9

A Voyage to New Orleans

Elisée Reclus

1855. Translated by John Clark and Camille Martin. 1993.
Mesechabe 11 (Winter), 14-17; 1994. *Mesechabe* 12 (Spring), 17-22. [1]

The Mississippi Delta

All night, the ship swayed on a bed of foul-smelling silt. But far from complaining, I rejoiced instead to feel myself rocking on this mud, as I had just traveled two thousand leagues to see it. From a geological point of view, nothing was more interesting than these vast alluvia still in a semi-liquid state. These sands and clays, slowly worn away by flooding and by centuries of erosion from the mountain ranges of North America, form a thick stratum of two or three hundred meters. Sooner or later, through settling and the influence of geothermal heating, they will be transformed into vast foundations of rock and will serve as the basis for fertile and populated regions. These fine particles filter through the sea continuously in a creative process that adds islands, peninsulas, and coastline to the continent, or else, carried by the Florida current, they are deposited a thousand leagues away on the banks of Newfoundland.

Toward daybreak, the captain pondered how to escape our bed of mud, and sent one of his launches to the mouth of the river to find a pilot. The craft soon disappeared in the morning mist and the sound of its oars, growing more and more faint, finally died away toward the north. We tried in vain to follow it by sight and sound without being able to penetrate the thick layer of fog that separated us from it. Suddenly, lifting

---

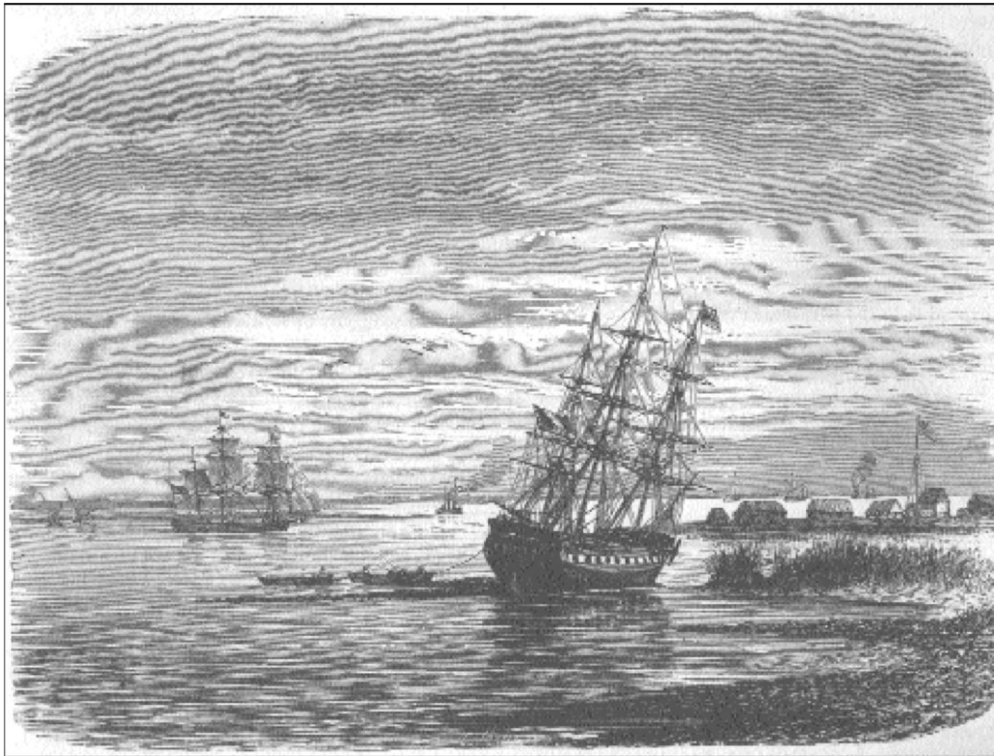
[1] Reprinted with permission from John Clark and Camille Martin. An expanded version is available in Clark, J. and C. Martin. 2003. *A Voyage to New Orleans: Anarchist Impressions of the Old South* (revised and expanded edition). Thetford,VT: Glad Day Books.

our eyes, we caught sight of it again, seemingly suspended from a curtain of clouds. The launch, after having crossed the first trail of mist that crept on the sea and blocked our view for a few cable lengths, reached a space perfectly free of humidity and, appearing to us beyond the fog, seemed to drift through limpid air. These parallel zones of mist and transparent atmosphere are not rare at the mouth of the Mississippi, where currents of fresh water and salt water meet and mingle in different temperatures.

During two hours of waiting, we could leisurely observe the whales that are plentiful in these waters. These animals always frolic with their families, and gather in groups of two or three that always stay together. All their movements are rhythmic and interdependent. Sometimes, several whales leap out of the water one after the other and plunge back after tracing an enormous parabola. They give the impression of several cogged wheels slowly rolling, all engaged in the same system of gears. A group of whales seems to form a single mechanism.

Finally, we saw a black point leave the mouth of the Mississippi and head toward us – it was the tugboat coming to extract us from the mire. It gradually increased in size, and soon I was able to observe all its details. I had not yet seen an American steam vessel, and I have to say that this one delighted me, first of all because of its bold shape, its speed, and its resolute air. I found in it a youthfulness, and also a heroic bearing that I had to admire – it seemed as though it had led a life superior to that of humans. Leaning slightly to one side, moving the powerful levers of its machinery on its deck like gigantic arms, unfurling its thick plumes of smoke up to the horizon, and heaving a prolonged and loud rumbling at regular intervals, it seemed like a supreme realization of power. With each turn of the wheel that brought it closer to us I found it still more amazing. Soon it was at our side. It pirouetted gracefully, took hold of a cable that we threw out to it, and without a tremor attached itself side by side to our ship.

The two bows were hardly touching when a young man leaped from the paddle box of the wheel and jumped onto our deck. He kept his cap on his head and at best mumbled between his teeth the word “captain,” which could, perhaps, be taken for a greeting. In an instant he was on the poop deck, grasping the helm and giving orders to the flabbergasted sailors. He was not on board thirty seconds when the keel of our ship, under the pull of steam power, began to plow through the silt. A true American, the pilot did not waste a single second on politeness. Taking a liking to this man of a different race, I went up to him. He didn’t see me at all, but hearing my approaching steps, he drew out of his pocket a bundle of newspapers which he held out without looking at me, without expecting the least gratitude from me. Indeed, I didn’t have the glaring naïveté to thank him, and I got as far away from him as possible, to engross myself in reading the *New Orleans Daily Delta*.



The mouth of the Mississippi. Drawing by de Bérard, after Reclus.

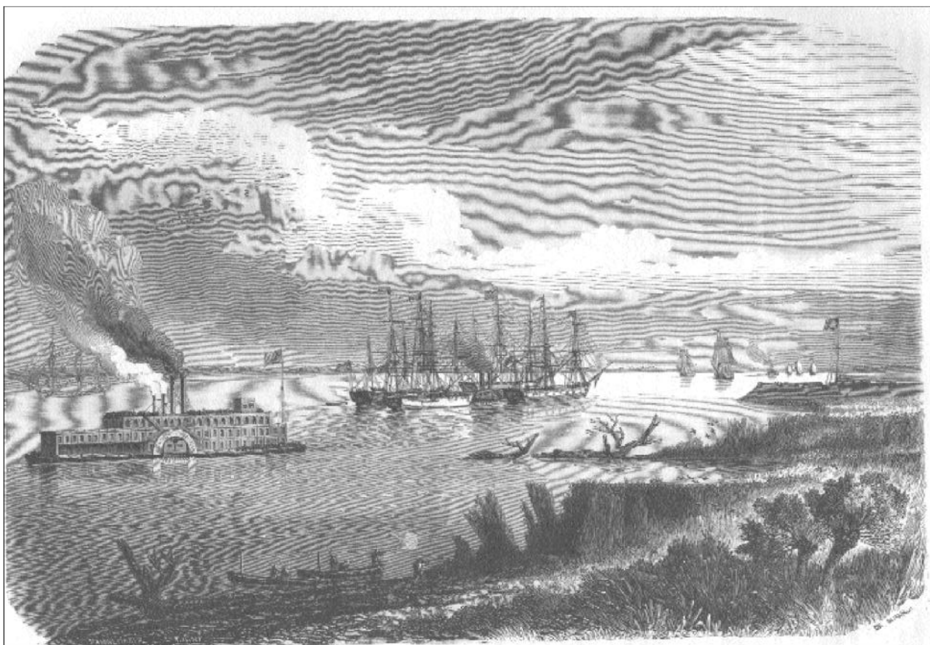
[…]

After having launched us into deep water, the pilot took his money and left us without saying a word, and without even the semblance of courtesy. Then, leaving our ship in the middle of the river, his steamboat set off again to sea in order to fetch another three-master. But we didn't remain there alone very long, for soon swarms of boats loaded with oranges, liquor, sugar, and shellfish were untied from their pilings at the edge of the river and came to offer us their goods.

The village of Pilotsville,[2] where shacks made of boards rise up along the left bank, is commonly known by the name of Balize. Actually, this name belongs to another village established by the French settlers at the Southeast Pass, but since the Southwest Pass has become the principal mouth of the Mississippi, the pilots have transplanted both their industry and the name of their miserable town. Surely there are very few places in the world that look as sad and desolate as Balize. The narrow strip

[2] Now called Pilot Town. This and all subsequent notes are by the translators.

of land where the houses are clustered is the shore of both river and sea. Waves of salt water and fresh water lap over it in turn and meet there in a maze of ditches full of a viscous, putrid mixture. Wherever a spongy bulge allows plants to take root, wild cane and reeds grow in impenetrable thickets.[3] The huts are constructed of boards as light as possible so that they don't sink into the waterlogged soil, and they are perched atop high pilings like roosts so that the moisture will penetrate them less. Also, when a storm blows and the waves of the sea crash one after another over the coastal strip into the river, the houses of Balize could very easily be swept away, were they not anchored like ships. Sometimes the village even reaches the point of dragging its anchors. Fever and death ceaselessly emanate from the blanket of miasma covering Balize. Nevertheless, four hundred Americans have the courage to roost in these huts and sleep off their fever in hopes of being able to fleece the ships passing through.



Steamboat and tugboat on the Mississippi. Drawing by Bérard, after Reclus.

[3] Steven Platt, Christopher Brantley and Thomas Rainwater in their recent article "Canebrakes: Bamboo Forests of the Southeast" [2002. *Wild Earth* 12(1), 38-45] describe the extraordinary cane forests that were once widespread along the Mississippi. They observe that "cane (*Arundinaria gigantean*), a member of the grass family, is the only bamboo native to the United States and occurs throughout most of the Southeast … ." The "culms (above-ground stalks) support thick evergreen foliage" that "may reach 9 to 10 meters in height, and crowd together in dense stands called 'canebrakes' by the early settlers … ." The largest of these canebrakes "occurred on natural levees in the Mississippi River floodplain, on a chain of bluffs … extending from western Kentucky to Southeastern Louisiana" (p.38). The authors note that while the canebrakes of the Southeast were once extensive ecosystems that included individual forests of tens of thousands of hectares, most of these were destroyed in the nineteenth century and the canebrake ecosystem is today "critically endangered" (p. 44).

A light wind blew from the south, and our captain wanted to take full advantage of it by sailing upstream. Unfortunately, there were numerous bends in the river, and the sailors constantly had to tack, bracing and clewing up the sails only to brace them again. They were at the point of exhaustion when the ship did them the favor of getting stuck several feet in the soft mud of the shore. The sailors hardly complained about this mishap, and as for me, I happily hastened to the anchor chain hanging at the bow, slid down, and jumped onto the bank.

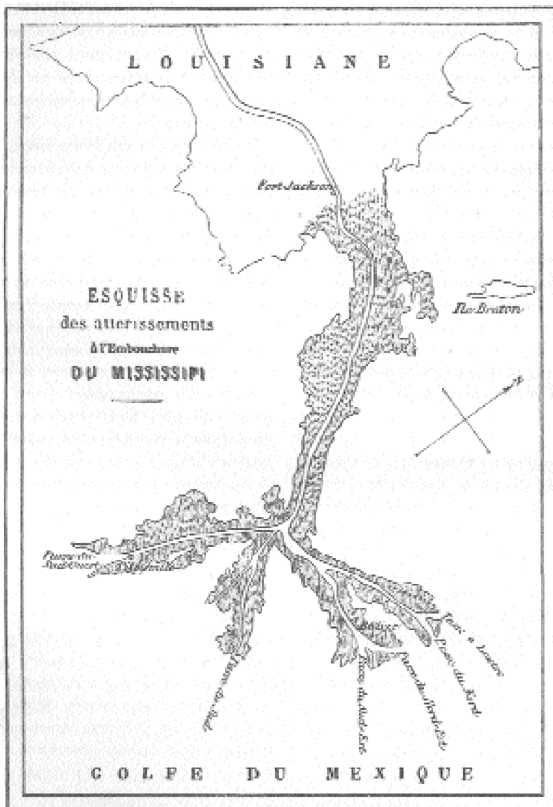
It's a strange sensation to touch solid ground after treading on the moving, quaking surface of the ship for weeks on end. One feels as dizzy as a convalescent trying to walk after a long illness. One's feet become accustomed to a moving surface and finally get used to it so well that the earth seems unstable by contrast, and appears to vibrate as if shaken by a volcanic tremor. This strange sensation did not diminish the pleasure that I felt in walking on solid ground once again, and with the joy of a liberated prisoner, I disappeared into a thicket of wild cane. I had scarcely succeeded in creeping along a few meters in this thick mass of vegetation when I was already unable to distinguish the ship through the immense number of stalks waving back and forth. My every step made the dry reeds strewn about the ground crackle and crunch, and I was almost afraid that all the noise I was making might awaken some snake coiled around a root. The cane rose twenty feet above my head, and only allowed a narrow view of the sky and ... an electric telegraph wire.

Science seems out of place in the wilderness of Louisiana, and this wire that mysteriously transmits thoughts seemed all the more strange in that it passes above these reeds, far from all cultivated fields, between stagnant marshes and a muddy river. Such is the march of civilization in the United States: here, on soggy ground that is not even part of the continent yet, but only the residue of waves, the telegraph is the first work of humans. Before having disturbed this earth with pickax or plow, the American already has his thoughts circulating here – or at least his calculations. As soon as a ship arrives at Balize, this wire announces to the Orleanian merchants how many barrels of salt, immigrants, or bolts of cotton fabric are contained in the cargo. Rarely does an employee come to examine the condition of the wire's insulation. It sways amid the high stalks of cane, and so long as a speculator does not have it cut, it transmits the news quite well. Sometimes, wild cattle wandering through the thicket knock down the poles with their horns, but as long as electricity flows obediently through the wire, no one even thinks of putting them back up. These wandering cows belong to the *Islingues*, semi-barbaric people who are descended from the *Islenots* or *Canariotes* so numerous in Cuba and in the other Antilles.[4]

Toward evening, a tugboat came to pull our ship from its ridiculous position and start it off on its last stretch, accompanied by three other sailing ships. It's a

[4] This community, descended from immigrants from the Canary Islands, is still well known in southeast Louisiana as the "Isleños."

thrilling sight to see four ships crowded together, with their twelve masts, their yards, their inflated sails, their countless riggings stretched in all directions, their streamers, and their waving flags forming something like one gigantic structure. A thick smoke erupted from the middle of these ships. This, along with the bellowing of the steam escaping at regular intervals, were the only things that revealed the powerful tugboat hidden behind the high bulwarks of the three-masters. The little steamer grasped the four ships as if in a vise and dragged them along against the current of this vast Mississippi that flows like a sea into the sea. The strength of that little steamer has something terrifying and inexorable about it. It is with good reason that the tugboats take such proud names as Titan, Briareus, Hercules, Jupiter, and Enceladus.[5]



Engraved by Erhard, after a map of Franklin-Bache.

Thanks to the powerful engine, in less than one hour we reached the point at which the river branches out into several mouths. For the last 150 kilometers of its course, the Mississippi resembles a gigantic arm projecting into the sea and spreading its fingers on the surface of the waters. Barataria Bay extends to the west, the Gulf and Lake Borgne to the east, while to the south, the sea thrusts a little gulf between each of the mouths, so that everywhere the land consists only of thin strips of coastal mud constantly demolished by the waves and endlessly renewed by alluvial deposits. In some places, the levee of soil that separates the salt water from the current of fresh water is so narrow that the waves break right into the Mississippi. If the creeping roots of the reeds did not hold the soil with their clinging network, a few waves would suffice to carry away the embankment and cut out a new mouth in the river.

[…]

[5] All of these figures are from classical mythology. Briareus was one of three giants, sons of Uranus and Gaea, who had fifty heads and one hundred arms each. Enceladus, also a giant, was struck down with a great stone thrown at him by Athena during a war with the gods. Jupiter and Hercules are, of course, more familiar symbols of power.

Great savannas sometimes extend between the cypress forest bordering the edge of the Mississippi and the already distant seashore. These areas are home to multitudes of birds. The hunters have found that the easiest way to make them leave their nests and shoot them in flight is to set the grass of the savanna on fire. This barbarous method is forbidden, because the fire can spread little by little across the grass to the plantations.

But this does not in the least stop the hunters from resorting to such an expeditious means of flushing out the birds. During the day, all these burning prairies cast a distinctly reddish glow on the atmosphere, and one can see nothing but black smoke extending heavily over the horizon. But the night reveals an awesome sight to the traveler. When the flames of several days of fire finally die out, the ground is covered with a thick layer of ash over an area of several square kilometers, and the marsh grass that composes the soil of the undulating prairies has been burned several feet deep. The hunters have achieved their goal. They had a magnificent fowl hunt.

The first plantations appear above Fort Jackson, a type of small earthen fort that the patriots of Louisiana like to think of as impregnable.[6] These plantations incorporate everything. On the bank are trunks of fallen trees and an earthen levee to prevent flooding. Behind, there is a road parallel to the river, and then high fences made of boards split by the ax. Next come fields of cane like vast blocks of greenery, isolated magnolias, and alleys of pecan trees and azedarachs.[7] There are also wooden houses painted with a red or white wash and perched on two or three-foot pilings of masonry above the always-moist soil, and Negroes' quarters resembling beehives, half-buried in the tall grass of a garden. Finally, in the distance, there is a thick wall of cypress tracing the outline of the river.

This landscape has an eternal, unchanging quality, and it inspires through its tranquility, its majesty, and the grandeur of its lines, rather than because of its details. In order to love and understand Louisiana, one must spend every evening contemplating the severe horizon of its forests, the solemn beauty of its countryside, the silent current of its river.

---

[6] The patriots were wrong, as Reclus suspected. On April 18, 1862 the Union fleet attacked the fort and other Confederate defenses along the river. After constant bombardment for nine days, the fort's supply lines were cut off, it was surrounded, and the defending troops mutinied. The fort surrendered on April 28 (see Winter, John D. 1963. *The Civil War in Louisiana*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 85- 102).

[7] Reclus probably refers to *Melia azedarach*, a naturalized tree commonly known in Louisiana as the chinaberry or chinaball tree.

In the middle of one of these plantations, situated on the east bank of the Mississippi, rises a commemorative column in honor of the Battle of New Orleans.[8] It was there that the British under General Pakenham were routed by the celebrated Andrew Jackson. The Americans were admirably positioned and took advantage of the terrain to enclose themselves, as if in a fortress. By digging a ditch, they cut the narrow isthmus that separated the Mississippi from the impenetrable cypress forests of Lake Borgne. They then used piles of cotton bales to create a rampart that was impervious to bullets and cannon fire. The British, marching in step over sodden ground, slow and unconcerned as if on parade, were shot down like wild game by the skilled riflemen from Louisiana and Kentucky. The true story of this battle is yet to be told. According to popular accounts, the British army supposedly lost seven thousand men, more soldiers than it counted in its ranks, while the Americans lost only seven soldiers. Such is the ratio: one to a thousand.[9]

We had already recognized the proximity of the great city by the thick black atmosphere that hung over the distant horizon and by the high towers softly outlined in the haze. All of a sudden, as we rounded a bend, the buildings of the southern metropolis came into sight. With each turn of the wheel, a new detail was revealed, belfry after belfry, house after house, ship after ship. Finally, when the tugboat left us, the whole city spread its vast crescent, two kilometers long, before us. Intersecting in all directions on the river were great commercial steamers, little tugboats that were harnessed to large ships and made them lightly pirouette, ferries trafficking ceaselessly between the city and its suburb of Algiers, and skiffs swimming like insects in the midst of all these powerful monsters. The bank of the river was an endless avenue of ships tied to the shore. Appearing in turn were luggers,[10] schooners, high steamboats resembling gigantic stabled mastodons, and then three-masters arranged along the bank in an interminable avenue. Behind this vast semi-circle of masts and yards were wooden jetties crowded with all sorts of merchandise, carriages and wagons bouncing along the pavement, and finally, houses of brick, wood, and stone, gigantic billboards, factory fumes, and bustling streets. Bright sunlight illuminated this vast horizon of movement and noise.

---

[8] The final battle of the War of 1812 between the United States and the British Empire. The major engagement took place between December 23, 1814 and January 8, 1815. The war officially ended on December 14, 1814, with the Treaty of Ghent.

[9] In reality, the ratio was closer to one to three hundred. According to historian Charles B. Brooks (1961. *The Siege of New Orleans*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 252) “The Americans had 71 casualties, the British 2,057. More of the wounded would die before morning.”

[10] A lugger is a small boat for fishing or pleasure sailing that is rigged with a lugsail, a four-sided sail.

New Orleans

The plan of New Orleans is, like that of all American cities, one of extreme simplicity. However, the great curve of the Mississippi (which has earned the metropolis of the south the poetic name "the Crescent City") has prevented laying out the roads perfectly straight from one end of the city to the other. It necessitated arranging the districts in trapezoids, separated from each other by wide boulevards, with their small bases facing the river. On the other hand, the western suburbs of Lafayette, Jefferson, and Carrollton are constructed on a semi-circular peninsula of the Mississippi. Consequently, their larger bases face the river, and the boulevards that border them on each side join in a point at the edge of the forest in which the city was built. Thanks to the recent annexing of these districts, New Orleans has taken on a new appearance, and the two graceful curves that the Mississippi traces along its embankment for about seven miles should give it the name "the Double Crescent City."

The wetness of the ground in Louisiana's principal city is proverbial, and it is easy to imagine that the whole city, with its buildings, warehouses, and boulevards, rests on an enormous raft carried by the waters of the river. Core drillings up to 250 meters deep are sufficient proof to the contrary. They also demonstrate that the soil on which the city is built is composed solely of layers of mud alternating with clay and of tree trunks that are slowly turning into peat and then coal, due to the forces continually operating in the great workshop of nature. One has to dig only a few centimeters, or during dry spells, one or two meters, to reach muddy water. Also, the slightest rain is enough to flood the streets, and when a heavy rain beats down over the city, all of the avenues and plazas become rivers and lagoons. The steam engines work almost constantly to rid New Orleans of its stagnant waters and to discharge them through a canal into Lake Pontchartrain, four miles north of the river.

Obviously, the banks of the Mississippi, like those of all waterways that flood alluvial plains, are higher than the riparian terrain. Nowhere is this fact more evident than in New Orleans, for there is a difference of four meters between the parts of the city distant from the river and those near the embankment. For this reason, structures are protected against the flooding of the Mississippi by a boarded levee one hundred meters wide. In addition, the flooding of the river always brings an enormous amount of sand and clay that reinforces the levee and forms a new batture,[11] on which several streets have already been constructed since the beginning of the century. The districts far from the Mississippi are only a few centimeters above sea level, and people's homes are separated from alligator nests only by drainage pools of stagnant and always iridescent water. However, a certain bulge, called a "hill" in these parts, stretches between the city and Lake Pontchartrain. This swelling, imperceptible to the naked

[11] The term "batture" is still used in New Orleans. It generally refers to land created by deposits in the bend of a river. In New Orleans it refers more broadly to all the land between the levee and the river.

eye, might be one meter high. The plain is so level that the water, at its lowest point, falls only about ten centimeters over a total distance of 180 kilometers, from the city to the Gulf of Mexico.

The oldest district of New Orleans, the one usually called the French Quarter, is still the most elegant of the city. In fact, the French are only a small minority here, and most of their houses have been purchased by American capitalists. There is the main post office, the large banks, the shops selling Parisian goods, the cathedral, and the opera house. Even the name of this last building is proof of the gradual disappearance of foreign or Creole elements. Formerly, this theater showed only French plays, comedies, or vaudeville, but to continue to be profitable, it was forced to change its playbills and its name. Today it is patronized by the American public. It is clear that the French language will increasingly disappear. The population of New Orleans, which fluctuates between 120,000 and 200,000 inhabitants depending on the season, includes barely 6,000 to 10,000 French, or one twentieth. In addition, there are the same number of Creoles who are not yet completely Americanized. Soon the Anglo-Saxon idiom will dominate unchallenged, and all that will remain of the aboriginal Indians and the French and Spanish settlers who had established themselves on the land well before the immigrants of British origin will be the names of streets: Tchoupitoulas, Perdido, Bienville, etc. At the French Market, which foreigners once visited without fail in order to hear the medley of languages, one now hears only English conversations. The Germans, always ashamed of their heritage, try to prove that they have become Yankees through their clearly articulated curses and barroom jokes. The Negroes, with their inexhaustible chatter, deign to speak French only out of sympathy for the listener. And the occasional Indian hunters, proud and sad as prisoners, respond to questions in monosyllabic English.

The American section, located west of the French Quarter on the other side of the wide and beautiful Canal Street, is inhabited mostly by merchants and brokers. It is also the center of political life. Here one finds hotels almost as beautiful as those of New York, cotton warehouses, most of the churches and theaters, and City Hall. This is also where the big slave market is held. A huge mob always crowds inside Bank's Arcade, the interior of which is dominated by a large counter, abundantly stocked with bottles and glasses. On a platform stands the auctioneer, a large, red-faced, bloated man with a booming voice: "Come on, Jim! Get up on the table. How much for this good nigger Jim? Look how strong he is! He's got good teeth! Look at the muscles on his arms! Come on, now, dance for us, Jim!" And he makes the slave turn around. "Here's a nigger who knows how to do everything – he's a carpenter, a cartwright, and a shoemaker. He won't talk back – you never need to hit him." But most of the time there are long whitish rays etched by the whip on their black skin. Then it is a Negro woman's turn: "Look at this wench! She's already had two niggers, and she's still young. Look at her strong back and sturdy chest! She's a good wet nurse, and a good negress for work!" And the bidding starts again amid laughter and shouts. Thus all the Negroes of Louisiana pass in turn on this fateful table: children who have just ended their seventh year and whom the law in its solicitude deems old enough to be separated

from their mothers; young girls subjected to the stares of two thousand spectators and sold by the pound; mothers who come to see their children stolen from them, and who are obliged to remain cheerful while threatened by the whip; and the elderly, who have already been auctioned off many times, and who have to appear one last time before these pale-faced men who despise them and jeer at their white hair. In the end, they are deprived of the most vile and pitiful honor – that of bringing a good price. Sold off for a few dollars, they might as well be buried like animals in the cypress forest. According to the advocates of slavery, all this is willed by the cause of progress itself, the doctrines of our holy religion, and the most sacred laws of family and property.

For a long time, all the houses of New Orleans were simple huts made of wood. In spite of its extent, the whole city had the appearance of a huge fairground. Today, the houses of the two main districts are for the most part built with brick and stone. Granite was even used to construct the new customs house. In spite of the strong pilings thirty meters long on which it rests, its walls have already sunk one foot into the ground.

But the principal agent of change in the city is not the aesthetic taste of the property owners, but rather fire. I soon had the opportunity to learn this first-hand, for I arrived in New Orleans at the peak of the annual fire season. According to the poets, the month of May is the season of regeneration; in the chief city of Louisiana, it is the season of conflagration. “Of course,” they say, “because then the hot weather begins, and the woodwork of the houses dries out under the sun. It’s also a time of merriment when people are less concerned for their own self-interest.” “That’s true,” add the cynics, “but don’t forget that the month of May comes right after the April quarter, and the burnings can help balance the books.” The fact is that during the last two or three weeks of May, not one night passes in which the alarm does not call the citizens with its slow, deep sound. Often, the purple reflections of four or five fires color the sky at the same time, and the fire brigade, woken up suddenly, doesn’t have a clue as to where it is most needed. It has been calculated that in the city of New York alone, flames annually destroy as many buildings as in all of France. In New Orleans, a city with only one-fifth or one-sixth the population of New York, the impact of fire is relatively even greater, since the total destruction caused by fires is equivalent to half the loss due to similar catastrophes throughout France.

One night, early in my stay in the metropolis of the South, one of those horrible disasters so common in the United States occurred. Seven large steamships burned simultaneously. It was an awesome sight. The seven ships, moored side by side, looked

The port of New Orleans (Louisiana).
Drawing by de Bérard, after an American photograph

like individual fireplaces joined at the base by a sea of flames. Whirlwinds of fire shot up from the bottom of the holds and then swept back down below the galleries, revealing in all its ephemeral beauty the elegant architecture of these palaces glittering with gilding and mirrors. But soon the tongues of fire penetrated in successive jets through the floor of the galleries, and from top to bottom, the three decks of cabins were enveloped in a blazing hurricane. Above the ships, black smokestacks surrounded by swirling billows of flame remained motionless for a long time, like solemn ghosts. The flags, hoisted to the top of the masts, appeared from time to time through the smoke, fluttering festively as if for a holiday. One after another, the galleries caved in with a horrible groan, and the engines and furnaces, losing their center of gravity, suddenly leaned over, making the whole enormous conflagration flutter like a pennant. The decks and smokestacks collapsed successively, and the burning debris became a river of fire carried along by the Mississippi. The uniform facades of the city, the docks covered with merchandise, the chaotic crowd, the great ships moored along the bank, and on the opposite shore, the houses and forests of Algiers – all seemed illuminated with a bloody glow. By contrast, the sky alone seemed black, and the stars had vanished. The screams that were heard for a long time coming from the burning ships intensified the horror of this frightful scene. Forty-two persons were burned alive before a rescue attempt was organized. It is a fact that from the construction of the first steamboat up to the present time, more than forty thousand persons have been burned

or drowned in the Mississippi because of accidents of all sorts, including explosions, collisions, or fires – an average of one thousand victims per year.

The night watchmen are far too few in number to be very effective in preventing disasters. The city, almost seven miles long and an average of one mile wide, has only 240 watchmen, of whom 120 work at night. Yet they take great care to warn criminals of their approach. They are equipped with big sticks of ironwood or oak, and when they arrive at a street corner, they strike a resounding blow to the edge of the sidewalk. Arsonists, thieves, and murderers thus hear the enemy coming and are able to accomplish their deeds without fear of surprise. The most notorious criminals are hardly ever arrested, except when, emboldened by long success, they have the audacity to kill in broad daylight. Each year several hundred murders are committed and duly reported by the press, but they are rarely pursued by the judges. However, criminal activity is so excessive that, in spite of the casual nature of justice, 25,000 to 30,000 arrests are made each year. It is true that of this considerable number, amounting to one tenth of the population, 4,000 or 5,000 are Negroes guilty of walking about freely without a letter of permission, or even sent by their masters to the executioner to receive twenty-five lashes of the whip.

The city's more than twenty-five hundred taverns are always filled with drinkers, and fuel the most violent passions with brandy and rum. Every big hotel opens its entire first floor in order to take advantage of the national vice of drunkenness. At the center, there is a large rotunda, a type of stock exchange where merchants come to read their newspapers and discuss their finances. It opens onto a gambling hall, where rogues rendezvous with dupes. There is also a bar, with a table richly and abundantly laid out for the public. The meal is completely free, on a first come, first served basis. One just has to pay for the brandy or rum. The picayune (twenty-five cents) that one spends for each little glass is more than enough to cover all the expenses of this public banquet. Besides, the vast majority of persons who enter the hall don't even touch the food, and are content to drink. Thus, hundreds of drinkers rub shoulders, ignorant of the fact that they are footing the bill for a feast for famished paupers.

The taverns are always full, especially during election time. The candidate has to justify himself to all who are voting for him. If he doesn't know how to drink a cocktail with style, he will lose popularity and be branded a traitor. When political adversaries meet in a bar, drunk or sober, insults followed by fistfights or gunshots are not unusual. More than once, the conqueror has been seen drinking over the corpse of the conquered.

True, it is against the law to carry concealed weapons. But during elections, the boldest among the citizens elude the letter of the law and furnish their belts with a veritable arsenal in plain sight. Most, however, are content to conceal a dagger or pocket pistol in their clothing.

> "Is it true that it is expressly forbidden by law to carry weapons on one's person?" someone asked a famous Louisiana judge.
>
> "Certainly. We can't thank our legislators enough for having forbidden the carrying of concealed weapons."
>
> "Then what would you do if I insulted you or slapped you?"
>
> "What would I do?" And seizing a loaded pistol from his belt, he aimed it at the head of his questioner.

A misanthrope might compare the vices of our European society to a hidden evil that gnaws at the individual from within, whereas the vices of American society appear outwardly in all of their hideous brutality. The most violent hatred separates factions and races: the slavery advocate abhors the abolitionist, the white loathes the Negro, the native detests the foreigner, the wealthy planter disdains the small landowner, and rivalry of interests creates an insurmountable barrier of mistrust even between related families. In a society of this type, the arts cannot be seriously cultivated. Moreover, periodic bouts of yellow fever eliminate all concerns other than commerce, and the merchant places no value on beautifying a city that he plans to flee once he has amassed a sufficient fortune. Under the pretext of art, rich individuals limit themselves to whitewashing the trees in their gardens. This luxury has the double advantage of being pleasing to their sight and of costing very little. They cannot do the same to public promenades because these do not exist. The only tree inside the city is a solitary date palm planted sixty years ago by an old monk. On the other hand, the city holds the honor of erecting a bronze statue to its savior Andrew Jackson. However, this statue has no merit other than that of being colossal and of having cost a million.[12] The artist who modeled and cast it, Mr. Clarke Mills, has been neither to Rome nor to Florence, having studied only in the studios of Washington, D.C. That is exactly what made his reputation among the locals, and those who advanced him money and provided him with work imposed on him the express condition of never traveling outside of his native country. His indubitable claims to fame will hardly enable him to eclipse the sculptors of the ancient world. These consist of the patented invention of a very simple process for the fusion of metal, and of the art of perfectly balancing equestrian statues on the two hind legs without the help of a luxuriant tail or an obliging tree trunk. The city of New Orleans has also commissioned from Mr. Mills a statue of Washington, which will be erected in the American quarter.

---

[12] General Andrew Jackson, the future president, was hailed as "the hero of New Orleans," because of his victory over the British during the Battle of New Orleans. His famous statue was erected at the center of the Place d' Armes, renamed "Jackson Square" in his honor. Reclus, as an implacable foe of racism and an early critic of American expansionism, could hardly have seen this leader of genocidal expeditions against Native Americans as a hero. It is perhaps for this reason, in addition to aesthetics, that he had little appreciation for Jackson's monument.

As for the public buildings, they are for the most part devoid of any architectural merit. The train stations are wretched hangars blackened with smoke, the theaters are mostly dumps at the mercy of fire, and the churches, with the exception of a type of mosque built by the Jesuits, are but large pretentious hovels. Moreover, of all the public buildings, the churches are most subject to the risk of fire or demolition. The congregations that gather there come together, separate, and meet again, only to disperse once more like flecks of sea foam or whirlwinds of leaves carried along by the wind. If a young man is gifted with a strong voice, if he has been successful in the drawing rooms, or if he attracts attention by a religious zeal, actual or feigned, he can issue shares to raise money for the construction of a church, of which he will become absolute master. The church will be his thing, his capital, his business. If renting out the pews does not generate enough income, and his oratory is not fruitful, he gets rid of his church by bankrupting, selling, demolishing, or burning it, and then changes his denomination. This kind of speculation can very easily be combined with others. Nothing prevents the minister of the Gospel from also being a banker, a planter or a slave merchant. The American never has a fixed vocation. He is constantly on the lookout for opportunities, waiting for fortune to pass by so he can hop on and be carried away toward the land of Eldorado.

In the United States, everyone and everything changes and moves with a rapidity inconceivable to those of us who are accustomed always to follow one long routine. In Europe, each stone has its own history. The church rises where the dolmen once stood, and for thirty centuries, the inhabitants of the country – Gauls, Franks, or French – have worshipped at the same consecrated place. We obey traditions rather than humans, and let ourselves be governed by the dead more than by the living. In America, there is nothing of the kind. Not a single superstition is attached to the past or the native soil, and the population, moving like the surface of a lake seeking its level, distributes itself entirely according to the laws of economics. In the young and growing republic, there are already as many ruins as in our old empires. Present-day life is too active and tempestuous for the traditions of the past to dominate the soul. Instinctive love of country in its native simplicity no longer exists in the United States. For the masses, all feelings merge more and more with pecuniary interests.

But for those who are noble of heart – as rare in America as in every nation of the world – there is no country other than liberty.