

Balcony Stories

Grace Elizabeth King

Table of Contents

<u>Balcony Stories</u>	1
<u>Grace Elizabeth King</u>	1
<u>THE BALCONY</u>	1
<u>A DRAMA OF THREE</u>	2
<u>LA GRANDE DEMOISELLE</u>	5
<u>MIMI'S MARRIAGE</u>	8
<u>THE MIRACLE CHAPEL</u>	11
<u>THE STORY OF A DAY</u>	14
<u>ANNE MARIE AND JEANNE MARIE</u>	18
<u>A CRIPPLED HOPE</u>	20
<u>"ONE OF US"</u>	25
<u>THE LITTLE CONVENT GIRL</u>	27
<u>GRANDMOTHER'S GRANDMOTHER</u>	31
<u>THE OLD LADY'S RESTORATION</u>	33
<u>A DELICATE AFFAIR</u>	36
<u>PUPASSE</u>	45

Balcony Stories

Grace Elizabeth King

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- THE BALCONY
- A DRAMA OF THREE
- LA GRANDE DEMOISELLE
- MIMI'S MARRIAGE
- THE MIRACLE CHAPEL
- THE STORY OF A DAY
- ANNE MARIE AND JEANNE MARIE
- A CRIPPLED HOPE
- "ONE OF US"
- THE LITTLE CONVENT GIRL
- GRANDMOTHER'S GRANDMOTHER
- THE OLD LADY'S RESTORATION
- A DELICATE AFFAIR
- PUPASSE

THE BALCONY

THERE is much of life passed on the balcony in a country where the summer unrolls in six moon-lengths, and where the nights have to come with a double endowment of vastness and splendor to compensate for the tedious, sun-parched days.

And in that country the women love to sit and talk together of summer nights, on balconies, in their vague, loose, white garments, men are not balcony sitters, with their sleeping children within easy hearing, the stars breaking the cool darkness, or the moon making a show of light oh, such a discreet show of light! through the vines. And the children inside, waking to go from one sleep into another, hear the low, soft mother-voices on the balcony, talking about this person and that, old times, old friends, old experiences; and it seems to them, hovering a moment in wakefulness, that there is no end of the world or time, or of the mother-knowledge; but, illimitable as it is, the mother-voices and the mother-love and protection fill it all, with their mother's hand in theirs, children are not afraid even of God, and they drift into slumber again, their little dreams taking all kinds of pretty reflections from the great unknown horizon outside, as their fragile soap-bubbles take on reflections from the sun and clouds.

Experiences, reminiscences, episodes, picked up as only women know how to pick them up from other women's lives, or other women's destinies, as they prefer to call them, and told as only women know how to relate them; what God has done or is doing with some other woman whom they have known that is what interests women once embarked on their own lives, the embarkation takes place at marriage, or after the marriageable time, or, rather, that is what interests the women who sit of summer nights on balconies. For in those long-moon countries life is open and accessible, and romances seem to be furnished real and gratis, in order to save, in a languor-breeding climate, the ennui of reading and writing books. Each woman has a different way of picking up and relating her stories, as each one selects different pieces, and has a personal way of playing them on the piano.

Balcony Stories

Each story *is* different, or appears so to her; each has some unique and peculiar pathos in it. And so she dramatizes and inflects it, trying to make the point visible to her apparent also to her hearers. Sometimes the pathos and interest to the hearers lie only in this that the relater has observed it, and gathered it, and finds it worth telling. For do we not gather what we have not, and is not our own lacking our one motive? It may be so, for it often appears so.

And if a child inside be wakeful and precocious, it is not dreams alone that take on reflections from the balcony outside: through the half-open shutters the still, quiet eyes look across the dim forms on the balcony to the star-spangled or the moon-brightened heavens beyond; while memory makes stores for the future, and germs are sown, out of which the slow, clambering vine of thought issues, one day, to decorate or hide, as it may be, the structures or ruins of life.

A DRAMA OF THREE

IT was a regular dramatic performance every first of the month in the little cottage of the old General and Madame B—.

It began with the waking up of the General by his wife, standing at the bedside with a cup of black coffee.

"Hé! Ah! Oh, Honorine! Yes; the first of the month, and affairs affairs to be transacted."

On those mornings when affairs were to be transacted there was not much leisure for the household; and it was Honorine who constituted the household. Not the old dressing-gown and slippers, the old, old trousers, and the antediluvian neck-foulard of other days! Far from it. It was a case of warm water with even a fling of cologne in it), of the trimming of beard and mustache by Honorine, and the black broadcloth suit, and the brown satin stock, and that *je ne sais quoi de dégagé* which no one could possess or assume like the old General. Whether he possessed or assumed it is an uncertainty which hung over the fine manners of all the gentlemen of his day, who were kept through their youth in Paris to cultivate *bon ton* and an education.

It was also something of a gala-day for Madame la Générale too, as it must be a gala-day for all old wives to see their husbands pranked in the manners and graces that had conquered their maidenhood, and exhaling once more that ambrosial fragrance which once so well incensed their compelling presence.

Ah, to the end a woman loves to celebrate her conquest! It is the last touch of misfortune with her to lose in the old, the ugly, and the commonplace her youthful lord and master. If one could look under the gray hairs and wrinkles with which time thatches old women, one would be surprised to see the flutterings, the quiverings, the thrills, the emotions, the coals of the heart-fires which death alone extinguishes, when he commands the tenant to vacate.

Honorine's hands chilled with the ice of sixteen as she approached scissors to the white mustache and beard. When her finger-tips brushed those lips, still well formed and roseate, she felt it, strange to say, on her lips. When she asperged the warm water with cologne, it was her secret delight and greatest effort of economy to buy this cologne, — she always had one little moment of what she called faintness that faintness which had veiled her eyes, and chained her hands, and stilled her throbbing bosom, when as a bride she came from the church with him. It was then she noticed the faint fragrance of the cologne bath. Her lips would open as they did then, and she would stand for a moment and think thoughts to which, it must be confessed, she looked forward from month to month. What a man he had been! In truth he belonged to a period that would accept nothing less from Nature than physical beauty; and Nature is ever subservient to the period. If it is to-day all small men, and to-morrow gnomes and dwarfs, we may know that the period is demanding them from Nature.

Balcony Stories

When the General had completed let it be called no less than the ceremony of his toilet, he took his chocolate and his *pain de Paris*. Honorine could not imagine him breakfasting on anything but *pain de Paris*. Then he sat himself in his large armchair before his *escritoire*, and began transacting his affairs with the usual –

"But where is that idiot, that dolt, that sluggard, that snail, with my mail?"

Honorine, busy in the breakfast-room:

"In a moment, husband. In a moment."

"But he should be here now. It is the first of the month, it is nine o'clock, I am ready; he should be here."

"It is not yet nine o'clock, husband."

"Not yet nine! Not yet nine! Am I not up? Am I not dressed? Have I not breakfasted before nine?"

"That is so, husband. That is so."

Honorine's voice, prompt in cheerful acquiescence, came from the next room, where she was washing his cup, saucer, and spoon.

"It is getting worse and worse every day. I tell you, Honorine, Pompey must be discharged. He is worthless. He is trifling. Discharge him! Discharge him! Do not have him about! Chase him out of the yard! Chase him as soon as he makes his appearance! Do you hear, Honorine?"

"You must have a little patience, husband."

It was perhaps the only reproach one could make to Madame Honorine, that she never learned by experience.

"Patience! Patience! Patience is the invention of dullards and sluggards. In a well-regulated world there should be no need of such a thing as patience. Patience should be punished as a crime, or at least as a breach of the peace. Wherever patience is found police investigation should be made as for smallpox. Patience! Patience! I never heard the word I assure you, I never heard the word in Paris. What do you think would be said there to the messenger who craved patience of you? Oh, they know too well in Paris a *rataplan* from the walking-stick on his back, that would be the answer; and a, 'My good fellow, we are not hiring professors of patience, but legs.' "

"But, husband, you must remember we do not hire Pompey. He only does it to oblige us, out of his kindness."

"Oblige us! Oblige me! Kindness! A negro oblige me! Kind to me! That is it; that is it. That is the way to talk under the new régime. It is favor, and oblige, and education, and monsieur, and madame, now. What child's play to call this a country a government! I would not be surprised" jumping to his next position on this ever-recurring first of the month theme "I would not be surprised if Pompey has failed to find the letter in the box. How do I know that the mail has not been tampered with? From day to day I expect to hear it. What is to prevent? Who is to interpose? The honesty of the officials? Honesty of the officials that is good! What a farce honesty of officials! That is evidently what has happened. The thought has not occurred to me in vain. Pompey has gone. He has not found the letter, and well; that is the end."

But the General had still another theory to account for the delay in the appearance of his mail which he always posed abruptly after the exhaustion of the arraignment of the post-office.

Balcony Stories

"And why not Journal?" Journal was their landlord, a fellow of means, but no extraction, and a favorite aversion of the old gentleman's. "Journal himself? you think he is above it, hé? You think Journal would not do such a thing? Ha! your simplicity, Honorine your simplicity is incredible. It is miraculous. I tell you, I have known the Journals, from father to son, for yes, for seventy-five years. Was not his grandfather the overseer on my father's plantation? I was not five years old when I began to know the Journals. And this fellow, I know him better than he knows himself. I know him as well as God knows him. I have made up my mind. I have made it up carefully that the first time that letter fails on the first of the month I shall have Journal arrested as a thief. I shall land him in the penitentiary. What! You think I shall submit to have my mail tampered with by a Journal? Their contents appropriated? What! You think there was no coincidence in Journal's offering me his post-office box just the month just the month, before those letters began to arrive? You think he did not have some inkling of them? Mark my words, Honorine, he did by some of his subterranean methods. And all these five years he has been arranging his plans that is all. He was arranging theft, which no doubt has been consummated to-day. Oh, I have regretted it I assure you I have regretted it, that I did not promptly reject his proposition, that, in fact, I ever had anything to do with the fellow."

It was almost invariably, so regularly do events run in this world, it was almost invariably that the negro messenger made his appearance at this point. For five years the General had perhaps not been interrupted as many times, either above or below the last sentence. The mail, or rather the letter, was opened, and the usual amount three ten-dollar bills was carefully extracted and counted. And as if he scented the bills, even as the General said he did, within ten minutes after their delivery, Journal made his appearance to collect the rent.

It could only have been in Paris, among that old retired nobility, who counted their names back, as they expressed it, "au de ça du déluge," that could have been acquired the proper manner of treating a "roturier" landlord: to measure him with the eyes from head to foot; to hand the rent the ten-dollar bill with the tips of the fingers; to scorn a look at the humbly tendered receipt; to say: "The cistern needs repairing, the roof leaks; I must warn you that unless such notifications meet with more prompt attention than in the past, you must look for another tenant," etc., in the monotonous tone of supremacy, and in the French, not of Journal's dictionary, nor of the dictionary of any such as he, but in the French of Racine and Corneille; in the French of the above suggested circle, which inclosed the General's memory, if it had not inclosed as he never tired of recounting his star-like personality.

A sheet of paper always infolded the bank-notes. It always bore, in fine but sexless tracery, "From one who owes you much."

There, that was it, that sentence, which, like a locomotive, bore the General and his wife far on these firsts of the month to two opposite points of the horizon, in fact, one from the other "From one who owes you much."

The old gentleman would toss the paper aside with the bill receipt. In the man to whom the bright New Orleans itself almost owed its brightness, it was a paltry act to search and pick for a debtor. Friends had betrayed and deserted him; relatives had forgotten him; merchants had failed with his money; bank presidents had stooped to deceive him; for he was an old man, and had about run the gamut of human disappointments a gamut that had begun with a C major of trust, hope, happiness, and money.

His political party had thrown him aside. Neither for ambassador, plenipotentiary, senator, congressman, not even for a clerkship, could he be nominated by it. Certes! "From one who owed him much." He had fitted the cap to a new head, the first of every month, for five years, and still the list was not exhausted. Indeed, it would have been hard for the General to look anywhere and not see some one whose obligations to him far exceeded this thirty dollars a month. Could he avoid being happy with such eyes?

But poor Madame Honorine! She who always gathered up the receipts, and the "From one who owes you much"; who could at an instant's warning produce the particular ones for any month of the past half-decade. She kept

Balcony Stories

them filed, not only in her armoire, but the scrawled papers skewered, as it were, somewhere else where women from time immemorial have skewered such unsigned papers. She was not original in her thoughts no more, for the matter of that, than the General was. Tapped at any time on the first of the month, when she would pause in her drudgery to reimpose her heart by a sight of the written characters on the scrap of paper, her thoughts would have been found flowing thus, "One can give everything, and yet be sure of nothing."

When Madame Honorine said "everything," she did not, as women in such cases often do, exaggerate. When she married the General, she in reality gave the youth of sixteen, the beauty (ah, do not trust the denial of those wrinkles, the thin hair, the faded eyes!) of an angel, the dot of an heiress. Alas! It was too little at the time. Had she in her own person united all the youth, all the beauty, all the wealth, sprinkled parsimoniously so far and wide over all the women in this land, would she at that time have done aught else with this than immolate it on the burning pyre of the General's affection? "And yet be sure of nothing."

It is not necessary, perhaps, to explain that last clause. It is very little consolation for wives that their husbands have forgotten, when some one else remembers. Some one else! Ah! there could be so many some one elses in the General's life, for in truth he had been irresistible to excess. But this was one particular some one else who had been faithful for five years. Which one?

When Madame Honorine solves that enigma she has made up her mind how to act.

As for Journal, it amused him more and more. He would go away from the little cottage rubbing his hands with pleasure (he never saw Madame Honorine, by the way, only the General). He would have given far more than thirty dollars a month for this drama; for he was not only rich, but a great *farceur*.

LA GRANDE DEMOISELLE

THAT was what she was called by everybody as soon as she was seen or described. Her name, besides baptismal titles, was Idalie Sainte Foy Mortemart des Islets. When she came into society, in the brilliant little world of New Orleans, it was the event of the season, and after she came in, whatever she did became also events. Whether she went, or did not go; what she said, or did not say; what she wore, and did not wear all these became important matters of discussion, quoted as much or more than what the president said, or the governor thought. And in those days, the days of '59, New Orleans was not, as it is now, a one-heiress place, but it may be said that one could find heiresses then as one finds type-writing girls now.

Mademoiselle Idalie received her birth, and what education she had, on her parents' plantation, the famed old Reine Sainte Foy place, and it is no secret that, like the ancient kings of France, her birth exceeded her education.

It was a plantation, the Reine Sainte Foy, the richness and luxury of which are really well described in those perfervid pictures of tropical life, at one time the passion of philanthropic imaginations, excited and exciting over the horrors of slavery. Although these pictures were then often accused of being purposely exaggerated, they seem now to fall short of, instead of surpassing, the truth. Stately walls, acres of roses, miles of oranges, unmeasured fields of cane, colossal sugar-house they were all there, and all the rest of it, with the slaves, slaves, slaves everywhere, whole villages of negro cabins. And there were also, most noticeable to the natural, as well as to the visionary, eye there were the ease, idleness, extravagance, self-indulgence, pomp, pride, arrogance, in short the whole enumeration, the moral *sine qua non*, as some people considered it, of the wealthy slaveholder of aristocratic descent and tastes.

What Mademoiselle Idalie cared to learn she studied, what she did not she ignored; and she followed the same simple rule untrammelled in her eating, drinking, dressing, and comportment generally; and whatever discipline may have been exercised on the place, either in fact or fiction, most assuredly none of it, even so much as in a

Balcony Stories

threat, ever attained her sacred person. When she was just turned sixteen, Mademoiselle Idalie made up her mind to go into society. Whether she was beautiful or not, it is hard to say. It is almost impossible to appreciate properly the beauty of the rich, the very rich. The unfettered development, the limitless choice of accessories, the confidence, the self-esteem, the sureness of expression, the simplicity of purpose, the ease of execution all these produce a certain effect of beauty behind which one really cannot get to measure length of nose, or brilliancy of eye. This much can be said: there was nothing in her that positively contradicted any assumption of beauty on her part, or credit of it on the part of others. She was very tall and very thin with small head, long neck, black eyes, and abundant straight black hair, for which her hair-dresser deserved more praise than she, good teeth, of course, and a mouth that, even in prayer, talked nothing but commands; that is about all she had *en fait d'ornements*, as the modistes say. It may be added that she walked as if the Reine Sainte Foy plantation extended over the whole earth, and the soil of it were too vile for her tread. Of course she did not buy her toiles in New Orleans. Everything was ordered from Paris, and came as regularly through the custom-house as the modes and robes to the milliners. She was furnished by a certain house there, just as one of a royal family would be at the present day. As this had lasted from her layette up to her sixteenth year, it may be imagined what took place when she determined to make her *début*. Then it was literally, not metaphorically, *carte blanche*, at least so it got to the ears of society. She took a sheet of note-paper, wrote the date at the top, added, "I make my *début* in November," signed her name at the extreme end of the sheet, addressed it to her dressmaker in Paris, and sent it.

It was said that in her dresses the very handsomest silks were used for linings, and that real lace was used where others put imitation, around the bottoms of the skirts, for instance, and silk ribbons of the best quality served the purposes of ordinary tapes; and sometimes the buttons were of real gold and silver, sometimes set with precious stones. Not that she ordered these particulars, but the dressmakers, when given *carte blanche* by those who do not condescend to details, so soon exhaust the outside limits of garments that perforce they take to plastering them inside with gold, so to speak, and, when the bill goes in, they depend upon the furnishings to carry out a certain amount of the contract in justifying the price. And it was said that these costly dresses, after being worn once or twice, were cast aside, thrown upon the floor, given to the negroes anything to get them out of sight. Not an inch of the real lace, not one of the jeweled buttons, not a scrap of ribbon, was ripped off to save. And it was said that if she wanted to romp with her dogs in all her finery, she did it; she was known to have ridden horseback, one moonlight night, all around the plantation in a white silk dinner-dress flounced with Alençon. And at night, when she came from the balls, tired, tired to death as only balls can render one, she would throw herself down upon her bed in her tulle skirts, on top, or not, of the exquisite flowers, she did not care, and make her maid undress her in that position; often having her bodices cut off her, because she was too tired to turn over and have them unlaced.

That she was admired, raved about, loved even, goes without saying. After the first month she held the refusal of half the beaux of New Orleans. Men did absurd, undignified, preposterous things for her; and she? Love? Marry? The idea never occurred to her. She treated the most exquisite of her pretenders no better than she treated her Paris gowns, for the matter of that. She could not even bring herself to listen to a proposal patiently; whistling to her dogs, in the middle of the most ardent protestations, or jumping up and walking away with a shrug of the shoulders, and a "Bah!"

Well! Every one knows what happened after '59. There is no need to repeat. The history of one is the history of all. But there was this difference for there is every shade of difference in misfortune, as there is every shade of resemblance in happiness. Mortemart des Islets went off to fight. That was natural; his family had been doing that, he thought, or said, ever since Charlemagne. Just as naturally he was killed in the first engagement. They, his family, were always among the first killed; so much so that it began to be considered assassination to fight a duel with any of them. All that was in the ordinary course of events. One difference in their misfortunes lay in that after the city was captured, their plantation, so near, convenient, and rich in all kinds of provisions, was selected to receive a contingent of troops – a colored company. If it had been a colored company raised in Louisiana it might have been different; and these negroes mixed with the negroes in the neighborhood, and negroes are no better than whites, for the proportion of good and bad among them, and the officers were always off duty when

Balcony Stories

they should have been on, and on when they should have been off.

One night the dwelling caught fire. There was an immediate rush to save the ladies. Oh, there was no hesitation about that! They were seized in their beds, and carried out in the very arms of their enemies; carried away off to the sugar-house, and deposited there. No danger of their doing anything but keep very quiet and still in their *chemises de nuit*, and their one sheet apiece, which was about all that was saved from the conflagration that is, for them. But it must be remembered that this is all hearsay. When one has not been present, one knows nothing of one's own knowledge; one can only repeat. It has been repeated, however, that although the house was burned to the ground, and everything in it destroyed, wherever, for a year afterward, a man of that company or of that neighborhood was found, there could have been found also, without search-warrant, property that had belonged to the Des Islets. That is the story; and it is believed or not, exactly according to prejudice.

How the ladies ever got out of the sugar-house, history does not relate; nor what they did. It was not a time for sociability, either personal or epistolary. At one offensive word your letter, and you, very likely, examined; and Ship Island for a hotel, with soldiers for hostesses! Madame Des Islets died very soon after the accident of rage, they say; and that was about all the public knew.

Indeed, at that time the society of New Orleans had other things to think about than the fate of the Des Islets. As for *la grande demoiselle*, she had prepared for her own oblivion in the hearts of her female friends. And the gentlemen, her *preux chevaliers*, they were burning with other passions than those which had driven them to her knees, encountering a little more serious response than "bahs" and shrugs. And, after all, a woman seems the quickest thing forgotten when once the important affairs of life come to men for consideration.

It might have been ten years according to some calculations, or ten eternities, the heart and the almanac never agree about time, but one morning old Champigny (they used to call him Champignon) was walking along his levee front, calculating how soon the water would come over, and drown him out, as the Louisianians say. It was before a seven-o'clock breakfast, cold, wet, rainy, and discouraging. The road was knee-deep in mud, and so broken up with hauling, that it was like walking upon waves to get over it. A shower poured down. Old Champigny was hurrying in when he saw a figure approaching. He had to stop to look at it, for it was worth while. The head was hidden by a green barege veil, which the showers had plentifully besprinkled with dew; a tall, thin figure. Figure! No; not even could it be called a figure: straight up and down, like a finger or a post; high-shouldered, and a step a step like a plowman's. No umbrella; no nothing more, in fact. It does not sound so peculiar as when first related something must be forgotten. The feet oh, yes, the feet they were like waffle-irons, or frying-pans, or anything of that shape.

Old Champigny did not care for women he never had; they simply did not exist for him in the order of nature. He had been married once, it is true, about a half century before; but that was not reckoned against the existence of his prejudice, because he was *célibataire* to his finger-tips, as any one could see a mile away. But that woman *intrigue'd* him.

He had no servant to inquire from. He performed all of his own domestic work in the wretched little cabin that replaced his old home. For Champigny also belonged to the great majority of the *nouveaux pauvres*.

He went out into the rice-field, where were one or two hands that worked on shares with him, and he asked them. They knew immediately; there is nothing connected with the parish that a field-hand does not know at once. She was the teacher of the colored public school some three or four miles away. "Ah," thought Champigny, "some Northern lady on a mission." He watched to see her return in the evening, which she did, of course; in a blinding rain. Imagine the green barege veil then; for it remained always down over her face.

Old Champigny could not get over it that he had never seen her before. But he must have seen her, and, with his abstraction and old age, not have noticed her, for he found out from the negroes that she had been teaching four or

Balcony Stories

five years there. And he found out also how, is not important that she was Idalie Sainte Foy Mortemart des Islets. *La grande demoiselle!* He had never known her in the old days, owing to his uncomplimentary attitude toward women, but he knew of her, of course, and of her family. It should have been said that his plantation was about fifty miles higher up the river, and on the opposite bank to Reine Sainte Foy. It seemed terrible. The old gentleman had had reverses of his own, which would bear the telling, but nothing was more shocking to him than this that Idalie Sainte Foy Mortemart des Islets should be teaching a public colored school for it makes one blush to name it seven dollars and a half a month. For seven dollars and a half a month to teach a set of well! He found out where she lived, a little cabin not so much worse than his own, for that matter in the corner of a field; no companion, no servant, nothing but food and shelter. Her clothes have been described.

Only the good God himself knows what passed in Champignon's mind on the subject. We know only the results. He went and married *la grande demoiselle*. How? Only the good God knows that too. Every first of the month, when he goes to the city to buy provisions, he takes her with him in fact, he takes her everywhere with him.

Passengers on the railroad know them well, and they always have a chance to see her face. When she passes her old plantation *la grande demoiselle* always lifts her veil for one instant the inevitable green barege veil. What a face! Thin, long, sallow, petrified! And the neck! If she would only tie something around the neck! And her plain, coarse cottonade gown! The negro women about her were better dressed than she.

Poor old Champignon! It was not an act of charity to himself, no doubt cross and disagreeable, besides being ugly. And as for love, gratitude!

MIMI'S MARRIAGE

THIS is how she told about it, sitting in her little room, her bridal chamber, not larger, really not larger than sufficed for the bed there, the armoire here, the bureau opposite, and the washstand behind the door, the corners all touching. But a nice set of furniture, quite *comme il faut*, handsome, in fact, as a bride of good family should have. And she was dressed very prettily, too, in her long white *negligée* with plenty of lace and ruffles and blue ribbons, such as only the Creole girls can make, and brides, alas! wear, the pretty honeymoon costume that suggests, that suggests well! to proceed. "The poor little cat!" as one could not help calling her, so *mignonne*, so blonde, with the pretty black eyes, and the rosebud of a mouth, whenever she closed it, a perfect kiss.

"But you know, Louise," she said, beginning quite seriously at the beginning, "papa would never have consented, never, never poor papa! Indeed, I should never have asked him; it would only have been one humiliation more for him, poor papa! So it was well he was dead, if it was God's will for it to be. Of course I had my dreams, like everybody. I was so blonde, so blonde, and so small; it seemed like a law I should marry a *brun*, a tall, handsome *brun*, with a mustache and a fine barytone voice. That was how I always arranged it, and you will laugh but a large, large house, and numbers of servants, and a good cook, but a superlatively good cuisine, and wine and all that, and long, trailing silk dresses, and theater every night, and voyages to Europe, and well, everything God had to give, in fact. You know, I get that from papa, wanting everything God has to give! Poor papa! It seemed to me I was to meet him at any time, my handsome *brun*. I used to look for him positively on my way to school, and back home again, and whenever I would think of him I would try and walk so prettily, and look so pretty! *Mon Dieu!* I was not ten years old yet! And afterward it was only for that that I went into society. What should girls go into society for otherwise but to meet their *brun* or their blond? Do you think it is amusing, to economize and economize, and sew and sew, just to go to a party to dance? No! I assure you, I went into society only for that; and I do not believe what girls say they go into society only for that too.

"You know at school how we used to *tirer la bonne aventure*. Well, every time he was not *brun, riche, avenant*, Jules, or Raoul, or Guy, I simply would not accept it, but would go on drawing until I obtained what I wanted. As

Balcony Stories

I tell you, I thought it was my destiny. And when I would try with a flower to see if he loved me, *Il m'aime, un peu, beaucoup, passionément, pas du tout*, if it were *pas du tout*, I would always throw the flower away, and begin tearing off the leaves from another one immediately. *Passionément* was what I wanted, and I always got it in the end.

"But papa, poor papa, he never knew anything of that, of course. He would get furious when any one would come to see me, and sometimes, when he would take me in society, if I danced with a 'nobody,' as he called no matter whom I danced with, he would come up and take me away with such an air such an air! It would seem that papa thought himself better than everybody in the world. But it went worse and worse with papa, not only in the affairs of the world, but in health. Always thinner and thinner, always a cough; in fact, you know, I am a little feeble-chested myself, from papa. And Clementine! Clementine with her children just think, Louise, eight! I thank God my mama had only me, if papa's second wife had to have so many. And so naughty! I assure you, they were all devils; and no correction, no punishment, no education but you know Clementine! I tell you, sometimes on account of those children I used to think myself in 'ell [making the Creole's attempt and failure to pronounce the h], and Clementine had no pride about them. If they had shoes, well; if they had not shoes, well also.

"But Clementine!" I would expostulate, I would pray –

"But do not be a fool, Mimi," she would say. 'Am I God? Can I do miracles? Or must I humiliate your papa?'

"That was true. Poor papa! It would have humiliated papa. When he had money he gave; only it was a pity he had no money. As for what he observed, he thought it was Clementine's negligence. For, it is true, Clementine had no order, no industry, in the best of fortune as in the worst. But to do her justice, it was not her fault this time, only she let him believe it, to save his pride; and Clementine, you know, has a genius for stories. I assure you, Louise, I was desperate. I prayed to God to help me, to advise me. I could not teach I had no education; I could not go into a shop that would be dishonoring papa and *enfin*, I was too pretty. 'And proclaim to the world,' Clementine would cry, 'that your papa does not make money for his family.' That was true. The world is so malicious. You know, Louise, sometimes it seems to me the world is glad to hear that a man cannot support his family; it compliments those who can. As if papa had not intelligence, and honor, and honesty! But they do not count now as in old times, 'before the war.'

"And so, when I thought of that, I laughed and talked and played the thoughtless like Clementine, and made bills. We made bills we had to for everything; we could do that, you know, on our old name and family. But it is too long! I am sure it is too long and tiresome! What egotism on my part! Come, we will take a glass of anisette, and talk of something else your trip, your family. No? no? You are only asking me out of politeness! You are so *aimable*, so kind. Well, if you are not *ennuyée* in fact, I want to tell you. It was too long to write, and I detest a pen. To me there is no instrument of torture like a pen.

"Well, the lady next door, she was an American, and common, very common, according to papa. In comparison to us she had no family whatever. Our little children were forbidden even to associate with her little children. I thought that was ridiculous not that I am a democrat, but I thought it ridiculous. But the children cared; they were so disobedient and they were always next door, and they always had something nice to eat over there. I sometimes thought Clementine used to encourage their disobedience, just for the good things they got to eat over there. But papa was always making fun of them; you know what a sharp tongue he had. The gentleman was a clerk; and, according to papa, the only true gentlemen in the world had family and a profession. We did not dare allow ourselves to. think it, but Clementine and I knew that they, in fact, were in more comfortable circumstances than we.

"The lady, who also had a great number of children, sent one day, with all the discretion and delicacy possible, and asked me if I would be so kind as to guess what, Louise! But only guess! But you never could! Well, to

Balcony Stories

darn some of her children's stockings for her. It was God who inspired her, I am sure, on account of my praying so much to him. You will be shocked, Louise, when I tell you. It sounds like a sin, but I was not in despair when papa died. It was a grief, yes, it seized the heart, but it was not despair. Men ought not to be subjected to the humiliation of life; they are not like women, you know. We are made to stand things; they have their pride, their *orgueil*, as we say in French, and that is the point of honor with some men. And Clementine and I, we could not have concealed it much longer. In fact, the truth was crying out everywhere, in the children, in the house, in our own persons, in our faces. The darning did not provide a superfluity, I guarantee you!

"Poor papa! He caught cold. He was condemned from the first. And so all his fine qualities died; for he had fine qualities they were too fine for this age, that was all. Yes; it was a kindness of God to take him before he found out. If it was to be, it was better. Just so with Clementine as with me. After the funeral crack! everything went to pieces. We were at the four corners for the necessaries of life, and the bills came in my dear, the bills that came in! What memories! what memories! Clementine and I exclaimed; there were some bills that we had completely forgotten about. The lady next door sent her brother over when papa died. He sat up all night, that night, and he assisted us in all our arrangements. And he came in afterward, every evening. If papa had been there, there would have been a fine scene over it; he would have had to take the door, very likely. But now there was no one to make objections. And so when, as I say, we were at the four corners for the necessaries of life, he asked Clementine's permission to ask me to marry him.

"I give you my word, Louise, I had forgotten there was such a thing as marriage in the world for me! I had forgotten it as completely as the chronology of the Merovingian dynasty, alas! with all the other school things forgotten. And I do not believe Clementine remembered there was such a possibility in the world for me. *Mon Dieu!* when a girl is poor she may have all the beauty in the world not that I had beauty, only a little prettiness. But you should have seen Clementine! She screamed for joy when she told me. Oh, there was but one answer according to her, and according to everybody she could consult, in her haste. They all said it was a dispensation of Providence in my favor. He was young, he was strong; he did not make a fortune, it was true, but he made a good living. And what an assistance to have a man in the family! an assistance for Clementine and the children. But the principal thing, after all, was, he wanted to marry me. Nobody had ever wanted that before, my dear!

"Quick, quick, it was all arranged. All my friends did something for me. One made my *peignoirs* for me, one this, one that *ma foi!* I did not recognize myself. One made all the toilet of the bureau, another of the bed, and we all sewed on the wedding-dress together. And you should have seen Clementine, going out in all her great mourning, looking for a house, looking for a servant! But the wedding was private on account of poor papa. But you know, Loulou, I had never time to think, except about Clementine and the children, and when I thought of all those poor little children, poor papa's children, I said 'Quick, quick,' like the rest.

"It was the next day, the morning after the wedding, I had time to think. I was sitting here, just as you see me now, in my pretty new *negligée*. I had been looking at all the pretty presents I have shown you, and my trousseau, and my furniture, it is not bad, as you see, my dress, my veil, my ring, and I do not know I do not know but, all of a sudden, from everywhere came the thought of my *brun*, my handsome *brun* with the mustache, and the *bonne aventure*, *riche*, *avenant*, the Jules, Raoul, Guy, and the flower leaves, and '*il m'aime, un peu, beaucoup, pas du tout, passionnément*, and the way I expected to meet him walking to and from school, walking as if I were dancing the steps, and oh, my plans, my plans, my plans, silk dresses, theater, voyages to Europe, and poor papa, so fine, so tall, so aristocratic. I cannot tell you how it all came; it seized my heart, and, *mon Dieu!* I cried out, and I wept, I wept, I wept. How I wept! It pains me here now to remember it. Hours, hours it lasted, until I had no tears in my body, and I had to weep without them, with sobs and moans, But this, I have always observed, is the time for reflection after the tears are all out. And I am sure God himself gave me my thoughts. 'Poor little Mimi!' I thought, '*fi donc!* You are going to make a fool of yourself now when it is all over, because why? It is God who manages the world, and not you. You pray to God to help you in your despair, and he has helped you. He has sent you a good, kind husband who adores you; who asks only to be a brother to your sisters and brothers, and son to Clementine; who has given you more than you ever possessed in your life but

Balcony Stories

because he did not come out of the *bonne aventure* and who gets a husband out of the *bonne aventure*? and would your *brun* have come to you in your misfortune? I am sure God inspired those thoughts in me.

"I tell you, I rose from that bed naturally I had thrown myself upon it. Quick I washed my face, I brushed my hair, and, you see these bows of ribbons, look, here are the marks of the tears, I turned them. *Hé*, Loulou, it occurs to me, that if you examined the blue bows on a bride's *negligée*, you might always find tears on the other side; for do they not all have to marry whom God sends? and am I the only one who had dreams? It is the end of dreams, marriage; and that is the good thing about it. God lets us dream to keep us quiet, but he knows when to wake us up, I tell you. The blue bows knew! And now, you see, I prefer my husband to my *brun*; in fact, Loulou, I adore him, and I am furiously jealous about him. And he is so good to Clementine and the poor little children; and see his photograph a blond, and not good-looking, and small!

"But poor papa! If he had been alive, I am sure he never would have agreed with God about my marriage."

THE MIRACLE CHAPEL

EVERY heart has a miracle to pray for. Every life holds that which only a miracle can cure. To prove that there have never been, that there can never be, miracles does not alter the matter. So long as there is something hoped for, that does not come in the legitimate channel of possible events, so long as something does come not to be hoped or expected in the legitimate channel of possible events, just so long will the miracle be prayed for.

The rich and the prosperous, it would seem, do not depend upon God so much, do not need miracles, as the poor do. They do not have to pray for the extra crust when starvation hovers near; for the softening of an obdurate landlord's heart; for strength in temptation, light in darkness, salvation from vice; for a friend in friendlessness; for that miracle of miracles, an opportunity to struggling ambition; for the ending of a dark night, the breaking of day; and, oh! for God's own miracle to the bedside-watchers the change for the better, when death is there and the apothecary's skill too far, far away. The poor, the miserable, the unhappy, they can show their miracles by the score; that is why God is called the poor man's friend. He does not mind, so they say, going in the face of logic and reason to relieve them; for often the kind and charitable are sadly hampered by the fetters of logic and reason, which hold them, as it were, away from their own benevolence.

But the rich have their miracles, no doubt, even in that beautiful empyrean of moneyed ease in which the poor place them. Their money cannot buy all they enjoy, and God knows how much of their sorrow it assuages. As it is, one hears now and then of accidents among them, conversions to better thoughts, warding off of danger, rescue of life; and heirs are sometimes born, and husbands provided, and fortunes saved, in such surprising ways, that even the rich, feeling their limitations in spite of their money, must ascribe it privately if not publicly to other potencies than their own. These cathedral *tours de force*, however, do not, if the truth be told, convince like the miracles of the obscure little chapel.

There is always a more and a most obscure little miracle chapel, and as faith seems ever to lead unhesitatingly to the latter one, there is ever rising out of humility and obscurity, as in response to a demand, some new shrine, to replace the wear and tear and loss of other shrines by prosperity. For, alas! it is hard even for a chapel to remain obscure and humble in the face of prosperity and popularity. And how to prevent such popularity and prosperity? As soon as the noise of a real miracle in it gets abroad, every one is for hurrying thither at once with their needs and their prayers, their candles and their picayunes; and the little miracle chapel, perhaps despite itself, becomes with mushroom growth a church, and the church a cathedral, from whose resplendent altars the cheap, humble ex-voto tablets, the modest beginnings of its ecclesiastical fortunes, are before long banished to dimly lighted lateral shrines.

The miracle chapel in question lay at the end of a very confusing but still intelligible route. It is not in truth a

Balcony Stories

chapel at all, but a consecrated chamber in a very small, very lowly cottage, which stands, or one might appropriately, if not with absolute novelty, say which kneels, in the center of a large garden, a garden primeval in rusticity and size, its limits being defined by no lesser boundaries than the four intersecting streets outside, and its culture showing only the careless, shiftless culture of nature. The streets outside were miracles themselves in that, with their liquid contents, they were streets and not bayous. However, they protected their island chapel almost as well as a six-foot moat could have done. There was a small paved space on the sidewalk that served to the pedestrian as an indication of the spot in the tall, long, broad fence where a gate might be sought. It was a small gate with a strong latch. It required a strong hand to open it. At the sound of the click it made, the little street ragamuffin, who stood near, peeping through the fence, looked up. He had worked quite a hole between the boards with his fingers. Such an anxious expression passed over his face that even a casual passer-by could not help relieving it by a question any question: "Is this the miracle chapel, little boy?"

"Yes, ma'am; yes." Then his expression changed to one of eagerness, yet hardly less anxious.

"Here. Take this –"

He did not hold out his hand, the coin had to seek it. At its touch he refused to take it.

"I ain't begging."

"What are you looking at so through the fence?" He was all sadness now.

"Just looking."

"Is there anything to see inside?"

He did not answer. The interrogation was repeated.

"I can't see nothing. I'm blind," putting his eyes again to the hole, first one, then the other.

"Come, won't you tell me how this came to be a miracle chapel?"

"Oh, ma'am," he turned his face from the fence, and clasped his hands in excitement, "it was a poor widow woman who come here with her baby that was a-dying, and she prayed to the Virgin Mary, and the Virgin Mary made the baby live –"

He dropped his voice, the words falling slower and slower. As he raised his face, one could see then that he was blind, and the accident that had happened to him, in fording the street. What sightless elves! What a wet, muddy little skeleton! Ten? No; hardly ten years of age.

"The widow woman she picked up her baby, and she run down the walk here, and out into the street screaming she was so glad," putting his eyes to the peep-hole again, – "and the Virgin Mary come down the walk after her, and come through the gate, too; and that was all she seed the widow woman."

"Did you know the widow woman?"

He shook his *head*.

"How do you know it?"

Balcony Stories

"That was what they told me. And they told me, the birds all begun to sing at once, and the flowers all lighted up like the sun was shining on them. They seed her. And she come down the walk, and through the gate," his voice lowering again to a whisper.

Ay, how the birds must have sung, and the flowers shone, to the widowed mother as she ran, nay, leaped, down that rose-hedged walk, with her restored baby clasped to her bosom!

"*They seed her,*" repeated the little fellow. "And that is why you stand here to see her, too?"

His shoulder turned uneasily in the clasp upon it.

"They seed her, and they ain't got no eyes."

"Have you no mother?"

"Ain't never had no mother." A thought struck him. "Would that count, ma'am? Would that count? The little baby that was dying yes, ma'am, it had a mother; and it's the mothers that come here constant with their children; I sometimes hear 'em dragging them in by the hand."

"How long have you been coming here?"

"Ever since the first time I heard it, ma'am."

Street ragamuffins do not cry: it would be better if they did so, when they are so young and so blind; it would be easier for the spectator, the auditor.

"They seed her I might see her ef ef I could see her once ef ef I could see anything once." His voice faltered; but he stiffened it instantly. "She might see me. She can't pass through this gate without seeing me; and and ef she seed me and I didn't even see her oh, I'm so tired of being blind!"

"Did you never go inside to pray?" How embarrassing such a question is, even to a child!

"No, ma'am. Does that count, too? The little baby didn't pray, the flowers didn't go inside, nor the birds. And they say the birds broke out singing all at once, and the flowers shined, like the sun was shining on 'em like the sun was shining in 'em," he corrected himself. "The birds they can see, and the flowers they can't see, and they seed her." He shivered with the damp cold and perhaps too with hunger.

"Where do you live?"

He wouldn't answer.

"What do you live on?"

He shook his head.

"Come with me." He could not resist the grasp on his shoulder, and the firm directing of his bare, muddy feet through the gate, up the walk, and into the chamber which the Virgin found that day. He was turned to the altar, and pressed down on his knees.

One should not look at the face of a blind child praying to the Virgin for sight. Only the Virgin herself should see that and if she once saw that little boy! There were hearts, feet, hands, and eyes enough hanging around to

Balcony Stories

warrant hope at least, if not faith; the effigies of the human aches and pains that had here found relief, if not surcease; feet and hands beholden to no physician for their exorcism of rheumatism; eyes and ears indebted to no oculist or aurist; and the hearts, they are always in excess, and, to the most skeptical, there is something sweetly comforting in the sight of so many cured hearts, with their thanks cut deep, as they should be, in the very marble thereof. Where the bed must have stood was the altar, rising by easy gradations, brave in ecclesiastical deckings, to the plaster figure of her whom those yearning hearts were seeing, whom those murmuring lips were addressing. Hearts must be all alike to her at such a distance, but the faces to the looker-on were so different. The eyes straining to look through all the experiences and troubles that their life has held to plead, as only elves can plead, to one who can, if she will, perform their miracle for them. And the mouths, the sensitive human mouths, each one distorted by the tragedy against which it was praying.

Their miracles! their miracles! what trifles to divinity! Perhaps hardly more to humanity! How far a simple looker-on could supply them if so minded! Perhaps a liberal exercise of love and charity by not more than half a dozen well-to-do people could answer every prayer in the room! But what a miracle that would be, and how the Virgin's heart would gladden thereat, and jubilate over her restored heart-dying children, even as the widowed mother did over her one dying babe!

And the little boy had stopped praying. The futility of it perhaps his own impotence had overcome him. He was crying, and past the shame of showing it crying helplessly, hopelessly. Tears were rolling out of his sightless eyes over his wordless lips. He could not pray; he could only cry. What better, after all, can any of us do? But what a prayer to a woman to even the plaster figure of a woman! And the Virgin did hear him; for she had him taken without loss of a moment to the hospital, and how easy she made it for the physician to remove the disability! To her be the credit.

THE STORY OF A DAY

It is really not much, the story; it is only the arrangement of it, as we would say of our dresses and our drawing-rooms.

It began with the dawn, of course; and the skiff for our voyage, silvered with dew, waiting in the mist for us, as if it had floated down in a cloud from heaven to the bayou. When repeated, this sounds like poor poetry; but that is the way one thinks at daydawn, when the dew is yet, as it were, upon our brains, and our ideas are still half dreams, and our waking hearts, alas! as innocent as waking babies playing with their toes.

Our oars waked the waters of the bayou, as motionless as a sleeping snake under its misty covert to continue the poetical language or thought. The ripples ran frightened and shivering into the rooty thicknesses of the sedge-grown banks, startling the little birds bathing there into darting to the nearest, highest rush-top, where, without losing their hold on their swaying, balancing perches, they burst into all sorts of incoherent songs, in their excitement to divert attention from the near-hidden nests: bird mothers are so much like women mothers!

It soon became day enough for the mist to rise. The eyes that saw it ought to be able to speak to tell fittingly about it.

Not all at once, nor all together, but a thinning, a lifting, a breaking, a wearing away; a little withdrawing here, a little withdrawing there; and now a peep, and now a peep; a bride lifting her veil to her husband! Blue! White! Lilies! Blue lilies! White lilies! Blue and white lilies! And still blue and white lilies! And still! And still! Wherever the veil lifted, still and always the bride!

Not in clumps and bunches, not in spots and patches, not in banks, meadows, acres, but in yes; for still it lifted beyond and beyond and beyond; the eye could not touch the limit of them, for the eye can touch only the limit of

Balcony Stories

vision; and the lilies filled the whole sea-marsh, for that is the way spring comes to the sea-marshes. The sedge-roots might have been unsightly along the water's edge, but there were morning-glories, all colors, all shades oh, such morning-glories as we of the city never see! Our city morning-glories must dream of them, as we dream of angels. Only God could be so lavish! Dropping from the tall spear-heads to the water, into the water, under the water. And then, the reflection of them, in all their colors, blue, white, pink, purple, red, rose, violet!

To think of an obscure little Acadian bayou waking to flow the first thing in the morning not only through banks of new-blown morning-glories, but sown also to its depths with such reflections as must make it think itself a bayou in heaven, instead of in Paroisse St. Martin. Perhaps that is the reason the poor poets think themselves poets, on account of the beautiful things that are only reflected into their minds from what is above? Besides the reflections, there were alligators in the bayou, trying to slip away before we could see them, and watching us with their stupid, senile eyes, sometimes from under the thickest' prettiest flowery bowers; and turtles splashing into the water ahead of us; and fish (silver-sided perch), looking like reflections themselves, floating through the flower reflections, nibbling their breakfast.

Our bayou had been running through swamp only a little more solid than itself; in fact, there was no solidity but what came from the roots of grasses. Now, the banks began to get firmer, from real soil in them. We could see cattle in the distance, up to their necks in the lilies, their heads and sharp-pointed horns coming up and going down in the blue and white. Nothing makes cattle's heads appear handsomer, with the sun just rising far, far away on the other side of them. The sea-marsh cattle turned loose to pasture in the lush spring beauty turned loose in Elysium!

But the land was only partly land yet, and the cattle still cattle to us. The rising sun made revelations, as our bayou carried us through a drove in their Elysium, or it might have always been an Elysium to us. It was not all pasturage, all enjoyment. The rising and falling feeding head was entirely different, as we could now see, from the rising and falling agonized head of the bogged the buried alive. It is well that the lilies grow taller and thicker over the more treacherous places; but, misery! misery! not much of the process was concealed from us, for the cattle have to come to the bayou for water. Such a splendid black head that had just yielded breath! The wide-spreading ebony horns thrown back among the morning-glories, the mouth open from the last sigh, the glassy eyes staring straight at the beautiful blue sky above, where a ghostly moon still lingered, the velvet neck ridged with veins and muscles, the body already buried in black ooze. And such a pretty red-and-white-spotted heifer, lying on her side, opening and shutting her eyes, breathing softly in meek resignation to her horrible calamity! And, again, another one was plunging and battling in the act of realizing her doom: a fierce, furious, red cow, glaring and bellowing at the soft, yielding inexorable abyss under her, the bustards settling afar off, and her own species browsing securely just out of reach.

They understand that much, the sea-marsh cattle, to keep out of reach of the dead combatant. In the delirium of anguish, relief cannot be distinguished from attack, and rescue of the victim has been proved to mean goring of the rescuer.

The bayou turned from it at last, from our beautiful lily world about which our pleasant thoughts had ceased to flow even in bad poetry.

Our voyage was for information, which might be obtained at a certain habitation; if not there, at a second one, or surely at a third and most distant settlement.

The bayou narrowed into a canal, then widened into a bayou again, and the low, level swamp and prairie advanced into woodland and forest. Oak-trees began, our beautiful oak-trees! Great branches bent down almost to the water, quite even with high water, covered with forests of oak, parasites, lichens, and with vines that swept our heads as we passed under them, drooping now and then to trail in the water, a plaything for the fishes, and a landing-place for amphibious insects. The sun speckled the water with its flickering patterns, showering us

Balcony Stories

with light and heat. We have no spring suns; our sun, even in December, is a summer one.

And so, with all its grace of curve and bend, and so the description is longer than the voyage we come to our first stopping-place. To the side, in front of the well-kept fertile fields, like a proud little showman, stood the little house. Its pointed shingle roof covered it like the top of a chafing-dish, reaching down to the windows, which peeped out from under it like little eyes.

A woman came out of the door to meet us. She had had time during our graceful winding approach to prepare for us. What an irrevocable vow to old maidenhood! At least twenty-five, almost a possible grandmother, according to Acadian computation, and well in the grip of advancing years. She was dressed in a stiff, dark red calico gown, with a white apron. Her black hair, smooth and glossy under a varnish of grease, was plaited high in the back, and dropped regular ringlets, six in all, over her forehead. That was the epoch when her calamity came to her, when the hair was worn in that fashion. A woman seldom alters her coiffure after a calamity of a certain nature happens to her. The figure had taken a compact rigidity, an unfaltering inflexibility, all the world away from the elasticity of matronhood; and her eyes were clear and fixed like her figure, neither falling, nor rising, nor puzzling under other eyes. Her lips, her hands, her slim feet, were conspicuously single, too, in their intent, neither reaching, nor feeling, nor running for those other lips, hands, and feet which should have doubled their single life.

That was Adorine Méronaux, otherwise the most industrious Acadian and the best cottonade-weaver in the parish. It had been short, her story. A woman's love is still with those people her story. She was thirteen when she met him. That is the age for an Acadian girl to meet him, because, you know, the large families the thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, twenty children take up the years; and when one wishes to know one's great-great-grandchildren (which is the dream of the Acadian girl) one must not delay one's story.

She had one month to love him in, and in one week they were to have the wedding. The Acadians believe that marriage must come *au point*, as cooks say their sauces must be served. Standing on the bayou-bank in front of the Méronaux, one could say "Good day" with the eyes to the Zévérin Theriots that was the name of the parents of the young bridegroom. Looking under the branches of the oaks, one could see across the prairie, prairie and sea-marsh it was, and clearly distinguish another little red-washed house like the Méronaux, with a painted roof hanging over the windows, and a staircase going up outside to the garret. With the sun shining in the proper direction, one might distinguish more, and with love shining like the sun in the eyes, one might see, one might see a heart full.

It was only the eyes, however, which could make such a quick voyage to the Zévérin Theriots; a skiff had a long day's journey to reach them. The bayou sauntered along over the country like a negro on a Sunday's pleasuring, trusting to God for time, and to the devil for means.

Oh, nothing can travel quickly over a bayou! Ask any one who has waited on a bayou-bank for a physician or a life-and-death message. Thought refuses to travel and turn and double over it; thought, like the eye, takes the shortest cut straight over the sea-marsh; and in the spring of the year, when the lilies are in bloom, thought could not take a more heavenly way, even from beloved to beloved.

It was the week before marriage, that week when, more than one's whole life afterward, one's heart feels most longing most well, in fact, it was the week before marriage. From Sunday to Sunday, that was all the time to be passed. Adorine women live through this week by the grace of God, or perhaps they would be as unreasonable as the men Adorine could look across the prairie to the little red roof during the day, and could think across it during the night, and get up before day to look across again longing, longing all the time. Of course one must supply all this from one's own imagination or experience.

But Adorine could sing, and she sang. One might hear, in a favorable wind, a gunshot, or the barking of a dog from one place to the other, so that singing, as to effect, was nothing more than the voicing of her looking and

Balcony Stories

thinking and longing.

When one loves, it is as if everything was known of and seen by the other; not only all that passes in the head and heart, which would in all conscience be more than enough to occupy the other, but the talking, the dressing, the conduct. It was then that the back hair was braided and the front curled more and more beautifully every day, and that the calico dresses became stiffer and stiffer and the white crochet lace collar broader and lower in the neck. At thirteen she was beautiful enough to startle one, they say, but that was nothing; she spent time and care upon these things, as if, like other women, her fate seriously depended upon them. There is no self-abnegation like that of a woman in love.

It was her singing, however, which most showed that other existence in her existence. When she sang at her spinning-wheel or her loom, or knelt battling clothes on the bank of the bayou, her lips would kiss out the words, and the tune would rise and fall and tremble, as if Zepherin were just across there, anywhere; in fact, as if every blue and white lily might hide an ear of him.

It was the time of the new moon, fortunately, when all sit up late in the country. The family would stop in their talking about the wedding to listen to her. She did not know it herself, but it the singing was getting louder and clearer, and, poor little thing, it told everything. And after the family went to bed they could still hear her, sitting on the bank of the bayou, or up in her window, singing and looking at the moon traveling across the lily prairie for all its beauty and brightness no more beautiful and bright than a heart in love.

It was just past the middle of the week, a Thursday night. The moon was so bright the colors of the lilies could be seen, and the singing, so sweet, so far-reaching it was the essence of the longing of love. Then it was that the miracle happened to her. Miracles are always happening to the Acadians. She could not sleep, she could not stay in bed. Her heart drove her to the window, and kept her there, and among the civilized it could not take place, but here she could sing as she pleased in the middle of the night; it was nobody's affair, nobody's disturbance. "Saint Ann! Saint Joseph! Saint Mary!" She heard her song answered! She held her heart, she bent forward, she sang again. Oh, the air was full of music! It was all music! She fell on her knees; she listened, looking at the moon; and, with her face in her hands, looking at Zepherin. It was God's choir of angels, she thought, and one with a voice like Zepherin! Whenever it died away she would sing again, and again, and again

But the sun came, and the sun is not created, like the moon, for lovers, and whatever happened in the night, there was work to be done in the day. Adorine worked like one in a trance, her face as radiant as the upturned face of a saint. They did not know what it was, or rather they thought it was love. Love is so different out there, they make all kinds of allowances for it. But, in truth, Adorine was still hearing her celestial voices or voice. If the cackling of the chickens, the whirl of the spinning-wheel, or the "bum bum" of the loom effaced it a moment, she had only to go to some still place, round her hand over her ear, and give the line of a song, and it was Zepherin Zepherin she heard.

She walked in a dream until night. When the moon came up she was at the window, and still it continued, so faint, so sweet, that answer to her song. Echo never did anything more exquisite, but she knew nothing of such a heathen as Echo. Human nature became exhausted. She fell asleep where she was, in the window, and dreamed as only a bride can dream of her groom. When she awoke, "Adorine! Adorine!" the beautiful angel voices called to her; "Zepherin! Zepherin!" she answered, as if she, too, were an angel, signaling another angel in heaven. It was too much. She wept, and that broke the charm. She could hear nothing more after that. All that day was despondency, dejection, tear-bedewed eyes, and tremulous lips, the commonplace reaction, as all know, of love exaltation. Adorine's family, Acadian peasants though they were, knew as much about it as any one else, and all that any one knows about it is that marriage is the cure-all, and the only cure-all, for love.

And Zepherin? A man could better describe his side of that week; for it, too, has mostly to be described from imagination or experience. What is inferred is that what Adorine longed and thought and looked in silence and

Balcony Stories

resignation, according to woman's way, he suffered equally, but in a man's way, which is not one of silence or resignation, at least when one is a man of eighteen, the last interview, the near wedding, her— beauty, his love, her house in sight, the full moon, the long, wakeful nights.

He took his pirogue; but the bayou played with his impatience, maddened his passion, bringing him so near, to meander with him again so far away. There was only a short prairie between him and —, a prairie thick with lily—roots one could almost walk over their heads, so close, and gleaming in the moonlight. But this is all only inference.

The pirogue was found tethered to the paddle stuck upright in the soft bank, and Adorine's parents related the rest. Nothing else was found until the summer drought had bared the swamp.

There was a little girl in the house when we arrived all else were in the field a stupid, solemn, pretty child, the child of a brother. How she kept away from Adorine, and how much that testified!

It would have been too painful. The little arms around her neck, the head nestling to her bosom, sleepily pressing against it. And the little one might ask to be sung to sleep. Sung to sleep!

The little bed—chamber, with its high mattress bed, covered with the Acadian homespun quilt, trimmed with netting fringe, its bit of mirror over the bureau, the bottle of perfumed grease to keep the locks black and glossy, the prayer—beads and blessed palms hanging on the wall, the low, black polished spinning—wheel, the loom, the *métier d'Adorine* famed throughout the parish, the ever goodly store of cotton and yarn hanks swinging from the ceiling, and the little square, open window which looked under the mossy oak—branches to look over the prairie; and once again all blue and white lilies they were all there, as Adorine was there; but there was more not there.

ANNE MARIE AND JEANNE MARIE

OLD Jeanne Marie leaned her hand against the house, and the tears rolled down her cheeks. She had not wept since she buried her last child. With her it was one trouble, one weeping, no more; and her wrinkled, hard, polished skin so far had known only the tears that come after death. The trouble in her heart now was almost exactly like the trouble caused by death; although she knew it was not so bad as death, yet, when she thought of this to console herself, the tears rolled all the faster. She took the end of the red cotton kerchief tied over her head, and wiped them away; for the furrows in her face did not merely run up and down they ran in all directions, and carried her tears all over her face at once. She could understand death, but she could not understand this.

It came about in this way: Anne Marie and she lived in the little red—washed cabin against which she leaned; had lived there alone with each other for fifty years, ever since Jeanne Marie's husband had died, and the three children after him, in the fever epidemic.

The little two—roomed cabin, the stable where there used to be a cow, the patch of ground planted with onions, had all been bought and paid for by the husband; for he was a thrifty, hard—working Gascon, and had he lived there would not have been one better off, or with a larger family, either in that quarter or in any of the red—washed suburbs with which Gascony has surrounded New Orleans. His women, however, the wife and sister—in—law, had done their share in the work: a man's share apiece, for with the Gascon women there is no discrimination of sex when it comes to work.

And they worked on just the same after he died, tending the cow, digging, hoeing, planting, watering. The day following the funeral, by daylight Jeanne Marie was shouldering around the yoke of milk—cans to his patrons, while Anne Marie carried the vegetables to market; and so on for fifty years.

Balcony Stories

They were old women now, seventy-five years old, and, as they expressed it, they had always been twins. In twins there is always one lucky and one unlucky one: Jeanne Marie was the lucky one, Anne Marie the unlucky one. So much so, that it was even she who had to catch the rheumatism, and to lie now bedridden, months at a time, while Jeanne Marie was as active in her sabots as she had ever been.

In spite of the age of both, and the infirmity of one, every Saturday night there was some little thing to put under the brick in the hearth, for taxes and license, and the never-to-be-forgotten funeral provision. In the husband's time gold pieces used to go in, but they had all gone to pay for the four funerals and the quadrupled doctor's bill. The women laid in silver pieces; the coins, however, grew smaller and smaller, and represented more and more not so much the gain from onions as the saving from food.

It had been explained to them how they might, all at once, make a year's gain in the lottery; and it had become their custom always, at the end of every month, to put aside one silver coin apiece, to buy a lottery ticket with one ticket each, not for the great, but for the twenty-five-cent, prizes. Anne Marie would buy hers round about the market; Jeanne Marie would stop anywhere along her milk course and buy hers, and they would go together in the afternoon to stand with the little crowd watching the placard upon which the winning numbers were to be written. And when they were written, it was curious, Jeanne Marie's numbers would come out twice as often as Anne Marie's. Not that she ever won anything, for she was not lucky enough to have them come out in the order to win; they only came out here and there, singly: but it was sufficient to make old Anne Marie cross and ugly for a day or two, and injure the sale of the onion-basket. When she became bedridden, Jeanne Marie bought the ticket for both, on the numbers, however, that Anne Marie gave her; and Anne Marie had to lie in bed and wait, while Jeanne Marie went out to watch the placard.

One evening, watching it, Jeanne Marie saw the ticket-agent write out the numbers as they came on her ticket, in such a way that they drew a prize forty dollars. When the old woman saw it she felt such a happiness; just as she used to feel in the old times right after the birth of a baby. She thought of that instantly. Without saying a word to any one, she clattered over the *banquette* as fast as she could in her sabots, to tell the good news to Anne Marie. But she did not go so fast as not to have time to dispose of her forty dollars over and over again. Forty dollars! That was a great deal of money. She had often in her mind, when she was expecting a prize, spent twenty dollars; for she had never thought it could be more than that. But forty dollars! A new gown apiece, and black silk kerchiefs to tie over their heads instead of red cotton, and the little cabin new red-washed, and soup in the pot, and a garlic sausage, and a bottle of good, costly liniment for Anne Marie's legs; and still a pile of gold to go under the hearth-brick a pile of gold that would have made the eyes of the defunct husband glisten.

She pushed open the picket-gate, and came into the room where her sister lay in bed.

"Eh, Anne Marie, my girl," she called in her thick, pebbly voice, apparently made purposely to suit her rough Gascon accent; "this time we have caught it!"

"Whose ticket?" asked Anne Marie, instantly.

In a flash all Anne Marie's ill luck ran through Jeanne Marie's mind;— how her promised husband had proved unfaithful, and Jeanne Marie's faithful; and how, ever since, even to the coming out of her lottery numbers, even to the selling of vegetables, even to the catching of the rheumatism, she had been the loser. But above all, as she looked at Anne Marie in the bed, all the misery came over Jeanne Marie of her sister's not being able, in all her poor old seventy-five years of life, to remember the pressure of the arms of a husband about her waist, nor the mouth of a child on her breast.

As soon as Anne Marie had asked her question, Jeanne Marie answered it.

"But your ticket, *Coton-Mai!*"

Balcony Stories

"Where? Give it here! Give it here!" The old woman, who had not been able to move her back for weeks, sat bolt upright in bed, and stretched out her great bony fingers, with the long nails as hard and black as rake-prongs from groveling in the earth.

Jeanne Marie poured the money out of her cotton handkerchief into them.

Anne Marie counted it, looked at it; looked at it, counted it; and if she had not been so old, so infirm, so toothless, the smile that passed over her face would have made it beautiful.

Jeanne Marie had to leave her to draw water from the well to water the plants, and to get her vegetables ready for next morning. She felt even happier now than if she had just had a child, happier even than if her husband had just returned to her.

"Ill luck! *Coton-Mai!* Ill luck! There's a way to turn ill luck!" And her smile also should have beautified her face, wrinkled and ugly though it was.

She did not think any more of the spending of the money, only of the pleasure Anne Marie would take in spending it.

The water was low in the well, and there had been a long drought. There are not many old women of seventy-five who could have watered so much ground as abundantly as she did; but whenever she thought of the forty dollars and Anne Marie's smile she would give the thirsting plant an extra bucketful.

The twilight was gaining. She paused. "*Coton-Mai!*" she exclaimed aloud. "But I must see the old woman smile again over her good luck."

Although it was "my girl" face to face, it was always "the old woman" behind each other's back.

There was a knot-hole in the plank walls of the house. In spite of Anne Marie's rheumatism they would never stop it up, needing it, they said, for light and air. Jeanne Marie slipped her feet out of her sabots and crept easily toward it, smiling, and saying "*Coton-Mai!*" to herself all the way. She put her eye to the hole. Anne Marie was not in the bed, she who had not left her bed for two months! Jeanne Marie looked through the dim light of the room until she found her.

Anne Marie, in her short petticoat and nightsack, with bare legs and feet, was on her knees in the corner, pulling up a plank, hiding peasants know hiding when they see it hiding her money away away away from whom? muttering to herself and shaking her old grayhaired head. Hiding her money away from Jeanne Marie!

And this was why Jeanne Marie leaned her head against the side of the house and wept. It seemed to her that she had never known her twin sister at all.

A CRIPPLED HOPE

YOU must picture to yourself the quiet, dim-lighted room of a convalescent; outside, the dreary, bleak days of winter in a sparsely settled, distant country parish; inside, a slow, smoldering log-fire, a curtained bed, the infant sleeping well enough, the mother wakeful, restless, thought-driven, as a mother must be, unfortunately, nowadays, particularly in that parish, where cotton worms and overflows have acquired such a monopoly of one's future.

God is always pretty near a sick woman's couch; but nearer even than God seems the sick-nurse at least in that

Balcony Stories

part of the country, under those circumstances. It is so good to look through the dimness and uncertainty, moral and physical, and to meet those little black, steadfast, all-seeing eyes; to feel those smooth, soft, all-soothing hands; to hear, across one's sleep, that three-footed step the flat-soled left foot, the tiptoe right, and the padded end of the broomstick; and when one is so wakeful and restless and thought-driven, to have another's story given one. God, depend upon it, grows stories and lives as he does herbs, each with a mission of balm to some woe.

She said she had, and in truth she had, no other name than "little Mammy"; and that was the name of her nature. Pure African, but bronze rather than pure black, and full-sized only in width, her growth having been hampered as to height by an injury to her hip, which had lamed her, pulling her figure awry, and burdening her with a protuberance of the joint. Her mother caused it by dropping her when a baby, and concealing it, for fear of punishment, until the dislocation became irremediable. All the animosity of which little Mammy was capable centered upon this unknown but never-to-be-forgotten mother of hers; out of this hatred had grown her love that is, her destiny, a woman's love being her destiny. Little Mammy's love was for children.

The birth and infancy (the one as accidental as the other, one would infer) took place in it sounds like the "Arabian Nights" now! took place in the great room, caravansary, stable, behind a negro-trader's auction-mart, where human beings underwent literally the

daily buying and selling of which the world now complains in a figure of speech a great, square, dusty chamber where, sitting cross-legged, leaning against the wall, or lying on foul blanket pallets on the floor, the bargains of to-day made their brief sojourn, awaiting transformation into the profits of the morrow.

The place can be pointed out now, is often pointed out; but no emotion arises at sight of it. It is so plain, so matter-of-fact an edifice that emotion only comes afterward in thinking about it, and then in the reflection that such an edifice could be, then as now, plain and matter-of-fact.

For the slave-trader there was no capital so valuable as the physical soundness of his stock; the moral was easily enough forged or counterfeited. Little Mammy's good-for-nothing mother was sold as readily as a vote, in the parlance of to-day; but no one would pay for a crippled baby. The mother herself would not have taken her as a gift, had it been in the nature of a negro-trader to give away anything. Some doctoring was done, so little Mammy heard traditionally, some effort made to get her marketable. There were attempts to pair her off as a twin sister of various correspondencies in age, site, and color, and to palm her off, as a substitute, at migratory, bereaved, overfull breasts. Nothing equaled a negro-trader's will and power for fraud, except the hereditary distrust and watchfulness which it bred and maintained. And so, in the even balance between the two categories, the little cripple remained a fixture in the stream of life that passed through that back room, in the fluxes and refluxes of buying and selling; not valueless, however rely upon a negro-trader for discovering values as substitutes, as panaceas. She earned her nourishment, and Providence did not let it kill the little animal before the emancipation of weaning arrived.

How much circumstances evoked, how much instinct responded, belongs to the secrets which nature seems to intend keeping. As a baby she had eyes, attention, solely for other babies. One cannot say while she was still crawling, for she could only crawl years after she should have been walking, but, before even precocious walking-time, tradition or the old gray-haired negro janitor relates, she would creep from baby to baby to play with it, put it to sleep, pat it, rub its stomach (a negro baby, you know, is all stomach, and generally aching stomach at that). And before she had a lap, she managed to force one for some ailing nursling. It was then that they began to call her "little Mammy." In the transitory population of the "pen" no one stayed long enough to give her another name; and no one ever stayed short enough to give her another one.

Her first recollection of herself was that she could not walk she was past crawling; she cradled herself along, as she called sitting down flat, and working herself about with her hands and her one strong leg. Babbling babies walked all around her, many walking before they babbled, and still she did not walk, imitate them as she

Balcony Stories

might and did. She would sit and "study" about it, make another trial, fall; sit and study some more, make another trial, fall again. Negroes, who believe that they must give a reason for everything even if they have to invent one, were convinced that it was all this studying upon her lameness that gave her such a large head.

And now she began secretly turning up the clothes of every negro child that came into that pen, and examining its legs, and still more secretly examining her own, stretched out before her on the ground. How long it took she does not remember; in fact, she could not have known, for she had no way of measuring time except by her thoughts and feelings. But in her own way and time the due process of deliberation was fulfilled, and the quotient made clear that, bowed or not, all children's legs were of equal length except her own, and all were alike, not one full, strong, hard, the other soft, flabby, wrinkled, growing out of a knot at the hip. A whole psychological period apparently lay between that conclusion and a broom-handle walking-stick; but the broomstick came, as it was bound to come, thank heaven! from that premise, and what with stretching one limb to malice it longer, and doubling up the other to make it shorter, she invented that form of locomotion which is still carrying her through life, and with no more exaggerated leg-crookedness than many careless negroes born with straight limbs display. This must have been when she was about eight or nine. Hobbling on a broomstick, with, no doubt, the same weird, wizened face as now, an innate sense of the fitness of things must have suggested the kerchief tied around her big head, and the burlaps rag of an apron in front of her linsey-woolsey rag of a gown, and the bit of broken pipe-stem in the corner of her mouth, where the pipe should have been, and where it was in after years. That is the way she recollected herself, and that is the way one recalls her now; with a few modifications.

The others came and went, but she was always there. It wasn't long before she became "little Mammy" to the grown folks too; and the newest inmates soon learned to cry: "Where's little Mammy?" "Oh, little Mammy! little Mammy! Such a misery in my head [or my back, or my stomach]! Can't you help me, little Mammy?" It was curious what a quick eye she had for symptoms and ailments, and what a quick ear for suffering, and how apt she was at picking up, remembering, and inventing remedies. It never occurred to her not to crouch at the head or the foot of a sick pallet, day and night through. As for the nights, she said she dared not close her eyes of nights. The room they were in was so vast, and sometimes the negroes lay so thick on the floor, rolled in their blankets (you know, even in the summer they sleep under blankets), all snoring so loudly, she would never have heard a groan or a whimper any more than they did, if she had slept, too. And negro mothers are so careless and such heavy sleepers. All night she would creep at regular intervals to the different pallets, and draw the little babies from under, or away from, the heavy, inert impending mother forms. There is no telling how many she thus saved from being overlaid and smothered, or, what was worse, maimed and crippled. Whenever a physician came in, as he was sometimes called, to look at a valuable investment or to furbish up some piece of damaged goods, she always managed to get near to hear the directions; and she generally was the one to apply them also, for negroes always would steal medicines most scurvily one from the other. And when death at times would slip into the pen, despite the trader's utmost alertness and precautions, as death often "had to do," little Mammy said, when the time of some of them came to die, and when the rest of the negroes, with African greed of eye for the horrible, would press around the lowly couch where the agonizing form of a slave lay writhing out of life, she would always to the last give medicines, and wipe the cold forehead, and soothe the clutching, fearsome hands, hoping to the end, and trying to inspire the hope that his or her "time" had not come yet; for, as she said, "Our time does not come just as often as it does come."

And in those sad last offices, which somehow have always been under reproach as a kind of shame, no matter how young she was, she was always too old to have the childish avoidance of them. On the contrary, to her a corpse was only a kind of baby, and she always strove, she said, to make one, like the other, easy and comfortable.

And in other emergencies she divined the mysteries of the flesh, as other precocities divine the mysteries of painting and music, and so become child wonders.

Balcony Stories

Others came and went. She alone remained there. Babies of her babyhood the toddlers she, a toddler, had nursed were having babies themselves now; the middle-aged had had time to grow old and die. Every week new families were coming into the great back chamber; every week they passed out: babies, boys, girls, buxom wenches, stalwart youths, and the middle-aged the grave, serious ones whom misfortune had driven from their old masters, and the ill-reputed ones, the trickish, thievish, lazy, whom the cunning of the negro-trader alone could keep in circulation. All were marketable, all were bought and sold, all passed in one door and out the other all except her, little Mammy. As with her lameness, it took time for her to recognize, to understand, the fact. She could study over her lameness, she could in the dull course of time think out the broomstick way of palliation. It would have been almost better, under the circumstances, for God to have kept the truth from her; only God keeps so little of the truth from us women. It is his system.

Poor little thing! It was not now that her master *could* not sell her, but he *would* not! Out of her own intelligence she had forged her chains; the lameness was a hobble merely in comparison. She had become too valuable to the negro-trader by her services among his crew, and offers only solidified his determination not to sell her. Visiting physicians, after short acquaintance with her capacities, would offer what were called fancy prices for her. Planters who heard of her through their purchases would come to the city purposely to secure, at any cost, so inestimable an adjunct to their plantations. Even ladies refined, delicate ladies sometimes came to the pen personally to back money with influence. In vain. Little Mammy was worth more to the negro-trader, simply as a kind of insurance against accidents, than any sum, however glittering the figure, and he was no ignorant expert in human wares. She can tell it; no one else can for her. Remember that at times she had seen the streets outside. Remember that she could hear of the outside world daily from the passing chattels of the plantations, farms, families; the green fields, Sunday woods, running streams; the camp-meetings, corn-shuckings, cotton-pickings, sugar-grindings; the baptisms, marriages, funerals, prayer-meetings; the holidays and holy days. Remember that, whether for liberty or whether for love, passion effloresces in the human being no matter when, where, or how with every spring's return. Remember that she was, even in middle age, young and vigorous. But no; do not remember anything. There is no need to heighten the coloring.

It would be tedious to relate, although it was not tedious to hear her relate it, the desperations and hopes of her life then. Hardly a day passed that she did not see, looking for purchases (rummaging among goods on a counter for bargains), some master whom she could have loved, some mistress whom she could have adored. Always her favorite mistresses were there tall, delicate matrons, who came themselves, with great fatigue, to select kindly-faced women for nurses; languid-looking ladies with smooth hair standing out in wide *bandeaux* from their heads, and lace shawls dropping from their sloping shoulders, silk dresses carelessly held up in thumb and finger from embroidered petticoats that were spread out like tents over huge hoops which covered whole groups of swarming piccannies on the dirty floor; ladies, pale from illnesses that she might have nursed, and over-burdened with children whom she might have reared! And not a lady of that kind saw her face but wanted her, yearned for her, pleaded for her, coming back secretly to slip silver, and sometimes gold, pieces into her hand, patting her turbaned head, calling her "little Mammy" too, instantly, by inspiration, and making the negro-trader give them, with all sorts of assurances, the refusal of her. She had no need for the whispered "Buy me, master!" "Buy me, mistress!" "You'll see how I can work, master!" "You'll never be sorry, mistress!" of the others. The negro-trader like hangmen, negro-traders are fitted by nature for their profession it came into his head he had no heart, not even a negro-trader's heart that it would be more judicious to seclude her during these shopping visits, so to speak. She could not have had any hopes then at all; it must have been all desperations.

That auction-block, that executioner's block, about which so much has been written Jacob's ladder, in his dream, was nothing to what that block appeared nightly in her dreams to her; and the climbers up and down well, perhaps Jacob's angels were his hopes, too.

At times she determined to depreciate her usefulness, mar her value, by renouncing her heart, denying her purpose. For days she would tie her kerchief over her ears and eyes, and crouch in a corner, strangling her

Balcony Stories

impulses. She even malingered, refused food, became dumb. And she might have succeeded in making herself salable through incipient lunacy, if through no other way, had she been able to maintain her role long enough. But some woman or baby always was falling into some emergency of pain and illness.

How it might have ended one does not like to think. Fortunately, one does not need to think.

There came a night. She sat alone in the vast, dark caravansary alone for the first time in her life. Empty rags and blankets lay strewn over the floor, no snoring, no tossing in them more. A sacrificial sale that day had cleared the counters. Alarm-bells rang in the streets, but she did not know them for alarm-bells; alarm brooded in the dim space around her, but she did not even recognize that. Her protracted tension of heart had made her fear-blind to all but one peradventure.

Once or twice she forgot herself, and limped over to some heap to relieve an imaginary struggling babe or moaning sleeper. Morning came. She had dozed. She looked to see the rag-heaps stir; they lay as still as corpses. The alarm-bells had ceased. She looked to see a new gang enter the far door. She listened for the gathering buzzing of voices in the next room, around the auction-block. She waited for the trader. She waited for the janitor. At nightfall a file of soldiers entered. They drove her forth, ordering her in the voice, in the tone, of the negro-trader. That was the only familiar thing in the chaos of incomprehensibility about her. She hobbled through the auction-room. Posters, advertisements, papers, lay on the floor, and in the torch-light glared from the wall. Her Jacob's ladder, her stepping-stone to her hopes, lay overturned in a corner.

You divine it. The negro-trader's trade was abolished, and he had vanished in the din and smoke of a war which he had not been entirely guiltless of producing, leaving little Mammy locked up behind him. Had he forgotten her? One cannot even hope so. She hobbled out into the street, leaning on her nine-year-old broomstick (she had grown only slightly beyond it; could still use it by bending over it), her head tied in a rag kerchief, a rag for a gown, a rag for an apron.

Free, she was free! But she had not hoped for freedom. The plantation, the household, the delicate ladies, the teeming children, broomsticks they were in comparison to freedom, but, that was what she had asked, what she had prayed for. God, she said, had let her drop, just as her mother had done. More than ever she grieved, as she crept down the street, that she had never mounted the auctioneer's block. An ownerless free negro! She knew no one whose duty it was to help her; no one knew her to help her. In the whole world (it was all she had asked) there was no white child to call her mammy, no white lady or gentleman (it was the extent of her dreams) beholden to her as to a nurse. And all her innumerable black beneficiaries! Even the janitor, whom she had tended as the others, had deserted her like his white prototype.

She tried to find a place for herself, but she had no indorsers, no recommenders. She dared not mention the name of the negro-trader; it banished her not only from the households of the whites, but from those of the genteel of her own color. And everywhere soldiers sentined the streets soldiers whose tone and accent reminded her of the negro-trader.

Her sufferings, whether imaginary or real, were sufficiently acute to drive her into the only form of escape which once had been possible to friendless negroes. She became a runaway. With a bundle tied to the end of a stick over her shoulder, just as the old prints represent it, she fled from her homelessness and loneliness, from her ignoble past, and the heart-disappointing termination of it. Following a railroad track, journeying afoot, sleeping by the roadside, she lived on until she came to the one familiar landmark in life to her a sick woman, but a white one. And so, progressing from patient to patient (it was a time when sick white women studded the country like mile-posts), she arrived at a little town, a kind of a refuge for soldiers' wives and widows. She never traveled further. She could not. Always, as in the pen, some emergency of pain and illness held her.

Balcony Stories

That is all. She is still there. The poor, poor women of that stricken region say that little Mammy was the only alleviation God left them after Sheridan passed through; and the richer ones say very much the same thing –

But one should hear her tell it herself, as has been said, on a cold, gloomy winter day in the country, the fire glimmering on the hearth; the overworked husband in the fields; the baby quiet at last; the mother uneasy, restless, thought-driven; the soft black hand rubbing backward and forward, rubbing out aches and frets and nervousness.

The eyelids droop; the firelight plays fantasies on the bed-curtains; the ear drops words, sentences; one gets confused one sleeps one dreams.

"ONE OF US"

AT the first glance one might have been inclined to doubt; but at the second anybody would have recognized her that is, with a little mental rehabilitation: the bright little rouge spots in the hollow of her cheek, the eyebrows well accentuated with paint, the thin lips rose-tinted, and the dull, straight hair frizzed and curled and twisted and turned by that consummate rascal and artist, the official beautifier and rectifier of stage humanity, Robert, the opera *coiffeur*. Who in the world knows better than he the gulf between the real and the ideal, the limitations between the natural and the romantic?

Yes, one could see her, in that time-honored thin silk dress of hers stiffened into brocade by buckram underneath; the high, low necked waist, hiding any evidences of breast, if there were such evidences to hide, and bringing the long neck into such faulty prominence; and the sleeves, crisp puffs of tulle divided by bands of red velvet, through which the poor lean arm runs like a wire, stringing them together like beater. Yes, it was she, the whilom *dugazon* of the opera troupe. Not that she ever was a *dugazon*, but that was what her voice once aspired to be: a *dugazon manquée* would better describe her.

What a ghost! But they always appeared like mere evaporations of real women. For what woman of flesh and blood can seriously maintain through life the rôle of sham attendant on sham sensations, and play public celebrant of other women's loves and lovers, singing, or rather saying, nothing more enlivening than: "Oh, madame!" and "Ah, madame!" and "*Quelle ivresse!*" or "*Quelle horreur!*" or, in recitative, detailing whatever dreary platitudes and inanities the librettist and Heaven connive to put upon the tongues of confidantes and attendants?

Looking at her how it came over one! The music, the lights, the scene; the fat soprano confiding to her the fact of the "amour extrême" she bears for the tenor, to which she, the *dugazon*, does not even try to listen; her eyes wandering listlessly over the audience. The calorous secret out, and in her possession, how she stumbles over her train to the back of the stage, there to pose in abject patience and awkwardness, while the gallant barytone, touching his sword, and flinging his cape over his shoulder, defies the world and the tenor, who is just recovering from his "*ut de poitrine*" behind the scenes.

She was talking to me all the time, apologizing for the intrusion, explaining her mission, which involved a short story of her life, as women's intrusions and missions usually do. But my thoughts, also as usual, distracted me from listening, as so often they have distracted me from following what was perhaps more profitable.

The composer, of course, wastes no music upon her; flinging to her only an occasional recitative in two notes, but always ending in a reef of a scale, trill, or roulade, for her to wreck her voice on before the audience. The *chef d'orchestre*, if he is charitable, starts her off with a contribution from his own lusty lungs, and then she oh, her voice is always thinner and more osseous than her arms, and her smile no more graceful than her train!

As well think of the simulated trees, waterfalls, and châteaux leaving the stage, as the *dugazon*! One always

Balcony Stories

imagines them singing on into dimness, dustiness, unsteadiness, and uselessness, until, like any other piece of stage property, they are at last put aside and simply left there at the end of some season there seems to be a superstition against selling or burning useless and dilapidated stage property. As it came to me, the idea was not an impossibility. The last representation of the season is over. She, tired beyond judgment haply, beyond feeling by her tireless rôle, sinks upon her chair to rest in her dressing-room; sinks, further, to sleep. She has no maid. The troupe, hurrying away to France on the special train waiting not half a dozen blocks away, forget her the insignificant are so easily forgotten! The porter, more tired, perhaps, than any one of the beautiful ideal world about him, and savoring already in advance the good onion-flavored *grillade* awaiting him at home, locks up everything fast and tight; the tighter and faster for the good fortnight's vacation he has promised himself.

No doubt if the old opera-house were ever cleaned out, just such a heap of stiff, wire-strung bones would be found, in some such hole as the *dugazon's* dressing-room, desiccating away in its last costume perhaps in that very costume of *Inez*; and if one were venturesome enough to pass Allhallowe'en there, the spirit of those bones might be seen availing itself of the privilege of unasperged corpses to roam. Not singing, not talking it is an anachronism to say that ghosts talk: their medium of communication must be pure thought; and one should be able to see their thoughts working, just as one sees the working of the digestive organs in the clear viscera of transparent animalculæ. The hard thing of it is that ghosts are chained to the same scenes that chained their bodies, and when they sleep-walk, so to speak, it must be through phases of former existence. What a nightmare for them to go over once again the lived and done, the suffered and finished! What a comfort to wake up and find one's self dead, well dead!

I could have continued and put the whole opera troupe in "costume de ghost," but I think it was the woman's eyes that drew me back to her face and her story. She had a sensible face, now that I observed her naturally, as it were; and her hands, how I have agonized over those hands on the stage! all knuckles and exaggerated veins, clutching her dress as she sang, or, petrified, outstretched to *Leonore's* " *Pourquoi ces larmes?*" her hands were the hands of an honest, hard-working woman who buckrams her own skirts, and at need could scrub her own floor. Her face (my description following my wandering glance) her face was careworn, almost to desuetude; not dissipation-worn, as, alas! the faces of the more gifted ladies of opera troupes too often are. There was no fattening in it of pastry, truffles, and bonbons; upon it none of the tracery left by nightly champagne tides and ripples; and consequently her figure, under her plain dress, had not that for display which the world has conventioned to call charms. Where a window-cord would hardly have sufficed to girdle *Leonore*, a necklace would have served her. She had not beauty enough to fear the flattering dangers of masculine snares and temptations, or there may have been other reasons, but as a wife there was something about her that guaranteed it she would have blossomed love and children as a fig-tree does figs.

In truth, she was just talking about children. The first part of her story had passed: her birthplace, education, situation; and now she was saying:

"I have always had the temptation, but I have always resisted it. Now," with a blush at her excuse, "it may be your spring weather, your birds, your flowers, your sky and your children in the streets. The longing came over me yesterday: I thought of it on the stage, I thought of it afterward it was better than sleeping; and this morning" her eyes moistened, she breathed excitedly "I was determined. I gave up, I made inquiry, I was sent to you. Would it be possible? Would there be any place" ("any rôle," she said first) "in any of your asylums, in any of your charitable institutions, for me? I would ask nothing but my clothes and food, and very little of that; the recompense would be the children the little girl children," with a smile can you imagine the smile of a woman dreaming of children that might be? "Think! Never to have held a child in my arms more than a moment, never to have felt a child's arms about my neck! Never to have known a child! Born on a stage, my mother born on a stage!" Ah, there were tragic possibilities in that voice and movement! "Pardon, madam. You see how I repeat. And you must be very wearied hearing about me. But I could be their nurse and their servant. I would bathe and dress them, play with them, teach them their prayers; and when they are sick they would see no difference. They would not know but what their mother was there!"

Balcony Stories

Oh, she had her program all prepared; one could see that.

"And I would sing to them no! no!" with a quick gesture, "nothing from the stage; little songs and lullabys I have picked up traveling around, and," hesitating, "little things I have composed myself little things that I thought children would like to hear some day." What did she not unconsciously throw into those last words?" "I dream of it," she pursued, talking with as little regard to me as on the stage she sang to the prima donna. "Their little arms, their little faces, their little lips! And in an asylum there would be so many of them! When they cried and were in trouble I would take them in my lap, and I would say to them, with all sorts of tenderness—" She had arranged that in her program, too all the minutiae of what she would say to them in their distress. But women are that way. When once they begin to love, their hearts are magnifying-lenses for them to feel through. "And my heart hungers to commence right here, now, at once! It seems to me I cannot wait. Ah, madam, no more stage, no more opera!" speaking quickly, feverishly. "As I said, it may be your beautiful spring, your flowers, your birds, and your numbers of children. I have always loved that place most where there are most children; and you have more children here than I ever saw anywhere. Children are so beautiful! It is strange, is it not, when you consider my life and my rearing?"

Her life, her rearing, how interesting they must have been! What a pity I had not listened more attentively!

"They say you have much to do with asylums here."

Evidently, when rôles do not exist in life for certain characters, God has to create them. And thus He had to create a role in an asylum for my friend, for so she became from the instant she spoke of children as she did. It was the poorest and neediest of asylums; and the poor little orphaned wretches but it is better not to speak of them. How can God ever expect to rear children without their mothers!

But the rôle I craved to create for my friend was far different some good, honest bourgeois interior, where lips are coarse and cheeks are ruddy, and where life is composed of real scenes, set to the real music of life, the homely successes and failures, and loves and hates, and embraces and tears, that fill out the orchestra of the heart; where romance and poetry abound *au naturel*; and where yes, where children grow as thick as nature permits: the domestic interior of the opera porter, for instance, or the clockmaker over the way. But what a loss the orphan-asylum would have suffered, and the dreary lacking there would have been in the lives of the children! For there must have been moments in the lives of the children in that asylum when they felt, awake, as they felt in their sleep when they dreamed their mothers were about them.

THE LITTLE CONVENT GIRL

SHE was coming down on the boat from Cincinnati, the little convent girl. Two sisters had brought her aboard. They gave her in charge of the captain, got her a state-room, saw that the new little trunk was put into it, hung the new little satchel up on the wall, showed her how to bolt the door at night, shook hands with her for good-bye (good-bys have really no significance for sisters), and left her there. After a while the bells all rang, and the boat, in the awkward elephantine fashion of boats, got into midstream. The chambermaid found her sitting on the chair in the state-room where the sisters had left her, and showed her how to sit on a chair in the saloon. And there she sat until the captain came and hunted her up for supper. She could not do anything of herself; she had to be initiated into everything by some one else.

She was known on the boat only as "the little convent girl." Her name, of course, was registered in the clerk's office, but on a steamboat no one thinks of consulting the clerk's ledger. It is always the little widow, the fat madam, the tall colonel, the parson, etc. The captain, who pronounced by the letter, always called her the little convent girl. She was the beau-ideal of the little convent girl. She never raised her eyes except when spoken to. Of course she never spoke first, even to the chamber maid, and when she did speak it was in the wee, shy, furtive

Balcony Stories

voice one might imagine a just-budding violet to have; and she walked with such soft, easy, carefully calculated steps that one naturally felt the penalties that must have secured them—penalties dictated by a black code of deportment.

She was dressed in deep mourning. Her black straw hat was trimmed with stiff new crape, and her stiff new bombazine dress had crape collar and cuffs. She wore her hair in two long plaits fastened around her head tight and fast. Her hair had a strong inclination to curl, but that had been taken out of it as austere as the noise out of her footfalls. Her hair was as black as her dress; her eyes, when one saw them, seemed blacker than either, on account of the bluishness of the white surrounding the pupil. Her eye-lashes were almost as thick as the black veil which the sisters had fastened around her hat with an extra pin the very last thing before leaving. She had a round little face, and a tiny pointed chin; her mouth was slightly protuberant from the teeth, over which she tried to keep her lips well shut, the effort giving them a pathetic little forced expression. Her complexion was sallow, a pale sallow, the complexion of a brunette bleached in darkened rooms. The only color about her was a blue taffeta ribbon from which a large silver medal of the Virgin hung over the place where a breastpin should have been. She was so little, so little, although she was eighteen, as the sisters told the captain; otherwise they would not have permitted her to travel all the way to New Orleans alone.

Unless the captain or the clerk remembered to fetch her out in front, she would sit all day in the cabin, in the same place, crocheting lace, her spool of thread and box of patterns in her lap, on the handkerchief spread to save her new dress. Never leaning back—oh, no! always straight and stiff, as if the conventual back board were there within call. She would eat only convent fare at first, notwithstanding the importunities of the waiters, and the jocularities of the captain, and particularly of the clerk. Every one knows the fund of humor possessed by a steamboat clerk, and what a field for display the table at meal-times affords. On Friday she fasted rigidly, and she never began to eat, or finished, without a little Latin movement of the lips and a sign of the cross. And always at six o'clock of the evening she remembered the angelus, although there was no church bell to remind her of it.

She was in mourning for her father, the sisters told the captain, and she was going to New Orleans to her mother. She had not seen her mother since she was an infant, on account of some disagreement between the parents, in consequence of which the father had brought her to Cincinnati, and placed her in the convent. There she had been for twelve years, only going to her father for vacations and holidays. So long as the father lived he would never let the child have any communication with her mother. Now that he was dead all that was changed, and the first thing that the girl herself wanted to do was to go to her mother.

The mother superior had arranged it all with the mother of the girl, who was to come personally to the boat in New Orleans, and receive her child from the captain, presenting a letter from the mother superior, a facsimile of which the sisters gave the captain.

It is a long voyage from Cincinnati to New Orleans, the rivers doing their best to make it interminable, embroidering themselves *ad libitum* all over the country. Every five miles, and sometimes oftener, the boat would stop to put off or take on freight, if not both. The little convent girl, sitting in the cabin, had her terrible frights at first from the hideous noises attendant on these landings—the whistles, the ringings of the bells, the running to and fro, the shouting. Every time she thought it was shipwreck, death, judgment, purgatory; and her sins! her sins! She would drop her crochet, and clutch her prayer-beads from her pocket, and relax the constraint over her lips, which would go to rattling off prayers with the velocity of a relaxed windlass. That was at first, before the captain took to fetching her out in front to see the boat make a landing.

Then she got to liking it so much that she would stay all day just where the captain put her, going inside only for her meals. She forgot herself at times so much that she would draw her chair a little closer to the railing, and put up her veil, actually, to see better. No one ever usurped her place, quite in front, or intruded upon her either with word or look; for every one learned to know her shyness, and began to feel a personal interest in her, and all wanted the little convent girl to see everything that she possibly could.

Balcony Stories

And it was worth seeing the balancing and *chasséeing* and waltzing of the cumbersome old boat to make a landing. It seemed to be always attended with the difficulty and the improbability of a new enterprise; and the relief when it did sidle up anywhere within rope's-throw of the spot aimed at! And the roustabout throwing the rope from the perilous end of the dangling gang-plank! And the dangling roustabouts hanging like drops of water from it dropping sometimes twenty feet to the land, and not infrequently into the river itself. And then what a rolling of barrels, and shouldering of sacks, and singing of Jim Crow songs, and pacing of Jim Crow steps; and black skins glistening through torn shirts, and white teeth gleaming through red lips, and laughing, and talking and bewildering! entrancing! Surely the little convent girl in her convent walls never dreamed of so much unpunished noise and movement in the world!

The first time she heard the mate it must have been like the first time woman ever heard man curse and swear, she turned pale, and rang quickly, quickly into the saloon, and came out again? No, indeed! not with all the soul she had to save, and all the other sins on her conscience. She shook her head resolutely, and was not seen in her chair on deck again until the captain not only reassured her, but guaranteed his reassurance. And after that, whenever the boat was about to make a landing, the mate would first glance up to the guards, and if the little convent girl was sitting there he would change his invective to sarcasm, and politely request the colored gentlemen not to hurry themselves on no account whatever; to take their time about shoving out the plank; to send the rope ashore by post-office write him when it got there; begging them not to strain their backs; calling them mister, colonel, major, general, prince, and your royal highness, which was vastly amusing. At night, however, or when the little convent girl was not there, language flowed in its natural curve, the mate swearing like a pagan to make up for lost time.

The captain forgot himself one day: it was when the boat ran aground in the most unexpected manner and place, and he went to work to express his opinion, as only steamboat captains can, of the pilot, mate, engineer, crew, boat, river, country, and the world in general, ringing the bell, first to back, then to head, shouting himself hoarser than his own whistle when he chanced to see the little black figure hurrying through the chaos on the deck; and the captain stuck as fast aground in midstream as the boat had done.

In the evening the little convent girl would be taken on the upper deck, and going up the steep stairs there was such confusion, to keep the black skirts well over the stiff white petticoats; and, coming down, such blushing when suspicion would cross the unprepared face that a rim of white stocking might be visible; and the thin feet, laced so tightly in the glossy new leather boots, would cling to each successive step as if they could never, never make another venture; and then one boot would (there is but that word) hesitate out, and feel and feel around, and have such a pause of helpless agony as if indeed the next step must have been wilfully removed, or was nowhere to be found on the wide, wide earth.

It was a miracle that the pilot ever got her up into the pilot-house; but pilots have a lonely time, and do not hesitate even at miracles when there is a chance for company. He would place a box for her to climb to the tall bench behind the wheel, and he would arrange the cushions, and open a window here to let in air, and shut one there to cut off a draft, as if there could be no tenderer consideration in life for him than her comfort. And he would talk of the river to her, explain the chart, pointing out eddies, whirlpools, shoals, depths, new beds, old beds, cut-offs, caving banks, and making banks, as exquisitely and respectfully as if she had been the River Commission.

It was his opinion that there was as great a river as the Mississippi flowing directly under it an underself of a river, as much a counterpart of the other as the second story of a house is of the first; in fact, he said they were navigating through the upper story. Whirlpools were holes in the floor of the upper river, so to speak; eddies were rifts and cracks. And deep under the earth, hurrying toward the subterranean stream, were other streams, small and great, but all deep, hurrying to and from that great mother-stream underneath, just as the small and great overground streams hurry to and from their mother Mississippi. It was almost more than the little convent girl could take in: at least such was the expression of her eyes; for they opened as all eyes have to open at pilot stories.

Balcony Stories

And he knew as much of astronomy as he did of hydrology, could call the stars by name, and define the shapes of the constellations; and she, who had studied astronomy at the convent, was charmed to find that what she had learned was all true. It was in the pilot-house, one night, that she forgot herself for the first time in her life, and stayed up until after nine o'clock. Although she appeared almost intoxicated at the wild pleasure, she was immediately overwhelmed at the wickedness of it, and observed much more rigidity of conduct thereafter. The engineer, the boiler-men, the firemen, the stokers, they all knew when the little convent girl was up in the pilot-house: the speaking-tube became so mild and gentle.

With all the delays of river and boat, however, there is an end to the journey from Cincinnati to New Orleans. The latter city, which at one time to the impatient seemed at the terminus of the never, began, all of a sudden, one day to make its nearness felt; and from that period every other interest paled before the interest in the imminence of arrival into port, and the whole boat was seized with a panic of preparation, the little convent girl with the others. Although so immaculate was she in person and effects that she might have been struck with a landing, as some good people might be struck with death, at any moment without fear of results, her trunk was packed and repacked, her satchel arranged and rearranged, and, the last day, her hair was brushed and plaited and smoothed over and over again until the very last glimmer of a curl disappeared. Her dress was whisked, as if for microscopic inspection; her face was washed; and her finger-nails were scrubbed with the hard convent nailbrush, until the disciplined little tips ached with a pristine soreness. And still there were hours to wait, and still the boat added up delays. But she arrived at last, after all, with not more than the usual and expected difference between the actual and the advertised time of arrival.

There was extra blowing and extra ringing, shouting, commanding, rushing up the gangway and rushing down the gangway. The clerks, sitting behind tables on the first deck, were plied, in the twinkling of an eye, with estimates, receipts, charges, countercharges, claims, reclaims, demands, questions, accusations, threats, all at topmost voices. None but steamboat clerks could have stood it. And there were throngs composed of individuals every one of whom wanted to see the captain first and at once: and those who could not get to him shouted over the heads of the others; and as usual he lost his temper and politeness, and began to do what he termed "hustle."

"Captain! Captain!" a voice called him to where a hand plucked his sleeve, and a letter was thrust toward him. "The cross, and the name of the convent." He recognized the envelop of the mother superior. He read the duplicate of the letter given by the sisters. He looked at the woman the mother casually, then again and again.

The little convent girl saw him coming, leading some one toward her. She rose. The captain took her hand first, before the other greeting, "Good-by, my dear," he said. He tried to add something else, but seemed undetermined what. "Be a good little girl –" It was evidently all he could think of. Nodding to the woman behind him, he turned on his heel, and left.

One of the deck-hands was sent to fetch her trunk. He walked out behind them, through the cabin, and the crowd on deck, down the stairs, and out over the gangway. The little convent girl and her mother went with hands tightly clasped. She did not turn her eyes to the right or left, or once (what all passengers do) look backward at the boat which, however slowly, had carried her surely over dangers that she wot not of. All looked at her as she passed. All wanted to say good-by to the little convent girl, to see the mother who had been deprived of her so long. Some expressed surprise in a whistle; some in other ways. All exclaimed audibly, or to themselves, "Colored!" IT takes about a month to make the round trip from New Orleans to Cincinnati and back, counting five days' stoppage in New Orleans. It was a month to a day when the steamboat came puffing and blowing up to the wharf again, like a stout dowager after too long a walk; and the same scene of confusion was enacted, as it had been enacted twelve times a year, at almost the same wharf for twenty years; and the same calm, a death calmness by contrast, followed as usual the next morning.

The decks were quiet and clean; one cargo had just been delivered, part of another stood ready on the levee to be shipped. The captain was there waiting for his business to begin, the clerk was in his office getting his books

Balcony Stories

ready, the voice of the mate could be heard below, mustering the old crew out and a new crew in; for if steamboat crews have a single principle, and there are those who deny them any, it is never to ship twice in succession on the same boat. It was too early yet for any but roustabouts, marketers, and church-goers; so early that even the river was still partly mist-covered; only in places could the swift, dark current be seen rolling swiftly along.

"Captain!" A hand plucked at his elbow, as if not confident that the mere calling would secure attention. The captain turned. The mother of the little convent girl stood there, and she held the little convent girl by the hand. "I have brought her to see you," the woman said. "You were so kind and she is so quiet, so still, all the time, I thought it would do her a pleasure."

She spoke with an accent, and with embarrassment; otherwise one would have said that she was bold and assured enough.

"She don't go nowhere, she don't do nothing but make her crochet and her prayers, so I thought I would bring her for a little visit of 'How d' ye do' to you."

There was, perhaps, some inflection in the woman's voice that might have made known, or at least awakened, the suspicion of some latent hope or intention, had the captain's ear been fine enough to detect it. There might have been something in the little convent girl's face, had his eye been more sensitive—a trifle paler, may-be, the lips a little tighter drawn, the blue ribbon a shade faded. He may have noticed that, but—And the visit of "How d' ye do" came to an end. They walked down the stairway, the woman in front, the little convent girl—her hand released to shake hands with the captain—following, across the bared deck, out to the gangway, over to the middle of it. No one was looking, no one saw more than a flutter of white petticoats, a show of white stockings, as the little convent girl went under the water.

The roustabout dived, as the roustabouts always do, after the drowning, even at the risk of their good-for-nothing lives. The mate himself jumped overboard; but she had gone down in a whirlpool. Perhaps, as the pilot had told her whirlpools always did, it may have carried her through to the underground river, to that vast, hidden, dark Mississippi that flows beneath the one we see; for her body was never found.

GRANDMOTHER'S GRANDMOTHER

AS the grandmother related it fresh from the primeval sources that feed a grandmother's memory, it happened thus:

In the early days of the settlement of Georgia—ah, how green and rustic appears to us now the world in the early days of the settlement of Georgia! Sometimes to women, listening to the stories of their grandmothers, it seems better to have lived then than now—her grandmother was at that time a young wife. It was the day of arduous, if not of long, courtship before marriage, when every wedding celebrated the close of an original romance; and when young couples, for bridal trips, went out to settle new States, riding on a pillion generally, with their trousseaux following as best they could on sumpter mules; to hear the grandmother describe it made one long to be a bride of those days.

The young husband had the enumeration of qualities that went to the making of a man of that period, and if the qualities were in the proportion of ten physical to one intellectual, it does not follow that the grandmother's grandfather was not a man of parts. For, to obtain the hand of his bride, an only child and an heiress, he had to give test of his mettle by ignoring his fortune, studying law, and getting his license before marriage, and binding himself to live the first year afterward on the proceeds of his practice; a device of the time thought to be a wholesome corrective of the corrupting influence of over-wealth in young domesticities.

Balcony Stories

Although he had already chosen the sea for his profession, and was a midshipman at the time, with more of a reputation for living than for learning, such was he, and such, it may be said, was the incentive genius of his choice, that almost before his resignation as midshipman was accepted, his license as a lawyer was signed. As for practice, it was currently remarked at his wedding, at the sight of him flying down the room in the reel with his bride for partner, that his tongue was as nimble as his heels, and that if he only turned his attention to criminal practice, there was no man in the country who would make a better prosecuting attorney for the State. And with him for prosecuting attorney, it was warranted that sirrahs the highwaymen would not continue to hold Georgia judge-and-jury justice in quite such contemptible estimation, and that the gallows would not be left so long bereft of their legitimate swingings. As for fees, it was predicted that the young fellow as he stood, or rather "chassé'd," could snap his fingers at both his and his bride's trustees.

He did turn his attention to criminal law, was made prosecuting attorney for the State in his county, and, before his six months had passed, was convincing the hitherto high and mighty, lordly, independent knights of the road that other counties in Georgia furnished more secure pasturage for them.

It was a beautiful spring morning. The young wife bade him a hearty good-by, and stood in the doorway watching him, gay and *debonair*, riding off, on his stout black charger Beetle, in the direction of the town in which court was to be held that week.

She herself feeling as full of ambition and work as if she also were prosecuting attorney, with a perennial spring of eloquence bubbling in her brain, turned to her domestic duties, and, without going into the detail of them, it suffices to say that, according to the grandmother's estimation, one morning's list of duties for a healthy young bride of that period would shame the week's work of a syndicate of them to-day. Finding herself nearing the limit of diminution of several household necessities, and the spring suggesting the beginning of new ones, she made up her mind to profit by her husband's absence and the fair weather to make a trading visit to the neighboring town next day.

So, early in a morning as beautiful as the preceding one, mounted on her own stanch mare Maid Marion, she ambled down the green over-hung forest-road, in the vista of which she had watched her husband disappear the day before; thinking about what she had to buy, and thinking, no doubt, much more, as brides will, of the absent lord and master as brides of those days loved to consider and denominate their husbands.

Coming into the little town, the freshly painted, swinging sign-board of the new tavern, "The Honest Georgian," as usual was the thing to catch her eye; but the instant after what should she see but Black Beetle hitched to the rack under the tree that shadowed the hostelry!

It was not decorous; but she was young, and the day of her first separation from her husband had been so long; and was he not also, against the firmest of resolutions and plans, hastening back to her, the separation being too long for him also?

Slipping her foot from the stirrup, she jumped to the ground, and ran into the tavern. There he stood calling hastily for a drink; and her heart more than her eyes took in his, to her, consecrated signalment the riding-boots, short clothes, blue coat, cocked hat, ruffles. She crept up behind to surprise him, her face, with its delight and smiles, beyond her control. She crept, until she saw his watch-fob dangling against the counter, and then her heart made a call. He turned. He was not her husband! Another man was in her husband's clothes, a man with a villainous countenance! With a scream she gave the alarm. The stranger turned, dropped his drink, bounded to the door and out, leaped to the back of Beetle, gave rein and spur, and the black horse made good his reputation. In a second all was hue-and-cry and pursuit. While men and horses made, for all they were worth, down the road after Beetle, she on Maid Marion galloped for her life in the opposite direction, the direction of the court town whither her husband had journeyed. The mare's hide made acquaintance with the whip that day if never before, for not even the willing Maid Marion could keep pace with the apprehensions on her back.

Balcony Stories

Scouring with her eyes the highway ahead of her, shooting hawk's glances into the forest on each side of her, the wife rode through the distance all, all day, praying that the day might be long enough, might equal the distance. The sun set, and night began to fall; but she and Maid Marion were none the less fresh, except in the heart.

The moon rose straight before them down the road, lighting it and them through the threatened obscurity. And so they came to trampled earth and torn grass, and so she uncovered concealed footsteps, and so, creeping on her hands and knees, she followed traces of blood, through thicket and glade, into the deep forest, to a hastily piled hillock of earth, gravel, and leaves. Burrowing with her hands, she came to it, the naked body of her young husband, cold and stiff, foully murdered.

Maid Marion approached at her call. She wrapped him in her cloak, and a young wife of those times alone would do it put him in the saddle before her: the good mare Maid Marion alone knows the rest. In the early gray dawn, from one highway there rode into the town the baffled pursuers, from the other the grandmother's grandmother, clasping the corpse of her husband with arms as stiff as his own; loving him, so the grandmother used to say, with a love which, if ever love could do so, would have effected a resurrection.

THE OLD LADY'S RESTORATION

THE news came out in the papers that the old lady had been restored to her fortune. She had been deprived of it so long ago that the real manner of her dispossession had become lost, or at least hidden under the many versions that had been invented to replace lapses of memory, or to remedy the unpicturesqueness of the original truth. The face of truth, like the face of many a good woman, is liable to the accident of ugliness, and the desire to embellish one as well as the other need not necessarily proceed from anything more harmful than an overweighted love of the beautiful.

If the old lady had not been restored to her fortune, her *personalia* would have remained in the oblivion which, as one might say, had accumulated upon everything belonging to her. But after that newspaper paragraph, there was such a flowering of memory around her name as would have done credit to a whole cemetery on All Saints. It took three generations to do justice to the old lady, for so long and so slow had been her descent into poverty that a grandmother was needed to remember her setting out upon the road to it.

She set out as most people do, well provided with money, diamonds, pretty clothing, handsome residence, equipage, opera-box, beaux (for she was a widow), and so many, many friends that she could never indulge in a small party she always had to give a grand ball to accommodate them. She made quite an occasion of her first reverse, some litigation decided against her, and said it came from the court's having only one ear, and that preempted by the other party.

She always said whatever she thought, regardless of the consequences, because she averred truth was so much more interesting than falsehood. Nothing annoyed her more in society than to have to listen to the compositions women make as a substitute for the original truth. It was as if, when she went to the theater to hear Shakspeare and Molière, the actors should try to impose upon the audience by reciting lines of their own. Truth was the wit of life and the wit of books. She traveled her road from affluence so leisurely that nothing escaped her eyes or her feelings, and she signaled unhesitatingly every stage in it.

"My dear, do you know there is really such a thing as existence without a carriage and horses?" "I assure you it is perfectly new to me to find that an opera-box is not a necessity. It is a luxury. In theory one can really never tell the distinction between luxuries and necessities." "How absurd! At one time I thought hair was given us only to furnish a profession to hair-dressers; just as we wear artificial flowers to support the flower-makers." "Upon my word, it is not uninteresting. There is always some *haute nouveauté* in economy. The ways of depriving one's self are infinite. There is wine, now." "Not own your residence! As soon not own your tomb as

Balcony Stories

your residence! My mama used to scream that in my ears. According to her, it was not *comme il faut* to board or live in a rented house. How little she knew!" When her friends, learning her increasing difficulties, which they did from the best authority (herself), complimented her, as they were forced to do, upon her still handsome appearance, pretty laces, feathers, jewelry, silks, "Fat," she would answer "fat. I am living off my fat, as bears do in winter. In truth, I remind myself of an animal in more ways than one."

And so every one had something to contribute to the conversation about her bits which, they said, affection and admiration had kept alive in their memory.

Each city has its own roads to certain ends, its ways of Calvary, so to speak. In New Orleans the victim seems ever to walk down Royal street and up Chartres, or *vice versa*. One would infer so, at least, from the display in the shops and windows of those thoroughfares. Old furniture, cut glass, pictures, books, jewelry, lace, china the fleece (sometimes the flesh still sticking to it) left on the brambles by the driven herd. If there should some day be a trump of resurrection for defunct fortunes, those shops would be emptied in the same twinkling of the eye allowed to tombs for their rendition of property. The old lady must have made that promenade many, many times, to judge by the samples of her "fat or fleece" displayed in the windows. She took to hobbling, as if from tired or sore feet.

"It is nothing," in answer to an inquiry. "Made-to-order feet learning to walk in ready-made shoes: that is all. One's feet, after all, are the most unintelligent part of one's body." Tea was her abomination, coffee her adoration; but she explained: "Tea, you know, is so detestable that the very worst is hardly worse than the very best; while coffee is so perfect that the smallest shade of impurity is not to be tolerated. The truly economical, I observe, always drink tea." "At one time I thought if all the luxuries of the world were exposed to me, and but one choice allowed, I should select gloves. Believe me, there is no superfluity in the world so easily dispensed with."

As may be supposed her path led her farther and farther away from her old friends. Even her intimates became scarce; so much so, that these observations, which, of course, could be made only to intimates, became fewer and fewer, unfortunately, for her circumstances were becoming such that the remarks became increasingly valuable. The last thing related of her was apropos of friends.

"My friends! My dear, I cannot tell you just so, on the spur of the moment, but with a little reflection and calculation I could tell you, to a picayune, the rent of every friend in the market. You can lease, rent, or hire them, like horses, carriages, opera-boxes, servants, by year, month, day, or hour; and the tariff is just as fixed.

"Christians! Christians are the most discreet people in the world. If you should ask me what Christianity has most promoted in the world, I should answer without hesitation, discretion. Of course, when I say the world I mean society, and when I say Christianity I mean our interpretation of it. If only duns could be pastors, and pastors duns! But of course you do not know what duns are; they are the guardian angels of the creditor, the pursuing fiends of the debtor."

After that, the old lady made her disappearance under the waves of that sea into the depths of which it is very improbable that a single friend ever attempted to pursue her. And there she remained until the news came that she was restored to fortune.

A week passed, two weeks; no sight or sound of her. It was during this period that her old friends were so occupied resuscitating their old friendships for her when all her antique sayings and doings became current ball-room and dinner-table gossip that she arose from her obscurity like Cinderella from her ashes, to be decked with every gift that fairy minds could suggest. Those who had known her intimately made no effort to conceal their importance. Those who did not know her personally put forward claims of inherited friendship, and those who did not know her traditionally or otherwise the *nouveaux riches* and *parvenus*, who alone feel the moneyed value of such social connections began making their resolutions to capture her as soon as she came in

Balcony Stories

sight of society.

The old residence was to be rebought, and refurnished from France; the *avant scène* at the opera had been engaged; the old cook was to be hired back from the club at a fabulous price; the old balls and the old dinners were to gladden the city so said they who seemed to know. Nothing was to be spared, nothing stinted at her age, with no child or relative, and life running short for pleasure. Diamonds, laces, velvets, champagne, Chateau Yquem "Grand Dieu Seigneur!" the old Creole servants exclaimed, raising their hands at the enumeration of it.

Where the news came from nobody knew, but everything was certified and accepted as facts, although, as between women, the grain of salt should have been used. Impatience waxed, until nearly every day some one would ring the bell of the old residence, to ask when the mistress was going to move in. And such affectionate messages! And people would not, simply could not, be satisfied with the incomprehensible answers. And then it leaked out. The old lady was simply waiting for everything to arrive furniture, toilets, carriage, etc. to make a grand *entrée* into her old sphere; to come riding on a throne, as it were. And still the time passed, and she did not come. Finally two of the clever-heads penetrated the enigma: *mauvaise honte*, shyness so long out of the world, so old; perhaps not sure of her welcome. So they determined to seek her out.

"We will go to her, like children to a grandmother, etc. The others have no delicacy of sentiment, etc. And she will thus learn who really remember, really love her, etc."

Provided with congratulatory bouquets, they set forth. It is very hard to find a dweller on the very sea-bottom of poverty. Perhaps that is why the effort is so seldom made. One has to ask at grocers' shops, groggeries, market-stalls, Chinese restaurants; interview corner cobblers, ragpickers, gutter children. But nothing is impossible to the determined. The two ladies overcame all obstacles, and needled their way along, where under other circumstances they would not have glanced, would have thought it improper to glance.

They were directed through an old, old house, out on an old, old gallery, to a room at the very extreme end.

"Poor thing! Evidently she has not heard the good news yet. We will be the first to communicate it," they whispered, standing before the dilapidated, withered-looking door.

Before knocking, they listened, as it is the very wisdom of discretion to do. There was life inside, a little kind of voice, like some one trying to hum a song with a very cracked old throat.

The ladies opened the door. "Ah, my friend!"

"Ah, my friend"

"Restored!"

"Restored!"

"At last!"

"At last!"

"Just the same!"

"Exactly the same!"

It was which one would get to her first with bouquet and kiss, competition almost crowding friendship.

Balcony Stories

"The good news!"

"The good news!"

"We could not stay!"

"We had to come!"

"It has arrived at last!"

"At last it has arrived!"

The old lady was very much older, but still the same.

"You will again have a chance!"

"Restored to your friends!"

"The world!"

"Your luxuries!"

"Your comforts!"

"Comforts! Luxuries!" At last the old lady had an opportunity to slip in a word. "And friends! You say right."

There was a pause—a pause which held not a small measure of embarrassment. But the two visitors, although they were women of the world, and so dreaded an embarrassment more than they did sin, had prepared themselves even to stand this.

The old lady standing there—she was very much thinner, very much bent, but still the same—appeared to be looking not at them, but at their enumeration.

"Comfort!" She opened a pot bubbling on the fire. "Bouillon! A good five-cent bouillon. Luxury!" She picked up something from a chair, a handful of new cotton chemises. "Luxury!" She turned back her bedspread: new cotton sheets. "Did you ever lie in your bed at night and dream of sheets? Comfort! Luxury! I should say so! And friends! My dear, look!" Opening her door, pointing to an opposite gallery, to the yard, her own gallery; to the washing, ironing, sewing women, the cobbling, chair-making, carpentering men; to the screaming, laughing, crying, quarreling, swarming children. "Friends! All friends—friends for fifteen years. Ah, yes, indeed! We are all glad—elated in fact. As you say I am restored."

The visitors simply reported that they had found the old lady, and that she was imbecile; mind completely gone under stress of poverty and old age. Their opinion was that she should be interdicted.

A DELICATE AFFAIR

"BUT what does this extraordinary display of light mean?" ejaculated my aunt, the moment she entered the parlor from the dining-room. "It looks like the kingdom of heaven in here! Jules! Jules!" she called, "come and put out some of the light!"

Balcony Stories

Jules was at the front door letting in the usual Wednesday-evening visitor, but now he came running in immediately with his own invention in the way of a gas-stick, a piece of broom-handle notched at the end, and began turning one tap after the other, until the room was reduced to complete darkness.

"But what do you mean now, Jules?" screamed the old lady again.

"Pardon, madame," answered Jules, with dignity; "it is an accident. I thought there was one still lighted."

"An accident! An accident! Do you think I hire you to perform accidents for me? You are just through telling me that it was accident made you give me both soup and gumbo for dinner to-day."

"But accidents can always happen, madame," persisted Jules, adhering to his position.

The chandelier, a design of originality in its day, gave light by what purported to be wax candles standing each in a cirlet of pendant crystals. The usual smile of ecstatic admiration spread over Jules's features as he touched the match to the simulated wicks, and lighted into life the rainbows in the prisms underneath. It was a smile that did not heighten the intelligence of his features, revealing as it did the toothless condition of his gums.

"What will madame have for her dinner to-morrow," looking benignantly at his mistress, and still standing under his aureole.

"Do I ever give orders for one dinner, with the other one still on my lips?"

"I only asked madame; there is no harm in asking." He walked away, his long stiff white apron rattling like a petticoat about him. Catching sight of the visitor still standing at the threshold: "Oh, madame, here is Mr. Horace. Shall I let him in?" "Idiot! Every Wednesday you ask me that question, and every Wednesday I answer the same way. Don't you think I could tell you when not to let him in without your asking?"

"Oh, well, madame, one never knows; it is always safe to ask."

The appearance of the gentleman started a fresh subject of excitement.

"Jules! Jules! You have left that front door unlocked again!"

"Excuse me," said Mr. Horace; "Jules did not leave the front door unlocked. It was locked when I rang, and he locked it again most carefully after letting me in. I have been standing outside all the while the gas was being extinguished and relighted."

"Ah, very well, then. And what is the news?" She sank into her arm-chair, pulled her little card-table closer, and began shuffling the cards upon it for her game of solitaire. "I never hear any news, you know. She [nodding toward me] goes out, but she never learns anything. She is as stupid to-night as an empty bottle."

After a few passes her hands, which were slightly tremulous, regained some of their wonted steadiness and brilliancy of movement, and the cards dropped rapidly on the table. Mr. Horace, as he had got into the habit of doing, watched her mechanically, rather absent-mindedly retailing what he imagined would interest her, from his week's observation and hearsay. And madame's little world revolved, complete for her, in time, place, and personality.

It was an old-fashioned square room with long ceiling, and broad, low windows heavily curtained with stiff silk brocade, faded by time into mellowness. The tall white-painted mantel carried its obligation of ornaments well: a gilt clock which under a glass case related some brilliant poetical idyl, and told the hours only in an insignificant

Balcony Stories

aside, according to the delicate politeness of bygone French taste; flanked by duplicate continuations of the same idyl in companion candelabra, also under glass; Sèvres, or imitation Sèvres vases, and a crowd of smaller objects to which age and rarity were slowly contributing an artistic value. An oval mirror behind threw replicas of them into another mirror, receiving in exchange the reflected portrait of madame in her youth, and in the partial nudity in which innocence was limned in madame's youth. There were besides mirrors on the other three walls of the room, all hung with such careful intent for the exercise of their vocation that the apartment, in spots, extended indefinitely; the brilliant chandelier was thereby quadrupled, and the furniture and ornaments multiplied everywhere and most unexpectedly into twins and triplets, producing such sociabilities among them, and forcing such correspondences between inanimate objects with such hospitable insistence, that the effect was full of gaiety and life, although the interchange in reality was the mere repetition of one original, a kind of phonographic echo.

The portrait of monsieur, madame's handsome young husband, hung out of the circle of radiance, in the isolation that, wherever they hang, always seems to surround the portraits of the dead.

Old has the parlors appeared, madame antedated them by the sixteen years she had lived before her marriage, which had been the occasion of their furnishment. She had traveled a considerable distance over the sands of time since the epoch commemorated by the portrait. Indeed, it would require almost documentary evidence to prove that she, who now was arriving at eighty, was the same Atalanta that had started out so buoyantly at sixteen.

Instead of a cap, she wore black lace over her head, pinned with gold brooches. Her white hair curled naturally over a low forehead. Her complexion showed care and powder. Her eyes were still bright, not with the effete intelligence of old age, but with actual potency. She wore a loose black sack flowered in purple, and over that a black lace mantle, fastened with more gold brooches.

She played her game of solitaire rapidly, impatiently, and always won; for she never hesitated to cheat to get out of a tight place, or into a favorable one, cheating with the quickness of a flash, and forgetting it the moment afterward.

Mr. Horace was as old as she, but he looked much younger, although his dress and appearance betrayed no evidence of an effort in that direction. Whenever his friend cheated, he would invariably call her attention to it; and as usual she would, shrug her shoulders, and say, "Bah! lose a game for a card!" and pursue the conversation.

He happened to mention mushrooms fresh mushrooms. She threw down her cards before the words were out of his mouth, and began to call, "Jules! Jules!" Mr. Horace pulled the bell-cord, but madame was too excitable for that means of communication. She ran into the antechamber, and put her head over the banisters, calling, "Jules! Jules!" louder and louder. She might have heard Jules's slippered feet running from the street into the corridor and up-stairs, had she not been so deaf He appeared at the door.

"But where have you been? Here I have been raising the house a half-hour, calling you. You have been in the street. I am sure you have been in the street."

"Madame is very much mistaken," answered Jules, with resentful dignity. He had taken off his white apron of waiter, and was disreputable in all the shabbiness of his attire as cook. "When madame forbids me to go into the street, I do not go into the street. I was in the kitchen; I had fallen asleep. What does madame desire?" smiling benevolently.

"What is this I hear? Fresh mushrooms in the market!"

"Eh, madame?"

"Fresh mushrooms in the market, and you have not brought me any!"

Balcony Stories

"Madame, there are fresh mushrooms everywhere in the market," waving his hand to show their universality.

"Everybody is eating them –"

"Old Pomponnette," Jules continued, "only this morning offered me a plate, piled up high, for ten cents."

"Idiot! Why did you not buy them?"

"If madame had said so; but madame did not say so. Madame said, 'Soup, Jules; carrots, rice,' " counting on his fingers.

"And the gumbo?"

"I have explained that that was an accident. Madame said 'Soup,' " enumerating his menu again; "madame never once said mushrooms."

"But how could I know there were mushrooms in the market? Do I go to market?"

"That is it!" and Jules smiled at the question thus settled.

"If you had told me there were mushrooms in the market –" pursued madame, persisting in treating Jules as a reasonable being.

"Why did not madame ask me? If madame had asked me, surely I would have told madame. Yesterday Cæsar brought them to the door whole bucketful for twenty–five cents. I had to shut the door in his face to get rid of him," triumphantly.

"And you brought me yesterday those detestable peas!"

"Ah," shrugging his shoulders, "madame told me to buy what I saw. I saw peas. I bought them."

"Well, understand now, once for all: whenever you see mushrooms, no matter what I ordered, you buy them. Do you hear?"

"No, madame. Surely I cannot buy mushrooms unless madame orders them. Madame's disposition is too quick."

"But I do order them. Stupid! I do order them. I tell you to buy them every day."

"And if there are none in the market every day?"

"Go away! Get out of my sight! I do not want to see you. Ah, it is unendurable! I must I must get rid of him!" This last was not a threat, as Jules knew only too well. It was merely a habitual exclamation.

During the colloquy Mr. Horace, leaning back in his arm–chair, raised his eyes, and caught the reflected portrait of madame in the mirror before him the reflection so much softer and prettier, so much more ethereal, than the original painting. Indeed, seen in the mirror, that way, the portrait was as refreshing as the most charming memory. He pointed to it when madame, with considerable loss of temper, regained her seat.

"It is as beautiful as the past," he explained most unnaturally, for he and his friend had a horror of looking at the long, long past, which could not fail to remind them of what no one cares to contemplate out of church. Making an effort toward some determination which a subtle observer might have noticed weighing upon him all the

Balcony Stories

evening, he added: "And, apropos of the past –"

"*Hein ?*" interrogated the old lady, impatiently, still under the influence of her irascibility about the mushrooms.

He moved his chair closer, and bent forward, as if his communication were to be confidential.

"Ah, bah! Speak louder!" she cried. "One would suppose you had some secret to tell. What secrets can there be at our age?" She took up her cards and began to play. There could be no one who bothered herself less about the forms of politeness.

"Yes, yes," answered Mr. Horace, throwing himself back into his chair; "what secrets can there be at our age?"

The remark seemed a pregnant one to him; he gave himself up to it. One must evidently be the age of one's thoughts. Mr. Horace's thoughts revealed him the old man he was. The lines in his face deepened into wrinkles; his white mustache could not pretend to conceal his mouth, worsened by the loss of a tooth or two; and the long, thin hand that propped his head was crossed with blue, distended veins. "At the last judgment" it was a favorite quotation with him "the book of our conscience will be read aloud before the whole company."

But the old lady, deep in her game, paid no more heed to his quotation than to him. He made a gesture toward her portrait.

"When that was painted, Josephine –"

Madame threw a glance after the gesture. The time was so long ago, the mythology of Greece hardly more distant! At eighty the golden age of youth must indeed appear an evanescent myth. Madame's ideas seemed to take that direction.

"Ah, at that time we were all nymphs, and you all demigods."

"Demigods and nymphs, yes; but there was one among us who was a god with you all."

The allusion a frequent one with Mr. Horace was to madame's husband, who in his day, it is said, had indeed played the god in the little Arcadia of society. She shrugged her shoulders. The truth is so little of a compliment. The old gentleman sighed in an abstracted way, and madame, although apparently absorbed in her game, lent her ear. It is safe to say that a woman is never too old to hear a sigh wafted in her direction.

"Josephine, do you remember in your memory –"

She pretended not to hear. Remember? Who ever heard of her forgetting? But she was not the woman to say, at a moment's notice, what she remembered or what she forgot.

"A woman's memory! When I think of a woman's memory in fact, I do not like to think of a woman's memory. One can intrude in imagination into many places; but a woman's memory –"

Mr. Horace seemed to lose his thread. It had been said of him in his youth that he wrote poetry and it was said against him. It was evidently such lapses as these that had given rise to the accusation. And as there was no one less impatient under sentiment or poetry than madame, her feet began to agitate themselves as if Jules were perorating some of his culinary inanities before her.

"And a man's memory!" totally misunderstanding him. "It is not there that I either would penetrate, my friend. A man –"

Balcony Stories

When madame began to talk about men she was prompted by imagination just as much as was Mr. Horace when he talked about women. But what a difference in their sentiments! And yet he had received so little, and she so much, from the subjects of their inspiration. But that seems to be the way in life or in Imagination.

"That you should" he paused with the curious shyness of the old before the word "love" "that you two should marry seemed natural, inevitable, at the time." Tradition records exactly the same comment by society at the time on the marriage in question. Society is ever fatalistic in its comments.

"But the natural the inevitable do we not sometimes, I wonder, perform them as Jules does his accidents?"

"Ah, do not talk about that idiot! An idiot born and bred! I won't have him about me! He is a monstrosity! I tell his grandmother that every day when she comes to comb me. What a farce what a ridiculous farce comfortable existence has become with us! Fresh mushrooms in market, and bring me carrots!"

The old gentleman, partly from long knowledge of her habit, or from an equally persistent bend of his own, quietly held on to his idea.

"One cannot tell. It seems so at the time. We like to think it so; it makes it easier. And yet, looking back on our future as we once looked forward to it –"

"Eh! but who wants to look back on it, my friend? Who in the world wants to look back on it?" One could not doubt madame's energy of opinion on that question to hear her voice. "We have done our future, we have performed it, if you will. Our future! It is like the dinners we have eaten; of course we cannot remember the good without becoming exasperated over the bad: but –" shrugging her shoulders "since we cannot beat the cooks, we must submit to fate," forcing a queen that she needed at the critical point of her game.

"At sixteen and twenty–one it is hard to realize that one is arranging one's life to last until sixty, seventy, forever," correcting himself as he thought of his friend, the dead husband. If madame had ever possessed the art of self–control, it was many a long day–since she had exercised it; now she frankly began to show ennui.

"When I look back to that time," Mr. Horace leaned back in his chair and half closed his eyes, perhaps to avoid the expression of her face, "I see nothing but lights and flowers, I hear nothing but music and laughter; and all lights and flowers and music and laughter seem to meet in this room, where we met so often to arrange our inevitabilities." The word appeared to attract him. "Josephine," with a sudden change of voice and manner, "Josephine, how beautiful you were!"

The old lady nodded her head without looking from her cards.

"They used to say," with sad conviction of the truth of his testimony "the men used to say that your beauty was irresistible. None ever withstood you. None ever could."

That, after all, was Mr. Horace's great charm with madame; he was so faithful to the illusions of his youth. As he looked now at her, one could almost feel the irresistibility of which he spoke.

"It was only their excuse, perhaps; we could not tell at the time; we cannot tell even now when we think about it. They said then, talking as men talk over such things, that you were the only one who could remain yourself under the circumstances; you were the only one who could know, who could will, under the circumstances. It was their theory; men can have only theories about such things." His voice dropped, and he seemed to drop too, into some abyss of thought.

Balcony Stories

Madame looked into the mirror, where she could see the face of the one who alone could retain her presence of mind under the circumstances suggested by Mr. Horace. She could also have seen, had she wished it, among the reflected bric-a-brac of the mantel, the corner of the frame that held the picture of her husband, but peradventure, classing it with the past which held so many unavenged bad dinners, she never thought to link it even by a look with her emotions of the present. Indeed, it had been said of her that in past, present, and future there had ever been but the one picture to interest her eyes—the one she was looking at now. This, however, was the remark of the uninitiated, for the true passion of a beautiful woman is never so much for her beauty as for its booty; as the passion of a gamester is for his game, not for his luck.

"How beautiful *she* was!"

It was apparently down in the depths of his abysm that he found the connection between this phrase and his last, and it was evidently to himself he said it. Madame, however, heard and understood too; in fact, traced back to a certain period, her thoughts and Mr. Horace's must have been fed by pretty much the same subjects. But she had she carefully barricaded certain-issues in her memory as almost to obstruct their flow into her life; if she were a cook, one would say that it was her bad dinners which she was trying to keep out of remembrance.

"You there, he there, she there, I there." He pointed to the places on the carpet, under the chandelier; he could have touched them with a walking-stick, and the recollection seemed just as close.

"She was, in truth, what we men called her then; it was her eyes that first suggested it—Myosotis, the little blue flower, the forget-me-not. It suited her better than her own name. We always called her that among ourselves. How beautiful she was!" He leaned his head on his hand and looked where he had seen her last—so long, such an eternity, ago.

It must be explained for the benefit of those who do not live in the little world where an allusion is all that is necessary to put one in full possession of any drama, domestic or social, that Mr. Horace was speaking of the wedding-night of madame, when the bridal party stood as he described under the chandelier; the bride and groom, with each one's best friend. It may be said that it was the last night or time that madame had a best friend of her own sex. Social gossip, with characteristic kindness, had furnished reasons to suit all tastes, why madame had ceased that night to have a best friend of her own sex. If gossip had not done so, society would still be left to its imagination for information, for madame never tolerated the smallest appeal to her for enlightenment. What the general taste seemed most to relish as a version was that madame in her marriage had triumphed, not conquered; and that the night of her wedding she had realized the fact, and, to be frank, had realized it ever since. In short, madame had played then to gain at love, as she played now to gain at solitaire; and hearts were no more than cards to her—and, "Bah! Lose a game for a card!" must have been always her motto. It is hard to explain it delicately enough, for these are the most delicate affairs in life; but the image of Myosotis had passed through monsieur's heart, and Myosotis does mean "forget me not." And madame well knew that to love monsieur once was to love him always, in spite of jealousy, doubt, distrust, nay, unhappiness (for to love him meant all this and more). He was that kind of man, they said, whom women could love even against conscience. Madame never forgave that moment. Her friend, at least, she could put aside out of her intercourse; unfortunately, we cannot put people out of our lives. God alone can do that, and so far he had interfered in the matter only by removing monsieur. It was known to notoriety that since her wedding madame had abandoned, destroyed, all knowledge of her friend. And the friend? She had disappeared as much as is possible for one in her position and with her duties.

"What there is in blue eyes, light hair, and a fragile form to impress one, I cannot tell; but for us men it seems to me it is blue-eyed, light-haired, and fragile-formed women that are the hardest to forget."

"The less easy to forget," corrected madame; but he paid no attention to the remark.

Balcony Stories

"They are the women that attach themselves in one's memory. If necessary to keep from being forgotten, they come back into one's dreams. And as life rolls on, one wonders about them, 'Is she happy? Is she miserable? Goes life well or ill with her?' "

Madame played her cards slowly, one would say, for her, prosaically.

"And there is always a pang when, as one is so wondering, the response comes, that is, the certainty in one's heart responds, 'She is miserable, and life goes ill with her.' Then, if ever, men envy the power of God."

Madame threw over the game she was in, and began a new one.

"Such women should not be unhappy; they are too fragile, too sensitive, too trusting. I could never understand the infliction of misery upon them. I could send death to them, but not not misfortune."

Madame, forgetting again to cheat in time, and losing her game, began impatiently to shuffle her cards for a new deal.

"And yet, do you know, Josephine, those women are the unhappy ones of life. They seem predestined to it, as others" looking at madame's full-chaired portrait "are predestined to triumph and victory. They" unconscious, in his abstraction, of the personal nature of his simile "never know how to handle their cards, and they always play a losing game."

"Ha!" came from madame, startled into an irate ejaculation.

"It is their love always that is sacrificed, their hearts always that are bruised. One might say that God himself favors the black-haired ones!"

As his voice sank lower and lower, the room seemed to become stiller and stiller. A passing vehicle in the street, however, now and then drew a shiver of sound from the pendent prisms of the chandelier.

"She was so slight, so fragile, and always in white, with blue in her hair to match her eyes and God knows what in her heart, all the time. And yet they stand it, they bear it, they do not die, they live along with the strongest, the happiest, the most fortunate of us," bitterly; "and" raising his eyes to his old friend, who thereupon immediately began to fumble her cards "whenever in the street I see a poor, bent, broken woman's figure, I know, without verifying it any more by a glance, that it is the wreck of a fair woman's figure; whenever I hear of a bent, broken existence, I know, without asking any more, that it is the wreck of a fair woman's life."

Poor Mr. Horace spoke with the unreason of a superstitious bigot.

"I have often thought, since, in large assemblies, particularly in weddings, Josephine, of what was going on in the women's hearts there, and I have felt sorry for them; and when I think of God's knowing what is in their hearts, I have felt sorry for the men. And I often think now, Josephine, I think oftener and oftener of it, that if the resurrection trumpet of our childhood should sound some day, no matter when, out there, over the old St. Louis cemetery, and we should all have to rise from our long rest of oblivion, what would be the first thing we should do? And though there were a God and a heaven awaiting us, by that same God, Josephine, I believe that our first thought in awakening would be the last in dying, confession, and that our first rush would be to the feet of one another for forgiveness. For there are some offenses that must outlast the longest oblivion, and a forgiveness that will be more necessary than God's own. Then our hearts will be bared to one another; for if, as you say, there are no secrets at our age, there can still be less cause for them after death."

Balcony Stories

His voice ended in the faintest whisper. The table crashed over, and the cards flew wide-spread on the floor. Before we could recover, madame was in the antechamber, screaming for Jules.

One would have said that, from her face, the old lady had witnessed the resurrection described by Mr. Horace, the rush of the spirits with their burdens of remorse, the one to the feet of the other; and she must have seen herself and her husband, with a unanimity of purpose never apparent in their short married life, rising from their common tomb and hastening to that other tomb at the end of the alley, and falling at the feet of the one to whom in life he had been recreant in love, she in friendship.

Of course Jules answered through the wrong door, rushing in with his gas-stick, and turning off the gas. In a moment we were involved in darkness and dispute.

"But what does he mean? What does the idiot mean? He—" It was impossible for her to find a word to do justice to him and to her exasperation at the same time.

"Pardon, madame; it is not I. It is the cathedral bell; it is ringing nine o'clock.

"But —"

"Madame can hear it herself. Listen!" We could not see it, but we were conscious of the benign, toothless smile spreading over his face as the bell-tones fell in the room.

"But it is not the gas. I —"

"Pardon, madame; but it is the gas. Madame said, 'Jules, put out the gas every night when the bell rings.' Madame told me that only last night. The bell rings: I put out the gas."

"Will you be silent? Will you listen?"

"If madame wishes; just as madame says." But the old lady had turned to Mr. Horace. "Horace, you have seen you know —" and it was a question now of overcoming emotion. "I I I a carriage, my friend, a carriage.

"Madame —" Jules interrupted his smile to interrupt her.

She was walking around the room, picking up a shawl here, a lace there; for she was always prepared against draughts. "Madame —" continued Jules, pursuing her.

"A carriage."

"If madame would only listen, I was going to say—but madame is too quick in her disposition—the carriage has been waiting since a long hour ago. Mr. Horace said to have it there in a half hour."

It was then she saw for the first time that it had all been prepared by Mr. Horace. The rest was easy enough: getting into the carriage, and finding the place of which Mr. Horace had heard, as he said, only that afternoon. In it, on her bed of illness, poverty, and suffering, lay the patient, wasted form of the beautiful fair one whom men had called in her youth Myosotis.

But she did not call her Myosotis.

"*Mon Amour!*" The old pet name, although it had to be fetched across more than half a century of disuse, flashed like lightning from madame's heart into the dim chamber.

Balcony Stories

"*Ma Divine!*" came in counter-flash from the curtained bed.

In the old days women, or at least young girls, could hazard such pet names one upon the other. These think of it! dated from the first communion class, the dating period of so much of friendship.

"My poor Amour!"

"My poor, poor Divine!"

The voices were together, close beside the pillow.

"I I—" began Divine.

"It could not have happened if God had not wished it," interrupted poor Amour, with the resignation that comes, alas! only with the last drop of the bitter cup.

And that was about all. If Mr. Horace had not slipped away, he might have noticed the curious absence of monsieur's name, and of his own name, in the murmuring that followed. It would have given him some more ideas on the subject of woman.

At any rate, the good God must thank him for having one affair the less to arrange when the trumpet sounds out there over the old St. Louis cemetery. And he was none too premature; for the old St. Louis cemetery, as was shortly enough proved, was a near reach for all three of the old friends.

PUPASSE

EVERY day, every day, it was the same overture in Madame Joubert's room in the Institut St. Denis; the strident:

"*Mesdemoiselles; à vos places! Notre Père qui est dans le ciel Qui a fait ce bruit?*"

"It's Pupasse, madame! It's Pupasse!" The answer invariably was unanimous.

"But, Madame Joubert, I assure you, Madame Joubert, I could not help it! They know I could not help it!"

By this time the fresh new fool's cap made from yesterday's "Bee" would have been pinned on her head.

"*Quelle injustice! Quelle injustice!*"

This last apostrophe in a high, whining nasal voice, always procured Pupasse's elevation on the tall three-legged stool in the corner.

It was a theory of the little girls in the primary class that Madame Joubert would be much more lenient to their own little inevitabilities of bad conduct and lessons if Pupasse did not invariably comb her the wrong way every morning after prayers, by dropping something, or sniffing, or sneezing. Therefore, while they distractedly got together books, slates, and copy-books, their infantile eyes found time to dart deadly reproaches toward the corner of penitence, and their little lips, still shaped from their first nourishment, pouted anything but sympathy for the occupant of it.

Indeed, it would have been a most startling unreality to have ever entered Madame Joubert's room and not seen Pupasse in that corner, on that stool, her tall figure shooting up like a post, until her tall, pointed *bonnet d'âne*

Balcony Stories

came within an inch or two of the ceiling. It was her hoop-skirt that best testified to her height. It was the period of those funnel-shaped hoop-skirts that spread out with such nice mathematical proportions, from the waist down, that it seemed they must have emanated from the brains of astronomers, like the orbits, and diameters, and other things belonging to the heavenly bodies. Pupassee could not have come within three feet of the wall with her hoop-skirt distended. To have forced matters was not to be thought of an instant. So even in her greatest grief and indignation, she had to pause before the three-legged black stool, and gather up steel after steel of her circumference in her hands behind, until her calico skirt careened and flattened; and so she could manage to accommodate herself to the limited space of her punishment, the circles drooping far over her feet as she stood there, looking like the costumed stick of a baby's rattle.

Her thinness continued into her face, which, unfortunately, had nothing in the way of toilet to assist it. Two little black eyes fixed in the sides of a mere fence of a nose, and a mouth with the shape and expression of all mouths made to go over sharp-pointed teeth planted very far apart; the smallest amount possible of fine, dry, black hair a perfect rat-tail when it was plaited in one, as almost all wore their hair. But sometimes Pupassee took it into her head to plait it in two braids, as none but the thick-haired ventured to wear it. As the little girls said, it was a petition to Heaven for "*eau Quinquina* ." When Marcelite, the hair-dresser, came at her regular periods to visit the hair of the boarders, she would make an effort with Pupassee, plaiting her hundred hairs in a ten-strand braid. The effect was a half yard of black worsted galloon; more, or better. Had Pupassee possessed as many heads as the hydra, she could have "coiffe'd" them all with fools' caps during one morning's recitations. She entirely monopolized the "Daily Bee." Madame Joubert was forced to borrow from "madame" the stale weekly "*Courrier des Etats-Unis*" for the rest of the room. From grammar, through sacred history, arithmetic, geography, mythology, down to dictation, Pupassee could pile up an accumulation of penitences that would have tasked the limits of the current day had not recreation been wisely set as a term which disbarred, by proscription, previous offenses. But even after recreation, with that day's lessons safely out, punished and expiated, Pupassee's doom seemed scarcely lightened; there was still a whole criminal code of conduct to infract. The only difference was that instead of books, slates, or copy-books, leathern medals, bearing various legends and mottos, were hung around her neck a travestied decoration worse than the books for humiliation.

The "*abécédaires*," their torment for the day over, thankful for any distraction from the next day's lessons, and eager for any relief from the intolerable ennui of goodness, were thankful enough now for Pupassee. They naturally watched her in preference to Madame Joubert, holding their books and slates quite cunningly to hide their faces. Pupassee had not only the genius, but that which sometimes fails genius, the means for grimacing: little eyes, long nose, foolish mouth, and pointed tongue. And she was so amusing, when Madame Joubert's head was turned, that the little girls, being young and innocent, would forget themselves and all burst out laughing. It sounded like a flight of singing birds through the hot, close, stupid little room; but not so to Madame Joubert.

"Young ladies! But what does this mean?"

And, terror-stricken, the innocents would call out with one voice, "It's Pupassee, madame! It's Pupassee who made us laugh!" There was nothing but fools' caps to be gained by prevaricating, and there was frequently nothing less gained by confession. And oh, the wails and the sobs as the innocents would be stood up, one by one, in their places! Even the pigtailed at the backs of their little heads were convulsed with grief. Oh, how they hated Pupassee then! When their *bonnes* came for them at three o'clock, washing their tear-stained faces at the cistern before daring to take them through the streets, how passionately they would cry out, the tears breaking afresh into the wet handkerchiefs:

"It's that Pupassee! It's that *vilaine* Pupassee!"

To Pupassee herself would be meted out that "*peine forte et dure*," that acme of humiliation and disgrace, so intensely horrible that many a little girl in that room solemnly averred and believed she would kill herself before submitting to it. Pupassee's voluminous calico skirt would be gathered up by the hem and tied up over her head!

Balcony Stories

Oh, the horrible monstrosity on the stool in the corner then! There were no eyes in that room that had any desire to look upon it. And the cries and the "*Quelle injustice!*" that fell on the ears then from the hidden feelings had all the weirdness of the unseen, but heard. And all the other girls in the room, in fear and trembling, would begin to move their lips in a perfect whirlwind of study, or write violently on their slates, or begin at that very instant to rule off their copy-books for the next day's verb.

Pupasse her name was Marie Pupasse, but no one thought of calling her anything but Pupasse, with emphasis on the first syllable and sibilance on the last had no parents, only a grandmother, to describe whom, all that is necessary to say is that she was as short as Pupasse was tall, and that her face resembled nothing so much as a little yellow apple shriveling from decay. The old lady came but once a week, to fetch Pupasse fresh clothes, and a great brown paper bag of nice things to eat. There was no boarder in the school who received handsomer bags of cake and fruit than Pupasse. And although, not two hours before, a girl might have been foremost in the shrill cry, "It is Pupasse who made the noise! It is Pupasse who made me laugh!" there was nothing in that paper bag reserved even from such a one. When the girl herself with native delicacy would, under the circumstances, judge it discreet to refuse, Pupasse would plead, "Oh, but take it to give me pleasure!" And if still the refusal continued, Pupasse would take her bag and go into the summer-house in the corner of the garden, and cry until the unforgiving one would relent. But the first offering of the bag was invariably to the stern dispenser of fools' caps and the unnamed humiliation of the reversed skirt: Madame Joubert.

Pupasse was in the fifth class. The sixth the *abécédaires* was the lowest in the school. Green was the color of the fifth; white innocence of the *abécédaires*. Exhibition after exhibition, the same green sash and green ribbons appeared on Pupasse's white muslin, the white muslin getting longer and longer every year, trying to keep up with her phenomenal growth; and always, from all over the room, buzzed the audience's suppressed merriment at Pupasse's appearance in the ranks of the little one of nine and ten. It was that very merriment that brought about the greatest change in the Institut St. Denis. The sitting order of the classes was reversed. The first class the graduates went up to the top step of the *estrade*; and the little ones put on the lowest, behind the pianos. The graduates grumbled that it was not *comme il faut* to have young ladies of their position stepping like camels up and down those great steps; and the little girls said it was a shame to hide them behind the pianos after their mamas had taken so much pains to make them look pretty. But madame said going also to natural history for her comparison that one must be a rhinoceros to continue the former routine.

Religion cannot be kept waiting forever on the intelligence. It was always in the fourth class that the first communion was made; that is, when the girls stayed one year in each class. But Pupasse had spent three years in the sixth class, and had already been four in the fifth, and Madame Joubert felt that longer delay would be disrespectful to the good Lord. It was true that Pupasse could not yet distinguish the ten commandments from the seven capital sins, and still would answer that Jeanne d'Arc was the foundress of the "Little Sisters of the Poor."

But, as Madame Joubert always said in the little address she made to the catechism class every year before handing it over to Father Dolomier, God judged from the heart, and not from the mind.

Father Dolomier from his face he would have been an able contestant of *bonnets d'âne* with Pupasse, if subjected to Madame Joubert's discipline evidently had the same method of judging as God, although the catechism class said they could dance a waltz on the end of his long nose without his perceiving it.

There is always a little air of mystery about the first communion: not that there is any in reality, but the little ones assume it to render themselves important. The going to early mass, the holding their dog-eared catechisms as if they were relics, the instruction from the priest, even if he were only old Father Dolomier it all put such a little air of devotion into their faces that it imposed (as it did every year) upon their companions, which was a vastly gratifying effect. No matter how young and innocent she may be, a woman's devotion always seems to have two aims God and her own sex.

Balcony Stories

The week of retreat came. Oh, the week of retreat! That was the *bonne bouche* of it all, for themselves and for the others. It was the same every year. By the time the week of retreat arrived, interest and mystery had been frothed to the point of indiscretion; so that the little girls would stand on tiptoe to peep through the shutters at the postulants inside, and even the larger girls, to whom first communion was a thing of an infantile past, would condescend to listen to their reports with ill-feigned indifference.

As the day of the first communion neared, the day of the general confession naturally neared too, leading it. And then the little girls, peeping through the shutters, and holding their breath to see better, saw what they beheld every year; but it was always new and awesome mysterious scribbling in corners with lead-pencils on scraps of paper; consultations; rewritings; copyings; the list of their sins, of all the sins of their lives.

"*Ma chère!*" pigtails and sunbonnets hiving outside would shudder. "Oh, *Mon Dieu!* To have to confess all but *all* your sins! As for me, it would kill me, sure!"

And the frightful recoils of their consciences would make all instantly blanch and cross themselves.

"And look at Pupasse's sins! Oh, but they are long! *Ma chère*, but look! But look, I ask you, at them!"

The longest record was of course the most complimentary and honorable to the possessor, as each girl naturally worked not only for absolution but for fame.

Between catechisms and instructions Madame Joubert would have "*La Vie des Saints*" read aloud, to stimulate their piety and to engage their thoughts; for the thoughts of first communicants are worse than flies for buzzing around the forbidden. The lecture must have been a great quickener of conscience; for they would dare punishment and cheat Madame Joubert, under her own eyes, in order surreptitiously to add a new sin to their list. Of course the one hour's recreation could not afford time enough for observation now, and the little girls were driven to all sorts of excuses to get out of the classroom for one moment's peep through the shutters; at which whole swarms of them would sometimes be caught and sent into punishment.

Only two days more. Madame Joubert put them through the rehearsal, a most important part of the preparation, almost as important as catechism how to enter the church, how to hold the candle, how to advance, how to kneel, retire everything, in fact.

Only one day more, the quietest, most devotional day of all. Pupasse lost her sins!

Of course every year the same accident happened to some one. But it was a new accident to Pupasse. And such a long list!

The commotion inside that retreat! Pupasse's nasal whine, carrying her lament without any mystery to the outside garden. Such searching of pockets, rummaging of corners, microscopic examination of the floor! Such crimination and recrimination, protestation, asseveration, assurances, backed by divine and saintly invocations! Pupasse accused companion after companion of filching her sins, which each after each would violently deny, producing each her own list from her own pocket, proof to conviction of innocence, and, we may say, of guilt also.

Pupasse declared they had filched it to copy, because her list was the longest and most complete. She could not go to confession without her sins; she could not go to communion without confession. The tears rolled down her long thin nose unchecked, for she never could remember to use her handkerchief until reminded by Madame Joubert.

She had committed it to memory, as all the others had done theirs; but how was she to know without the list if she had not forgotten something? And to forget one thing in a general confession they knew was a mortal sin.

Balcony Stories

"I shall tell Madame Joubert! I shall tell Madame Joubert!" "*Ma chère!*" whispered the little ones outside. "Oh, but look at them! *Elles font les quatre cents coups!*" which is equivalent to "cutting up like the mischief."

And with reason. As if such an influx of the world upon them at this moment were not sufficient of itself to damn them. But to tell Madame Joubert! With all their dresses made and ready, wreaths, veils, candles, prayer-books, picture-cards, mother-of-pearl prayer-beads, and festival breakfasts with admiring family and friends prepared. Tell Madame Joubert! She would simply cancel it all. In a body they chorused:

"But, Pupasse!" "*Chère Pupasse!*"

"*Voyons, Pupasse!*"

"I assure you, Pupasse!"

"On the cross, Pupasse!"

"Ah, Pupasse!"

"We implore you, Pupasse!"

The only response tears, and "I shall tell Madame Joubert."

Consultations, caucuses, individual appeals, general outbursts. Pupasse stood in the corner. Curiously, she always sought refuge in the very sanctum of punishment, her face hidden in her bended arms, her hoops standing out behind, vouchsafing nothing but tears, and the promise to tell Madame Joubert. And three o'clock approaching! And Madame Joubert imminent! But Pupasse really could not go to confession without her sins. They all recognized that; they were reasonable, as they assured her.

A crisis quickens the wits. They heard the cathedral clock strike the quarter to three. They whispered, suggested, argued bunched in the farthest corner from Pupasse.

"Console yourself, Pupasse! We will help you, Pupasse! Say no more about it! We will help you!" A delegate was sent to say that. She was only four feet and a half high, and had to stand on tiptoe to pluck the six-foot Pupasse's dress to gain her attention.

And they did help her generously. A new sheet of fool's-cap was procured, and torn in two, lengthwise, and pinned in a long strip. One by one, each little girl took it, and, retiring as far as possible, would put her hand into her pocket, and, extracting her list, would copy it in full on the new paper. Then she would fold it down, and give it to the next one, until all had written.

"Here, Pupasse; here are all our sins. We give them to you; you can have them."

Pupasse was radiant; she was more than delighted, and the more she read the better pleased she was. Such a handsome long list, and so many sins she had never thought of never dreamed of! She set herself with zeal to commit them to memory. But a hand on the door Madame Joubert! You never could have told that those little girls had not been sitting during the whole time, with their hands clasped and eyes cast up to the ceiling, or moving their lips as the prayer-beads glided through their fingers. Their versatility was really marvelous.

Poor Pupasse! God solved the dilemma of her education, and madame's increasing sensitiveness about her appearance in the fifth class, by the death of the old grandmother. She went home to the funeral, and never returned or at least she returned, but only for madame. There was a little scene in the parlor: Pupasse, all

Balcony Stories

dressed in black, with her bag of primary books in her hand, ready and eager to get back to her classes and fools' caps; madame, hesitating between her interests and her fear of ridicule; Madame Joubert, between her loyalty to school and her conscience. Pupasse the only one free and untrammelled, simple and direct.

That little school parlor had been the stage for so many scenes! Madame Joubert detested acting the comedy, as she called it. There was nothing she punished with more pleasure up in her room. And yet –

"Pupasse, *ma fille*, give me your grammar."

The old battered, primitive book was gotten out of the bag, the string still tied between the leaves for convenience in hanging around the neck.

"Your last punishment: the rule for irregular verbs. Commence!"

"I know it, Madame Joubert; I know it perfectly, I assure you."

"Commence!"

"Irregular verbs but I assure you I know it I know it by heart –"

"Commence, *ma fille*!"

"Irregular verbs irregular verbs I know it, Madame Joubert one moment –" and she shook her right hand, as girls do to get inspiration, they say. "Irregular verbs give me one word, Madame Joubert; only one word!"

"That –"

"Irregular verbs, that irregular verbs, that –"

"See here, Pupasse; you do not know that lesson any more than a cat does" Madame Joubert's favorite comparison.

"Yes, I do, Madame Joubert! Yes, I do!"

"Silence!"

"But, Madame Joubert –"

"Will you be silent!"

"Yes, Madame Joubert; only –"

"Pupasse, one more word and –" Madame Joubert was forgetting her comedy "Listen, Pupasse, and obey! You go home and learn that lesson. When you know it, you can reënter your class. That is the punishment I have thought of to correct your 'want of attention.' "

That was the way Madame Joubert put it "want of attention."

Pupasse looked at her at madame, a silent but potent spectator. To be sent from home because she did not know the rule of the irregular verbs! To be sent from home, family, friends! for that was the way Pupasse put it. She had been in that school it may only be whispered fifteen years. Madame Joubert knew it; so did madame,

Balcony Stories

although they accounted for only four or five years in each class. That school was her home; Madame Joubert God help her! her mother; madame, her divinity; fools' caps and turned-up skirts, her life. The old grandmother she it was who had done everything for her (a *ci-devant* rag-picker, they say); she it was who was nothing to her.

Madame must have felt something of it besides the loss of the handsome salary for years from the little old withered woman. But conventionality is inexorable; and the St. Denis's great recommendation was its conventionality. Madame Joubert must have felt something of it, she must have felt something of it, for why should she volunteer? Certainly madame could not have imposed *that* upon *her*. It must have been an inspiration of the moment, or a movement, a *tressaillement*, of the heart.

"Listen, Pupasse, my child. Go home, study your lesson well. I shall come every evening myself and hear it; and as soon as you know it, I shall fetch you back myself. You know I always keep my word."

Keep her word! That she did. Could the inanimate past testify, what a fluttering of fools' caps in that parlor—"Daily Bees," and "Weekly Couriers," by the year—full!

What could Pupasse say or do? It settled the question, as Madame Joubert assured madame, when the tall, thin black figure with the bag of books disappeared through the gate.

Madame Joubert was never known to break her word; that is all one knows about her part of the bargain.

One day, not three years ago, ringing a bell to inquire for a servant, a familiar murmuring fell upon the ear, and an old *abécédaire's* eyes could not resist the temptation to look through the shutters. There sat Pupasse; there was her old grammar; there were both fingers stopping her ears—as all studious girls do, or used to do; and there sounded the old words composing the rule for irregular verbs.

And you all remember how long it is since we wore funnel-shaped hoop-skirts!