Fenner, Axson,—had begun to drag from oblivion the city's vital statistics and to publish facts that should have alarmed any community. But the blind are not frightened with ghosts. Barton showed that the mortality of 1849, *over and above* the deaths by cholera, had been about twice the common average of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, or Charleston. What then? Nothing. He urged under-ground sewerage in vain. Quarantine was proposed; commerce frowned. A plan was offered for daily flushing the city's innumerable open street-gutters; it was rejected. The vice of burying in tombs above ground in the heart of town was shown; but the burials went on.

As the year 1853 drew near, a climax of evil conditions seemed to be approached. The city became more dreadfully unclean than before. The scavenging was being tried on a contract system, and the "foul and nauseous steams" from gutters, alleys, and dark nooks became intolerable. In the merchants' interest Carondelet basin and canal were being once more dug out; the New Canal was being widened; gas and water

mains were being extended; in the Fourth District, Jackson street and St. Charles avenue were being excavated for the road-beds of their railways. In the Third District, many small draining trenches were being dug. On the 12th of March, the ship *Augusta* sailed from Bremen for New Orleans with upward of two hundred emigrants. Thirteen days afterward the *Northampton* left Liverpool, bound in the same direction, with between three or four hundred Irish. She had sickness on board during the voyage, and some deaths. The *Augusta* had none. While these were on their way, the bark *Siri*, in the port of Rio de Janeiro, lost her captain and several of her crew by yellow fever, and afterward sailed for New Orleans. The ship *Camboden Castle* cleared from Kingston, Jamaica, for the same port, leaving seven of her crew dead of the fever. On the 9th of May, the *Northampton* and the *Siri* arrived in the Mississippi. The *Northampton* was towed to the city alone, and on the 10th was moored at a wharf in the Fourth District, at the head of Josephine street. The *Siri* was towed up in company with another vessel, the *Saxon*. She was dropped at a wharf in the First District. The *Saxon* moved on and rested some distance away, at a wharf opposite the water-works reservoir, in front of Market street. The *Northampton* was found to be very foul. Hands sent aboard to unload and clean her left on the next day, believing they had detected "black vomit" in her hospital. One of them fell sick of yellow fever three days after, but recovered. A second force was employed; several became ill. This was on the 17th. On the same day, the *Augusta* and the *Camboden Castle* entered the harbor in the same tow. The *Camboden Castle* was moored alongside the *Saxon*. At the next wharf, two or three hundred feet below, lay abreast the *Niagara* and the *Harvest Queen*. The *Augusta* passed on up and cast off her tow-lines only when she was moored close to the *Northampton*. The emigrants went ashore. Five thousand landed in New Orleans that year. Here, then, was every condition necessary to the outbreak of a pestilence, whether indigenous, imported, or both.

On the same day that the fever broke out on the *Northampton* it appeared also on the *Augusta*. About the same time it appeared in one or two distant parts of the city without discernible connection with the shipping. On the 29th, it appeared on the *Harvest Queen*, and, five days later, on the *Saxon*. The *Ni-*



A CEMETERY WALK. (TOMBS AND "OVENS.")

agara had put to sea; but, on the 8th, the fever broke out on her and carried off the captain and a number of the crew. Two fatal cases in the town the attending physician reported under a disguised term, "not wishing to create alarm." Such was the inside, hidden history of the Great Epidemic's beginning.

On the 27th of May, one of the emigrants from the *Northampton* was brought to the charity hospital. He had been four days ill, and he died the next day, of yellow fever. The Board of Health made official report of the case; but the daily papers omitted to publish it. Other reports followed in June; they were shunned in the same way, and the great city, with its one hundred and fifty-four thousand people, one in every ten of whom was to die that year, remained in slumberous ignorance of the truth. It was one of the fashions. On the 2d of July, twenty-five deaths from yellow fever were reported for the closing week. Many "fever centers" had been developed. Three or four of them pointed, for their origin, straight back to the *Northampton*; one to the *Augusta*, and one to the *Saxon*.

A season of frequent heavy rains, alternating with hot suns and calms—the worst of conditions—set in. At the end of the next week, fifty-nine deaths were reported. There had been not less, certainly, than three hundred cases, and the newspapers slowly and one by one began to admit the presence of danger. But the truth was already guessed, and alarm and dismay lurked everywhere. Not in every breast, however; there were still those who looked around with rather impatient surprise, and—often in Creole accent,



Wm. Deane Gilbert
1858
New Orleans

THE OLD BURIAL CHURCH.

and often not—begged to be told what was the matter. The deaths around them, they insisted, in print, were at that moment “fewer in number than in any other city of similar population in the Union.”

Indeed, the fever was still prowling distantly in those regions most shunned by decent feet and clean robes; about Rousseau street, and the like, along the Fourth District river-front, where the forlorn German immigrants boarded in damp and miry squalor; in the places where such little crowded living as there was in the town was gathered; Lynch’s row and other blocks and courts in the filthy Irish quarters of St. Thomas and Tchoupitoulas streets; and the foul, dark dens about the French market and the Mint, in the old French quarter; among the Gascon *vacheries* and *bougeries*, of repulsive uncleanness, on the upper and rear borders of the Fourth District; and around Gormley’s basin—a small artificial harbor at the intersection of Dryades walk and Felicity road, for the wood-cutters and shingle-makers of the swamp, and “a pestilential muck-and-mire pool of dead animals and filth of every kind.”

But suddenly the contagion leaped into the midst of the people. In the single week ending July 16th, two hundred and four persons were carried to the cemeteries. A panic seized the town. Everywhere porters were tossing trunks into wagons, carriages rattling over the stones and whirling out across the broad white levee to the steam-boats’ sides. Foot-passengers were hurrying along the sidewalk, luggage and children in hand, and out of breath, many a one with the plague already in his pulse. The fleeing crowd was numbered by thousands.

During the following week, the charity hospital alone received from sixty to one hundred patients a day. Its floors were covered with the sick. From the 16th to the 23d, the deaths averaged sixty-one a day. Presently, the average ran up to seventy-nine. The rains continued, with much lightning and thunder. The weather became tropical; the sun was scorching hot and the shade chilly. The streets became heavy with mud, the air stifling with bad odors, and the whole town a perfect Constantinople for foulness.

August came on. The week ending the 6th showed one hundred and eighty-seven deaths from *other* diseases, an enormous death-rate, to which the fever added nine hundred and forty-seven victims. For a week, the deaths in the charity hospital—where the poor immigrants lay—had been one every half hour.

The next day two hundred and twenty-eight persons died. The pestilence had attacked the Creoles and the blacks. In every direction were confusion, fright, flight, calls for aid, the good “Howards” hurrying from door to door, widows and orphans weeping, till the city was, as an eye-witness says, a “theater of horrors.”

“Alas,” cries one of the city journals, “we have not even grave-diggers!” Five dollars an hour failed to hire enough of them. Some of the dead went to the tomb still, with pomp and martial honors; but the city scavengers, too, with their carts, went knocking from house to house asking if there were any to be buried. Long rows of coffins were laid in furrows scarce two feet deep, and hurriedly covered with a few shovelfuls of earth, which the daily rains washed away, and the whole mass was left, “filling the air far and near

with the most intolerable pestilential odors." Around the grave-yards funeral trains jostled each other and quarreled for place, in an air reeking with the effluvia of the earlier dead. Many "fell to work and buried their own

of the dead give but an imperfect idea of the wide-spread suffering and anguish. The disease is repulsive and treacherous, and requires the most unremitting and laborious attention. Its fatal ending is inexpressibly terrible, often



AMONG THE MARKETS.

dead." Many sick died in carriages and carts. Many were found dead in their beds, in stores, in the streets. Vice and crime broke out fiercely; the police were never so busy. Heroism, too, was seen on every hand. Hundreds toiled for the comfort of sick and dying, and hundreds fell victims to their own noble self-abnegation. Forty-five distant cities and towns sent relief.

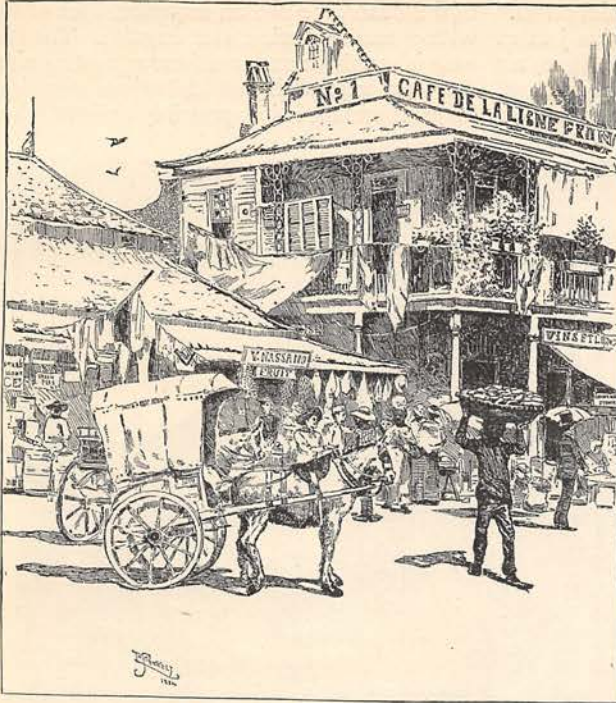
On one day, the 11th of August, two hundred and three persons died of the fever. In the week ending two days later, the total deaths were fourteen hundred and ninety-four. Rain fell every day for two months. Streets became so bad that hearses could scarcely reach the cemeteries. On the 20th, the week's mortality was fifteen hundred and thirty-four.

Despair now seemed the only reasonable frame of mind. In the sky above, every new day brought the same merciless conditions of atmosphere. The earth below bubbled with poisonous gases. Those who would still have fled the scene saw no escape. To leave by ship was to court the overtaking stroke of the plague beyond the reach of medical aid, and probably to find a grave in the sea; while to escape to inland towns was to throw one's self into the arms of the pestilence, carried there by earlier fugitives. The numbers

attended with raving madness. Among the Creoles of the old French quarter, a smaller proportion than one in each eleven suffered attack. But in the Fourth District, where the unacclimated were most numerous, there were whole wards where more than half the population had to take their chances of life and death from the dreadful contagion. In the little town of Algiers, just opposite the city, a thirty-sixth of all its people died in one week.

On the 22d day of August, the climax was at last reached. Death struck that day, from midnight to midnight, a fresh victim every five minutes, and two hundred and eighty-three deaths summed up an official record that was confessedly incomplete. The next day, there were twenty-five less. The next, thirty-six less than this. Each day was better than the preceding. The crisis had passed. Hope rose into rejoicing. The 1st of September showed but one hundred and nineteen deaths, and the 10th but eighty. North winds and cool, dry weather set in. On the 20th, there were but forty-nine deaths; on the 30th, only sixteen. In some of the inland towns it was still raging, and so continued until the middle of October.

In the cemeteries of New Orleans, between the 1st of June and the 1st of October, nearly



BEHIND THE FRENCH MARKET.

eleven thousand persons were buried. To these must be added the many buried without certificate, the hundreds who perished in their flight, and the multitudes who fell in the towns to which the pestilence was carried. It lingered through autumn, and disappeared only in December. During the year 1853 nearly thirty thousand residents of New Orleans were ill of the yellow fever, and there died, from all causes, nearly sixteen thousand.

In the next two summers, 1854 and '55, the fever returned and destroyed more than five thousand persons. Cholera added seventeen hundred and fifty. The two years' death-rates were seventy-two and seventy-three per thousand. That of 1853 was one hundred and eleven. In three years, thirty-seven thousand people had died, and wherever, by ordinary rate of mortality, there should have been one grave or sepulchre, there were four. One can but draw a sigh of relief in the assurance that this is a history of the past, not the present, and that new conditions have made it next to impossible that it should ever be repeated in the future.

V.

BRIGHTER SKIES.

"OUT of this nettle, danger," says the great bard, "we pluck this flower, safety." The dreadful scourge of 1853 roused the people

of New Orleans, for the first time, to the necessity of knowing the proven truth concerning themselves and the city in which they dwelt.

In the midst of the epidemic, the city council had adjourned, and a number of its members had fled. But, in response to popular demand, a board of health had appointed the foremost advocates of quarantine and municipal cleansing a commission to study and report the melancholy lessons of the plague. It labored arduously for many months. At its head was that mayor of New Orleans, Crossman by name, whose fame for wise and protracted rule is still a pleasant tradition of the city, and whose characteristic phrase—"a great deal to be said on both sides"—remains the most frequent quotation on the lips of the common people to-day. Doctors Barton, Axson, McNeil, Symonds, and Riddell,—men

at the head of the medical profession,—completed the body. They were bold and faithful, and they effected a revolution.

The thinking and unbiased few, who in all communities must first receive and fructify the germ of truth, were convinced. The technical question of the fever's contagiousness remained unsettled; but its transportability was fearfully proven in a multitude of interior towns, and its alacrity in seeking foul quarters and its malignancy there were plainly shown by its history in the city. The commission pronounced in favor of quarantine, and it was permanently established, and has ever since become, annually, more and more effective. They earnestly recommended, also, the purging of the city, and keeping it purged, by proper drainage and sewerage, of all those foul conditions that were daily poisoning its earth and air. The response to this was extremely feeble.

It would seem as if the commercial value both of quarantine and cleanliness might have been seen by the merchant, since the aggregate value of exports, imports, and domestic receipts fell off twenty-two and a half millions, and did not entirely recover for three years. But it was not. The merchants, both Creole and American, saw only the momentary inconveniences and losses of quarantine and its defective beginnings; the daily press, in bondage to the merchant

through its advertising columns, carped and caviled in two languages at the innovation and expanded on the filthiness of other cities, while the general public thought what they read.

Yet, in the face of all set-backs, the city that once was almost annually scourged, has, in the twenty-seven years since the great epidemic, which virtually lasted till 1855, suffered but one mild and three severe epidemics. In 1878, occurred the last of these, and the only severe one in fourteen years. Its fatality was but little over half as great as that of the Great Epidemic. In the five years ending with 1855, the average annual mortality had been seventy. In the next five, it fell to forty-five. In the five of the war period, it was forty. In the next, it was thirty-nine; in the next, it sank to thirty-four and a half, and in that which closed in 1880, notwithstanding the terrible epidemic of 1878, the rate was but thirty-three and a half. The mortality of 1879 was under twenty-four, and that of 1880, under twenty-five per thousand.

The events of 1878 are fresh in the public mind. In New Orleans they overwhelmed the people at large with the convictions which 1853 had impressed upon the more thoughtful few. To the merchant, "shot-gun quarantines" throughout the southern Mississippi valley explained themselves. The commercial necessity of quarantine and sanitation was established without a single scientific light, and measures were taken in hand for perfecting both—measures which are growing and bearing fruit day by day, which have already reduced the insalubrity of New Orleans to a point where it may be compared with that of other great cities, and which promise before long to make the city, really and emphatically, the home of health, comfort, and safety.

In the study of his expanded city, we have wandered from the contemplation of the Creole himself. It remains to be said that, unquestionably, as his town has expanded and improved, so has he. As the improvements of the age draw the great world nearer and nearer to him, he becomes more and more open to cosmopolitan feeling. The hostility to Americans, as such, is little felt. The French tongue is falling into comparative disuse, even in the family circle. The local boundaries are overstepped. He lives above Canal street now without feeling exiled. The social circles blend into each other. Sometimes, with the old Gallic intrepidity of conviction, he moves ahead of the American in progressive thought.

In these matters of sanitary reform, he has his share—or part of it. The old feeling of castellated immunity in his own high-fenced home often resents, in sentiment at least, official house-to-house inspection and the disturbance of a state of affairs under which his father and grandfather reached a good old age and left no end of children. Yet the movement in general has his assent; sometimes his coöperation; sometimes his subscription; and his doctors take part in debates and experiments. He is in favor of all this healthful flushing; this deepening and curbing of canals; this gratuitous and universal distribution of copperas, etc. Against one feature only he wages open war. He laughs; but he is in earnest: copperas, he tolerates; lime, the same; all odorless disinfectants, indeed; but carbolic acid—no! In Gallic fierceness, he hurls a nickname at it—"acide diabolique." When he smells it, he loads his gun and points it through his shutters. You shall never sprinkle him with that stuff—never!

A NOCTURNE OF RUBINSTEIN.

I.

WHAT now remains, what now remains but night?
Night hopeless, since the moon is in her grave!

Late came a glorious light,
In one wide flood on spire and field and wave.

It found a flowing way
To secret places where the dead leaves lay;

It won the half-hid stream
To shy remembrance of her morning gleam;

Then on the sky's sharp shore
Rolled back, a fading tide, and was no more.

No more on spire and ivied window bright!
No more on field and wave!

*What now remains, what now remains but night?
Night hopeless, since the moon is in her grave!*