

# The Creole People in New Orleans

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"Once upon a time—can you not recall it? You were many years younger and more sensitive to impressions, [and] you were reading that book of books, *The Arabian Nights*. It was a most alluring story, scented with garlic and all the delicacies of the East, you unexpectedly found yourself fighting a way through a narrow, tortuous street, swarming with children, merchants, black slaves and chattering old women, following a tall man, a magician in a high turban. Suddenly he halted before a green door and pulled a bell cord. You heard distinctly footsteps approaching on the other side. Then—How it happened that Fortune favored you is not in order for explanation here, but you found yourself admitted into a Realm of Mystery to which that unpretentious green door led, and what you saw in that Inner Court has already been described in ten times a hundred tales that will never die. All this happened years ago. But it comes back in a heap—If—

"You leave Canal Street, which is the principal thoroughfare of New Orleans and the neutral ground between the old and new sections of the city, and turn your footsteps down the old Rue Royal, Rue Bourbon, or Rue Chartres for a glimpse into story-book land. This French quarter is the most picturesque and interesting part of the city. Every square has its legendary or realistic story."<sup>1</sup>

**M**Y "LOVE AFFAIR" with this magical, story-book quarter began four years ago when I went to Louisiana to visit the Martínezes, Creole friends of mine. I knew that the Martínez family were of Spanish and French descent, and that the Louisiana born people of pure Latin-European blood were called Creoles, but I knew nothing of their customs or history. Of course, they were eager for me to see the Vieux Carré, or French quarter as it is sometimes called, in New Orleans, and to tell the history and the many stories of their people. From the first moment I saw the Vieux Carré, I was completely captivated.

It is a maze of ancient and lovely architecture filled with fine restaurants; exquisite grillwork on overhanging balconies; carriage entrances mellow with age leading back to sunny, tropical courtyards; narrow, musty tunnelways opening into flowered patios; flagstoned alleys; countless antique, curio, and perfume shops; book stores; art dealers; quaint bars; bearded artists. Through it all are the smells of age, of roasting coffee and cooking pralines, of all the famous Creole

1. C. Macleod, "Old-time Southern Life in the Hidden Courtyards of New Orleans," *Craftsman*, vol. 10, p. 300 (June, 1906).

dishes—gumbo, jambalaya, courtbouillon, hot rice cakes, pompano, and all the rest. There are the sounds of French and Spanish spoken behind latticed doors, the clip-clop of shod feet, the chimney-sweeps crying, "Raminay! Raminay! Got any chimneys to sweep today?" and the coal peddler calling "Mah mule is white, mah face is black; ah sells mah coal two bits a sack."

"They are like wrinkled faces, these old houses, and one must look upon them with the deference that youth should show to age. Some of the houses have outlived their usefulness, like so many of the old, and while you may look upon them as much as you please, you must look with friendly eyes. If you do not, you may come away with only the idea of dirt and squalor—and you may miss altogether that lingering charm which clings to these old mansions even in the last stages of their decay."<sup>2</sup>

There is a certain mood, a melancholia, surrounding the Vieux Carré—a sort of spell which comes from the dark, still bayous, the moss-covered oaks, the white of magnolias against dark green foliage, the old cemeteries, the luxuriant growth of tropical and semi-tropical plants, and the great Mississippi lazily crawling to the Gulf.

As I walked through the narrow, picturesque streets, I was borne into another world—the world of gay balls, operas in the old French Opera House, Creole gentlemen calling on the families of the girls in whom they were interested, and all the other romantic practices of the Creoles and old New Orleans.

"Such a city as this cannot be 'done.' It can only be savored. Only slowly will it reveal itself to you, like a shy but sapient woman who conceals not to mystify but to beguile. For New Orleans is old and has seen much and is a little weary, but she is still beautiful and quietly conscious of her charm. Such a city gives her hand to the tripper. Her heart she holds for the quiet and patient lover."<sup>3</sup>

It was in this atmosphere that my interest in that culture which flourished and then died in this beautiful city developed. When I returned from my Louisiana visit, I began reading every book I could find about New Orleans and the Creoles. Two years ago I returned to my Creole city, and I came home more in love with it than ever. The city and its people are a source of never-ending fascination to me, and I often long to return with a nostalgia I thought possible only with memories of home and family when one is away. There is a legend that anyone who drinks the water from the Mississippi River in New Orleans will immediately fall in love with the city, and, if he is so unlucky as not to be able to spend the rest of his life there, he will constantly long to return. Since there is no other water to drink in New Orleans but that from the river, every

2. Lyle Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, Crager, New Orleans, 1950, p. 268.

3. D. L. Cohn, "New Orleans," *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 165, p. 491 (April, 1940).

visitor and resident alike is the innocent victim of this spell. But what a wonderful spell to be under and what a fascinating, romantic city in which to lose your heart!

## THE WHITE BIRCH

Oh, if I could only be,  
As beautiful—as graceful—  
As the White Birch tree,  
Reaching—ever reaching,  
Toward Eternity.

Silvery in the moonlight,  
Oh, so silent and still,  
I watch the White Birch standing—  
Majestic on the hill.

And when I'm feeling lonely,  
And I begin to sigh,  
I gaze again at the White Birch—  
Reaching for the sky.

Majestic, so majestic—  
Oh, if only I  
Could be the White Birch standing—  
Reaching upward—ever reaching,  
Toward the starry sky.

—LOIS ANN DAVIDSON

## DEATH

Gray as the mist of dawning day  
Soft as glow of Hesperian ray  
Filmy as starlight fading away—  
A fleeting breath.

Silent as nighthawk soaring high  
Gentle as wind whispering nigh  
Peaceful as rivulets rippling by—  
This is death.

—NANCY E. CLARK