











I COULD MERELY CLASP THE HANDS SHE GAVE SO UNRESERVEDLY INTO MY KEEPING, GAZE INTO THE DEPTHS OF HER DARK EYES, AND MURMUR A FEW BROKEN WORDS OF CONFIDENCE AND FAREWELL. [Page 71]

[Frontispiece: I could merely clasp the hands she gave so unreservedly into my keeping, gaze into the depths of her dark eyes, and murmur a few broken words of confidence and farewell.]

# CONTENTS

FOREWORD

CHAPTER

- I THE REQUEST FOR AID
- II A PERILOUS VENTURE
- III A VISIT TO THE FLAG-SHIP
- IV WE HOLD A COUNCIL OF WAR
- V ON THE DECK OF THE "SANTA MARIA"
- VI THE ROLE OF PÈRE CASSATI
- VII THE CHEVALIER DE NOYAN
- VIII FAVORED OF THE GODS
- IX THE BIRTH OF THE DEATH-DAWN
- X A COVERT IN THE CANE
- XI A NIGHT IN THE BOAT
- XII WE LAND AN ODD FISH
- XIII WE GAIN A NEW RECRUIT
- XIV THE MOUTH OF THE ARKANSAS
- XV A PASSAGE AT ARMS
- XVI WE CHANGE OUR COURSE
- XVII WE MEET WITH AN ACCIDENT



- XVIII A HARD DAY'S MARCH
- XIX DEMON, OR WHAT?
- XX BACKS TO THE WALL
- XXI THE STRONGHOLD OF THE NATCHEZ
- XXII PRISONERS IN THE TEMPLE
- XXIII THE VOTE OF DEATH
- XXIV THE DAUGHTER OF THE SUN
- XXV A VISITANT FROM THE SUN
- XXVI THE CHRONICLES OF THE NATCHEZ
- XXVII A VENTURE IN THE DARK
- XXVIII SPEECH WITH NALADI
- XXIX IN AND OUT THE SHADOW
- XXX UNDERGROUND
- XXXI WE MOUNT THE CLIFF
- XXXII CHIEF PRIEST OF THE SUN
- XXXIII PERE ANDRÉ LAFOSSIER
- XXXIV THE TALE OF THE PRIEST
- XXXV NIGHT AND THE SAVAGES
- XXXVI THE INTERFERENCE OF THE JESUIT
- XXXVII THE DEAD BURY THEIR DEAD



## ILLUSTRATIONS

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Had I ventured upon a smile at his predicament he would have popped instantly forth again.

"I am the Daughter of the Sun. These are my children, given unto me by the great Sun-god.... None of white blood may set foot in this valley and live."

The woman stood gazing intently down, her red robe sweeping to her feet; below the flaring torches in the hands of her barbaric followers cast their light full upon her.



## FOREWORD

The manuscript of this tale has been in my possession several years. It reached me through natural lines of inheritance, but remained nearly forgotten, until a chance reading revealed a certain historic basis; then, making note of correspondences in minor details, I realized that what I had cast aside as mere fiction might possess a substantial foundation of fact. Impelled by this conviction, I now submit the narrative to public inspection, that others, better fitted than I, may judge as to the worth of this Geoffrey Benteen.

According to the earlier records of Louisiana Province, Geoffrey Benteen was, during his later years, a resident of La Petite Rocher, a man of note and character among his fellows. There he died in old age, leaving no indication of the extent of his knowledge, other than what is to be found in the yellowed pages of his manuscript; and these afford no evidence that this "Gentleman Adventurer" possessed any information derived from books regarding those relics of a prehistoric people, which are widely scattered throughout the Middle and Southern States of the Union and constitute the grounds on which our century has applied to the race the term "Mound Builders."

Apparently in all simplicity and faithfulness he recorded merely what he saw and heard. Later research, antedating his death, has seemingly proven that in the extinct Natchez tribe was to be found the last remnant of that mysterious and unfortunate race.

Who were the Mound Builders? No living man may answer. Their history—strange, weird, mysterious—stretches backward into the dim twilight before tradition, its sole remaining record graven upon the surface of the earth, vaguely guessed at by those who study graves; their pathetic ending has long been pictured in our country's story as occurring amid the shadows of that dreadful midnight upon the banks of the Ocatahoola, when vengeful Frenchmen put them to the sword. Whence they came, whether from fabled Atlantis, or the extinct Aztec empire of the South, no living tongue can tell; whither fled their remnant,—if remnant there was left to flee,—and what proved its ultimate fate, no previous pen has written. Out from the darkness of the unknown, scarcely more than spectral figures, they came, wrote their single line upon the

earth's surface, and vanished, kings and people alike sinking into speechless oblivion.

That Geoffrey Benteen witnessed the tragic ending of this strange people I no longer question; for I have compared his narrative with all we moderns have learned regarding them, as recorded in the pages of Parkman, Charlevoix, Du Pratz, and Duponceau, discovering nothing to awaken the slightest suspicion that he dealt with other than what he saw. More, I have traced with exactitude the route these fugitives followed in their flight northward, and, although the features of the country are greatly altered by settlements of nearly two hundred years, one may easily discern evidence of this man's honesty. For me it is enough to feel that I have stood beside the massive tomb of this mysterious people—a people once opulent and powerful, the warriors of forgotten battle-fields, the builders of lost civilizations, the masters of that imperial domain stretching from the Red River of the North to the sea-coast of the Carolinas; a people swept backward as by the wrath of the Infinite, scourged by famine, decimated by pestilence, warred against by flame, stricken by storm, torn asunder by vengeful enemies, until a weakened remnant, harassed by the French sword, fled northward in the night to fulfil the fate ordained of God, and finally perished amid the gloomy shadows of the grim Ozarks, bequeathing to the curious future neither a language nor a name.

But this I leave with Geoffrey Benteen, and turn to my own simpler task, a review of the peculiar circumstances leading up to this narrative, involving a brief chapter from the records of our Southwest.

The early history of the Province of Louisiana is so complicated by rapid changes in government as to confuse the student, rendering it extremely difficult to comprehend correctly the varied and conflicting interests—aristocratic, official, and commercial—actuating her pioneer colonists. The written records, so far as translated and published, afford only a faint reflection of the varied characteristics of her peculiar, changing population. The blue-eyed Arcadian of her western plateaus, yet dreaming upon his more northern freedom; the royalist planter of the Mississippi bottoms, proud of those broad acres granted him by letters-patent of the

King; the gay, volatile, passionate Creole of the town, one day a thoughtless lover of pleasure, the next a truculent wielder of the sword; the daring smugglers of Barataria, already rapidly drifting into open defiance of all legal restraint; together with the quiet market gardeners of the *Côte-des-Allemands*, formed a heterogeneous population impossible to please and extremely difficult to control.

Varied as were these types, yet there were others, easy to name, but far more difficult to classify in their political relationships—such as priests of the Capuchin order; scattered representatives of Britain; sailors from ships ever swinging to the current beside the levee; sinewy backwoodsmen from the wilds of the Blue Ridge; naked savages from Indian villages north and east; raftsmen from the distant waters of the Ohio and Illinois, scarcely less barbarian than those with redder skin; Spaniards from the Gulf islands, together with a negro population, part slave, part free, nearly equal in point of numbers to all the rest.

And over all who was the master?

It would have been difficult at times to tell, so swiftly did change follow change—Crozat, Law, Louis the Fifteenth, Charles the Third, each had his turn; flag succeeded flag upon the high staff which, ever since the days of Bienville, had ornamented the Place d'Armes, while great merchants of Europe played the occupants of thrones for the bauble of this far western province, whose heart, nevertheless, remained forever faithful to sunny France.

As late as 1768 New Orleans contained scarcely more than three thousand two hundred persons, a third of these being black slaves. Sixty-three years previously Bienville had founded Louisiana Province, making choice of the city site, but in 1763 it suited the schemes of him, who ruled the destinies of the mother country, to convey the yet struggling colony into the control of the King of Spain. It was fully two years later before word of this unwelcome transfer reached the distant province, while as much more time elapsed ere Don Antonio de Ulloa, the newly appointed Spanish governor, landed at New Orleans, and, under guard of but two companies of infantry, took unto himself the reins. Unrest was already in the air,—petitions and delegations laden with vehement protests crossed the Atlantic. Both were alike returned, disregarded by the

French King. Where it is probable that a single word of wise counsel, even of kindly explanation, might have calmed the rising tumult, silence and contempt merely served to aggravate it.

It has been written by conscientious historians that commercial interests, not loyalty to French traditions, were the real cause of this struggle of 1768. Be that as it may, its leaders were found in the Superior Council, a body of governors older even than New Orleans, of which the patriotic Lafrénière was then the presiding officer, and whose membership contained such representative citizens as Foucault, Jean and Joseph Milhet, Caresse, Petit, Poupet, a prominent lawyer. Marquis, a Swiss captain, with Bathasar de Masan, Hardy de Boisblanc, and Joseph Villere, planters of the upper Mississippi, as well as two nephews of the great Bienville, Charles de Noyan, a young ex-captain of cavalry, lately married to the only daughter of Lafrénière, and his younger brother, a lieutenant in the navy.

On the twenty-seventh of October, 1768, every Frenchman in Louisiana Province was marching toward New Orleans. That same night the guns at the Tehoupitoulas Gate—the upper river corner—were spiked; while yet farther away, along a narrow road bordering the great stream, armed with fowling pieces, muskets, even axes, the Arcadians, and the aroused inhabitants of the German coast, came sweeping down to unite with the impatient Creoles of the town. In the dull gray of early morning they pushed past the spiked and useless cannon, and, with De Noyan and Villere at their head, forced the other gates and noisily paraded the streets under the *fleur de lis*. The people rose *en masse* to greet them, until, utterly unable to resist the rising tide of popular enthusiasm, Ulloa retired on board the Spanish frigate, which slipped her cables, and came to anchor far out in the stream. Two days later, hurried no doubt by demands of the council, the governor set sail for the West Indies, leaving the fair province under control of what was little better than a headless mob.

For now, having achieved success, the strange listlessness of the Southern nature reasserted itself, and from that moment no apparent effort was made to strengthen their position—no government was established, no basis of credit effected, no diplomatic relations

were assumed. They had battled for results like men, yet were content to play with them like children. For more than seven months they thus enjoyed a false security, as delightful as their sunny summer-time. Then suddenly, as breaks an ocean storm, that slumbering community was rudely aroused from its siestas and day-dreaming by the report that Spaniards were at the mouth of the river in overwhelming force.

Confusion reigned on every hand; scarcely a hundred men rallied to defend the town; yet no one fled. The Spanish fleet consisted of twenty-four vessels. For more than three weeks they felt their uncertain way around the bends of the Mississippi, and on the eighteenth of August, 1769, furlled their canvas before the silent batteries. Firing a single gun from the deck of his flag-ship, the frigate "Santa Maria," Don Alexandro O'Reilly, accompanied by twenty-six hundred chosen Spanish troops and fifty pieces of artillery, landed, amid all the pomp of Continental war, taking formal possession of the province. That night his soldiers patrolled the streets, and his cannon swept the river front, while not a Frenchman ventured to stray beyond the doorway of his home.

Within the narrow space of two days the iron hand of Spain's new Captain-General had closed upon the leaders of the bloodless insurrection, his judgments falling with such severity as to earn for him in the annals of Louisiana the title of "Cruel O'Reilly." Among those of the revolutionists before mentioned, Petit, Masan, Doucet, Boisblanc, Jean Milhet, and Poupet were consigned to Moro Castle, Havana, where they remained a year, and then were stripped of their property and forbidden ever again to enter the province of Louisiana. The younger Bienville escaped with the loss of his fortune. Foucault met his fate resisting the guard on board the "Santa Maria," where he was held prisoner; while Lafrénière, De Noyan, Caresse, Marquis, and Joseph Milhet were condemned to be publicly hanged. The earnest supplication, both of colonists and Spanish officials, shocked by the unjust severity of this sentence, sufficed to save them from the disgrace of the gallows, but fated them to fall before the volley of a file of grenadiers.

With the firing of the sunset gun the evening of their last earthly day, the post-captain visited the condemned men, and spoke with

each in turn; they numbered five. All through the dark hours of that night heavily armed sentries stood in the narrow passageway before nail-studded doors, while each hour, as the ship's bell struck, the Commandant of Marine peered within each lighted apartment where rested five plainly outlined forms. With the first gray of the dawn the unfortunate prisoners were mustered upon deck, but they numbered only four. And four only, white faced, yet firm of step and clear of eye, stood an hour later with backs to the rising sun and hearts to the levelled rifles, and when the single volley had echoed and reechoed across the wide river, the white smoke slowly lifting and blown away above the trees, only four lifeless bodies lay closely pressed against the red-brick wall—the fifth condemned man was not there: *Chevalier Charles de Noyan had escaped his fate*. Like a spirit had he vanished during those mysterious hours between midnight and dawn, leaving no trace of his going save a newly severed rope which hung dangling from a foreyard.

But had he escaped?

That morning—as we learn from private letters sent home by officers of the Spanish fleet—there came to the puzzled O'Reilly a report that in the dense blackness of that starless night a single boat sought to slip silently past beneath the deep shadows of the upper battery. Unhalting in response to a hail of the sentry, a volley was hastily fired toward its uncertain outline, and, in the flare of the guns, the officer of the guard noted the black figure of a man leap high into air, and disappear beneath the dark surface of the river. So it was the Captain-General wrote also the name "Charles de Noyan" with those of the other four, endorsing it with the same terse military record, "Shot at sunrise."

Nor since that fateful hour has the world known otherwise, for, although strange rumors floated down the great river to be whispered about from lip to lip, and New Orleans wondered many a long month whither had vanished the fair young wife, the daughter of Lafrénière, yet no authentic message found its way out of the vast northern wilderness. For nearly one hundred and fifty years history has accepted without question the testimony of the Spanish records. The man who alone could tell the strange story was in old age impelled to do so by a feeling of sacred duty to the dead; and his pa-

pers, disarranged, ill-written, already yellowed by years, have fallen to my keeping. I submit them without comment or change, save only as to the subdivision into chapters, with an occasional substitution for some old-time phrase of its more modern equivalent. He who calls himself "Geoffrey Benteen, Gentleman Adventurer," shall tell his own tale.

R. P.

