

Fragment of a Voyage to Louisiana

Elisée Reclus

1855

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Putting Freedom on the Map: The Life and Work of Elisée Reclus *by John Clark*

Elisée Reclus was the foremost geographer of his epoch and a major figure in the history of anarchist political theory. He was born into a Protestant family on March 15, 1830, in Sainte-Foy-la-Grande, a small town on the Dordogne River in southwestern France. His father, Jacques Reclus, was, in effect, a Protestant among Protestants, leaving the French Reformed Church to become the pastor of a “Free Church” in Orthez, a town near Sainte-Foy. Elisée’s independence of thought and his quest for a just community were no doubt influenced by his heritage of religious dissent. Indeed, his anarchism can be seen as the ultimate Protestant revolt against the dominant religions of the Modern Age: capitalism and statism.

It is unclear when he first began to define himself explicitly as an anarchist, but as early as 1851 his views were clear enough for him to describe the “destiny” of humanity as “to reach that state of ideal perfection in which nations will no longer need to be under the tutelage of a government or of any other nation.” He says of this “ideal state” that “it is the absence of government, it is anarchy, the highest expression of order.”¹ It was at about this time that the twenty-one year old Elisée and his brother Elie, enraged by Louis Napoleon’s coup d’état, participated in an apparent plan to seize the mairie of Orthez. Although the small group of would-be insurrectionists were no great threat to the Empire (indeed, they merely marched to the mairie and then abandoned their plan), the authorities seemed to take the matter seriously, and the Reclus brothers found it necessary to leave France for the greater tolerance then prevailing in England. For Elisée, this flight began over five years of foreign travel, and profoundly affected his future vocation.

By early 1853, the young Reclus had crossed the Atlantic and was living in Louisiana. His “Fragment d’un voyage à la Nouvelle Orléans” recounts his passage through the Antilles, his trip up the Mississippi delta, and his striking impressions of antebellum New Orleans. It also chronicles an important stage in the development of his social and political ideas. For most of the two and on-half years that he spent in Louisiana, Reclus was a tutor for the children of the Fortier family at Félicité plantation, fifty miles upstream from New Orleans, on the West Bank of the Mississippi. One of the strongest impressions that he gained from his experience of the much-romanticized plantation society of the Old South was of the cruel inhumanity of slavery.² His repulsion by the slave system was largely responsible for his decision to leave Louisiana. He

¹ “Développement de la Liberté dans le Monde” in Paul Reclus, ed. *Les Frères Elie et Elisée Reclus* (Paris: Les Amis d’Elisée Reclus. 1964), p. 53.

² The editors, disguised as tourists from another bioregion, recently took a tour of a plantation near Felicité (which still stands, but is a private home not open to visitors). The official tour focuses entirely on the grandeur of the Old South, and gives no hint that a system of organized brutality ever existed there. The tour guide, a young woman dressed in antebellum garb, noted that “the slave who carried the baked pies from the kitchen outbuilding to the main house had to whistle constantly as he walked — to make sure that he didn’t taste the pie!” The crowd of tourists found this anecdote quite amusing, having no trouble identifying themselves with the clever planters, rather than the hapless servants.

wrote that he could not continue to earn money by tutoring the children of slaveholders and thus “steal from the Negroes who have truly earned through their sweat and blood the money that I put in my pocket.”³

Reclus was, throughout his life, a fierce opponent not only of slavery but of racism, which he saw to be one of the most pernicious forms of oppression and domination. He believed that the problems of social conflict and exploitation stemming from racism could only be solved finally through the blending of races and cultures. Racism, he concluded, was based on a false view of social hierarchy that contradicted his firm belief in equality and acceptance of social diversity. In his view, humanity is always strengthened by the creative diversification resulting from the cross-fertilization of peoples and traditions.

Another consequence of Reclus’ visit to Louisiana was the strengthening of his belief in the inhumanity of capitalism. While his experiences in Europe led him to abhor the evils of economic inequality and exploitation, he discovered in America an economic mentality that far surpassed that of more traditionalist European cultures. He concluded that the spirit of commerce and material gain had deeply infected American culture and poisoned it. As he wrote to his brother Elie, he believed the country to be a “great auction hall where everything is for sale, slaves and owners go into the bargain, votes and honor, the Bible and consciences. Everything goes to the highest bidder.”⁴ His loathing for the virtues of free enterprise continued throughout his lifetime.

Reclus finally returned to France, after spending a year in South America. His anti-racist beliefs were put into practice in his personal life when he married, in December 1858, Clarisse Brian, the mulatto daughter of a French father and a Senegalese mother. This happy union ended after only a few years with Clarisse’s death. A year later, Reclus married an old friend, Fanny L’Herminez, according to anarchist principles — that is, without the sanction of either church or state. This alliance proved to be his closest and most-valued relationship and profoundly affected him for the rest of his life. All who knew him agreed that his egalitarian and cooperative ideas were practiced admirably in his personal life. His fundamental principles of solidarity and mutual aid were much more than political slogans, and he was noted for his great sense of humility. Moreover, his conception of humanity and compassion extended to his treatment of other species and his concern for nature. In addition to writing in defense of the natural world, he practiced vegetarianism for most of his life, on ethical grounds.

During the 1860’s, Reclus began his extensive work in the field of geography, completing the first of the three great geographical projects of his life, the two-volume study *La Terre: description des phénomènes de la vie du globe*. His intellectual work was interrupted abruptly in the early 70’s by the events of the Paris Commune and its aftermath. He participated both in the politics of the Commune and in the unsuccessful defense of Paris. He was taken prisoner by the Versailles troops and spent the next eleven months in fourteen different prisons, after which he was tried and sentenced to deportation to New Caledonia. As a result of the efforts of his friends and admirers, he was finally allowed to emigrate instead to Switzerland. Ironically, this exile at the hands of a reactionary regime contributed powerfully to his development as a radical political theorist and as a force within the European anarchist movement. In Switzerland, he began his association with the anarchists of the Jura Federation, and developed close ties with the major anarchist theorists Bakunin and Kropotkin. It was also there that he began his greatest work, the *Nouvelle*

³ *Elisée Reclus, Correspondance* (Paris: Librairie Schleicher Frères, 1911), vol. I, p. 105.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 91.

géographie universelle. This monumental achievement appeared in nineteen volumes between 1876 and 1894. According to Reclus' biographer, geographer Gary Dunbar, "for a generation the NGU was to serve as the ultimate geographical authority" and constituted "probably the greatest individual writing feat in the history of geography."⁵

In 1894, the elderly Reclus began a new phase of his career when he accepted an invitation to become a professor at the New University in Brussels. Despite his late entry into the academic world, he achieved renown as a teacher and won the enduring admiration of many students. During this period he also completed his last great work, *L'Homme et la terre*. This impressive six-volume work reinforced his reputation as a major figure in the history of geography and is also an important contribution to social theory.

Reclus died in the countryside at Thourout near Brussels on July 4, 1905. It was reported that his last days were made particularly happy by news of the popular revolution in Russia. He expired shortly after hearing of the revolt of the sailors on the battleship Potemkin.

⁵ Gary S. Dunbar, *Elisée Reclus: Historian of Nature* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978), p. 95.

**“Fragment of A Voyage to New
Orleans (1855)” *by Elisée Reclus***

Translated by Camille Martin and John Clark

I. The Caribbean

The sea was calm and phosphorescent. At regular intervals, the ship parted the waves with a heavy rumbling like an enormous cetacean, and the sails, swelled by the breeze, coaxed a gently swaying from the masts. All of nature seemed to enjoy a mysterious well-being.

I was stretched out in the launch above the rudder, gazing at the stars. In this position, I existed only for pleasure. The rocking motions of the ship and of the waves caused shivers of contentment to pass through my body. It was as if my very soul had been abolished, and all that I had left was the faculty of relishing great lungfuls of the night's cool air. Swaying in the suspended launch as if in a hammock, in turn lifted to twenty feet above the water, then brought back down just to the surface, I heard the waves alternately strike the planking of the launch or disappear under the rudder of the ship with a cavernous sound. The phosphorescence of the jellyfish and the rotiferae cast a pale and flickering glow about me, and sometimes, the meeting of two luminous waves glistened in my eyes, like the reflection of lightning. Up close, the sea seemed to roll with fire, while in the distance, it emitted a vague bluish light, like flaming alcohol.

I sensed all the beauties of the sea without seeing them. My eyes remained fixed on the stars, and to stop contemplating them, I would have had to fight against my nature. In the midst of them, the masts, in turn lowered and lifted by the rolling of the ship, seemed to trace enormous circles with their points. I was deceived by the illusion that causes us to see motion in the body at rest and stability in moving objects, and I vaguely believed that the stars were myriads of fireflies swarming around the masts and dancing about the sails. Sometimes I saw something like snowing light, swirling in space and descending in vast spirals. I was dazzled by the lively radiance that makes the tropical sky something completely different from ours. The stars seem to shine at least four times more brilliantly, and, far from appearing to be set in a solid dome, they seem suspended from various heights in the blue-black air of the night. The Milky Way, so faint in our northern regions, stretches over the tropical sea like a vast transparent zone of luminous clouds, and beyond its own infinity, points us toward other infinities. Under this glorious sky, so deep and so pure, I wondered how the ancient astronomers were able to invent their crystal vault. At the very most, we can understand the Scandinavians, who saw in their obscure sky a great skull, where scattered clouds represented wisps from the divine brain.

Little by little my eyes closed, and I fell gently into a sleep as pleasant as my vigil. Dreaming, I again saw the stars sparkling at me from the deep sky of mysterious promises, when I was awakened with a start by the voice of a hearty fellow at the bow. A great black solid mass loomed in front of us two miles toward the northwest — it was the island of Montserrat. Through the deep blue of the air, in which something like dimly glowing particles were floating, we made out perfectly the sharp profiles of twin mountains above the horizon.

This was the first time that I had seen American soil, and yet I was not sorry that it was night. The country of my imagination did not appear to me suddenly laid bare by the brutal heat of the sun, but permitted speculation by the light of the stars and allowed me to give free rein to my dreams. On this black solid mass, I imagined gazing on all its tropical splendors — the

impenetrable forests teeming with life, deep gorges with shimmering waterfalls, white houses shining through the thick foliage of mango trees, and fields of cane or of plantain swaying in the breeze.

While I imagined that I was catching a glimpse of these splendid sights, the ship advanced rapidly, and soon Montserrat was only a nebulous, hovering cloud at the horizon. I let myself sink back to the bottom of the launch, and dreamed of leisurely walks under groves of orange trees. My walk lasted for a long time, for I slept even past sunrise. A rude stream of water woke me up suddenly — the sailors did their morning wash from the ship, and without seeing me, had directed their water hose right on me. As I was dressed lightly, I was not too alarmed by this improvised shower that crashed on my head, and I let myself brave the bath like a Triton.

The physiology of a good many idlers has been described, but the idler who prowls around on board a ship has usually been overlooked. His life is much more agreeable and varied than one might ordinarily think, and if he loves nature, he will never be bored. When the ship is still in the harbor, moored by a cable from the dock, the traveler wonders with a certain trepidation whether it is not foolish to risk his life on such a small floating house and to be imprisoned there cheerfully for months at a time. But if he would only enter — soon enough, this narrow craft, this simple plank that the poets say separates life from eternity, this trembling hull on the sea, ends up becoming a world. One is constantly making new discoveries here, and more often, at the end of the voyage, many areas of the ship remain unknown territory for the passenger. I'm not speaking only of the hold, the storeroom, the steward's room, and all those dark mysteries hidden by the shiny wooden floor of the cabins. There are vats of fresh water that might stifle forever the cries of the drowning, the hiding places and holes where brown rats and black rats organize their enemy republics, and the hideous depths of the hold, where seawater, streaming across the oak and mingling with the rubbish of the cargo, emanates its foul and noxious odor. Even a sailor hardly knows how to find his bearings in this unhealthy labyrinth. All the more would a passenger accustomed to open air and sun get miserably lost in these gloomy shadows.

The rest of the ship offers a good deal more to the sharp observer, and there is no lack of subjects to study. Even remaining in one's cabin, one is surprised to find a host of delightful objects, for on board, everything is in constant motion, and the least of objects seem to take on their own life. There's a barometer that dances and flickers, suspended by its elastic ligaments, and a compass dial that springs into action with each movement of the tiller. Tables and chairs lean forward with a moan, then right themselves, incline, and knock against each other. From all corners come strange cries and mysterious groans. Each plank makes its own creaking sound, each metal nail its shrill grating, and on the deck, violent shocks transmitted by the sea make the chains jostle about with a terrible clatter like a galloping squadron. From time to time, a wave that is stronger than usual crashes against the side of the ship, and when one feels it passing very close by, just outside the ship's frame, one cannot help shuddering with fear. At the same time, the lurching becomes more violent, and all of the objects in the cabin succumb to an unexpected gymnastics. Poorly fastened doors open and shut again with a loud crash, and bottles and glasses are hurled from the table and smash against the wooden floors. Everything comes to life in merry motion, and this dizzying dance, these crazy oscillations, seem to give life even to the small blackened beams of the ceiling. But nothing is more charming than the play of sun rays penetrating the room through the deadlight. These rays scamper about in every nook and cranny, entering furtively into the cabins, hiding, chasing each other, reflecting for a moment in the mirrors, then flitting

away again like startled birds. When the ship is swaying heavily, they come in, flicker, and vanish so rapidly that the eye cannot follow them.

If the passenger goes for a walk on the poop deck, other sights await him. First of all, he has to walk with small steps to avoid falling, and know how to keep his balance through improbable and complicated movements. The ground undulates, quakes and slips away from under his feet. At the same time, the waves rise up curiously one after another along the sides of the ship, as if to examine his clumsy manoeuvring. But he finally arrives, and his promenade seems to have been so much longer because of all his stumbling en route.

One of my favorite retreats on the ship was the far end of the stern behind the chains of the rudder. Leaning over the side, I gazed at the wake for hours on end. The waves came one after the other to lure my vision into their spirals, and to look away required a strong effort. The curls, the circular ripples, the bedlam, the eddying wavelets, the dances of the foamy trails, the struggles between the waves that reunite behind the keel, clutching and writhing, the formation of swift funnels trailing clusters of transparent bubbles in their vortex — all these little dramas of drop and of foam exercised on my eyes an irresistible fascination. Beyond the swift and twisting line of the wake, large surfaces of foam pass by, thrown aside to the right and left by the prow of the ship. There are islands, archipelagos, and continents that coalesce, break apart, diminish, dissolve and vanish. In reality, there is not a great difference, geologically speaking, between these continents of foam and the continents of land that we inhabit. Small or large, all phenomena are analogous: our continents also will dissolve and reform elsewhere, like clusters of white bubbles carried along by the wake of the vessel.

Leaning over in order to see the dark mass of the ship reflecting in the sea, one can distinguish strange animals in the enormous depths — nemertine worms rolled up like black ribbons; jellyfish spreading out their transparent mantle until almost invisible, and flexing it again in the shape of a yellow or white sphere; stephanomies like quivering embroideries of fine lace; squid; and cuttlefish with great cords of suckers. Then there are vague, formless creatures, almost completely dissolved by the water that contains them. In the midst of these living depths teeming with organisms, one occasionally sees an enormous green or bluish mass with an elusive outline pass by. It could be a shark that with a simple vibration of its powerful tail can hurl itself toward the surface up to twenty meters, or a family of porpoises playing hide-and-seek under the keel of the ship.

Toward noon, the overwhelming heat would force me to seek shelter, and I would stretch myself out on the sails in the shade of a mast. There, I would read or nap for several hours, and when the somewhat cooled atmosphere permitted me to leave my hideaway, everything seemed more beautiful than before. The air had become more luminous, the waves more joyful, the ship more alert to its course. Then I would go staggering off to find some observation post, such as the main mast or the foremast. Clinging to the vibrating lines of the rigging, I clambered up slowly, without looking down for fear of being overcome with vertigo in seeing the sea under my feet. My heart beating with a not very virile emotion, I hoisted myself with the strength of my arms across the bars of the maintop and leaned solidly against the mast. There, a true coward enjoying the emotions of danger, I loved feeling myself swaying by the ship's lurching, and tracing vast curves in the atmosphere. The sailors who climbed up the rigging or slid down the lines with the dexterity of monkeys never guessed that I had a greater pleasure than they — that of vertigo and of fear.

From the height of this observation post, swaying powerfully in space, I perceived the beauty of the sea all the better in seeing it from an unusual perspective. First of all, my horizon increased by several leagues, and the vast circumference that seemed so ruffled with waves from the deck had become calm, like a beach of bronze. Closer up, I had seen distinctly the waves rolling in military order, and when, under the influence of two opposing winds, two systems of waves crossed at right angles, I grasped all the details of their harmonious and periodic interference. On the shifting surface, sperm whales sometimes appeared, blowing jets of mist and water through their spouts and lifting their enormous tails in the air, and tribes of porpoises crossed the sea with a series of leaps and dives. Around the ship, long trails of sea wrack or sea grapes floated, and tri-colored Portuguese men-of-war swayed their long arms at the whim of each wave. Sometimes we came upon a broken yard, the remains of some shipwreck. Sea bream and dolphins circled around this wreckage like wolves in order to devour the little fish hidden in its shadow. This floating yard created was a world unto itself in the middle of the sea, and countless dramas of killing took place relentlessly around it.

Looking down below me, I found the ship strangely diminished in size, and I wondered how the weight of the distended sails did not capsize the hull. The poop deck, the launches, the chains, and the anchors seemed to have become impossibly tiny, and the creaking ribs of the ship, the clinking chains, and shouts of the sailors merged into a plaintive moan. Around the lower hull, the foam lifted up by the prow whirled in white spirals on the bluegreen backdrop of the sea. Seen from a height, it had the transparency and the luster of a vast surface of liquid and bubbling porcelain.

I did not easily tire out when I looked at the sea from the height of the top mast, but I had an even more agreeable post, the uppermost part of the bowsprit mast. There, I was completely outside of the ship, and looking down, I saw it behind me, cleaving the waves with its prow, and I defied this enormous enraged mass that chased me, but could never catch me. With each sudden pitch, I swooped almost to the level of the water, then I was thrown to a great height above it. The mast reared up under me, or plunged wildly, without being able to throw me off. Intoxicated with motion, I almost thought I commanded the monster that carried me, and leaning into the sea, sucking in the space by my gaze, I imagined that the great wings of the ship were inflated not by the wind but by the breath of my will. With a naive arrogance, I felt myself to be the center of the universe.

Thus I wandered around the ship, endlessly finding wonderful sights to contemplate. But especially since reaching the Caribbean, I loved to go from mast to mast, scanning the horizon, searching for land. Thirty-six hours after having passed Montserrat, we did indeed see land, as the southern coast of Haiti, blurry at first, then becoming larger and bolder, rose up toward the north. The peninsula that ends at Cape Requin or Tiburon is actually a narrow chain of mountains strewn in the middle of the sea, and the peaks lined up on the ridge have a magnificent, audacious character. The highest peak reaches about 2800 meters, and from this point, one looks downward to a succession of terraces and pyramids, and then finally to Cape Tiburon, where the jagged ridge plunges into the blue of the water with a lofty and proud descent. Alexandre Dumas' insightful image of a cape as a bull lifting his horns to the waves returned constantly to my mind.

The mountains toward which our ship was headed are rather bare, and large trees grow only in the gorges and in the narrow hollows set at intervals between the shore and the foot of the escarpments. Forests of mahogany, magnificent African baobabs, and mangroves are generally

found more to the east, on the coast of the Dominican Republic, but here the shore of the island is much too steep to allow a significant amount of vegetation to take hold. In several places, cliffs gleaming like metal rise up at the shore, and the fishermen's huts cling like goats to the ledges in the rock. Incubated by a relentless sun, almost the entire coast has taken on a reddish and severe aspect that would seem better suited to some promontory in Arabia.

The escarpments of several mountains are interrupted by horizontal terraces that are evidently ancient beaches. These terraces, spaced one above the other at more or less equal heights, are proof that there must have been successive periods of halts and ascensions to bring about the upthrust of the whole island. At intervals, heavy tropical rains have taken advantage of the least fold in the soil to dig deep ravines through the parallel rims of the superposed terraces. From a distance, one could imagine that all of these steps, separated from each other by enormous troughs, were carved into the rock by a race of giants. There is no lack of terraces except in places where the rock is too hard for the sea to cut in very deeply, but almost everywhere else, the island is surrounded by an uninterrupted belt of staggered tiers. These tiers often take a remarkable shape. Thus, near the port village of St. Nicolas, an island that emerged in a rather recent geological age is formed like a fortified harbor. It creates the impression of an elaborate rampart that might have required for its construction many centuries and human lives.

Near Cape Tiburon, we had the pleasure of observing the marvelous clarity of the water. Sheltered by the coastal mountains, the ship felt only the effects of puffs of the trade winds. The sea became as smooth as a mirror, and the calm began to spread its silver coating over the distant waters. I was lying at the far end of the cabin on the sails, and I put my head through the port-hole to observe the harmonious ruffling of the waves. For a long time, I seemed to see black trails resembling drifting algae at the bottom of the water, but I believed my sight to be deceived by the play of shadow and light. All of a sudden, I saw clearly some rocks and marine plants. I called out to the captain, and a sailor heaved the lead, which indicated twenty-six meters of depth. The water was as pure as condensed air. The fish were moving in jolts, and the sharks, so common and so dangerous in these waters, seemed to be suspended there above the void. Meadows of algae, colonies of polyps, and travelling schools of jellyfish passed by in turn under our eyes, and we could see creeping at the bottom of the sea chaotic and blurred assemblages of enormous legs and monstrous heads. Finally, the evening breeze lifted, and propelled us in the direction of Jamaica. The next morning, we were in sight of the Blue Mountains.

In these waters, the high peaks of the Antilles interrupt the steadiness of the trade winds, and often make them spin in aerial whirlpools. Sometimes a raging wind was followed by absolute calm, and the sails, only a moment before strained to the point of tearing, dropped back heavily along the masts. Then, on the coast of Jamaica, the wind suddenly dropped and the heavy waves flattened out little by little, gradually taking on the color and appearance of oil. Soon, the ship was affected only by the pressure of the equatorial current, and for two whole days, the island slowly revealed before us its magnificent panorama of mountains and forests, of azure and light.

On the evening of the second day, the sight was especially dazzling in its splendor. The sun was setting and had already assumed that oval shape that it always has on the hazy horizon. The western sky was flooded with the most intense violet glow up to the zenith, and the polished sea reflected this glow so well that the sun, already grazing the surface of the water, appeared like the keystone of an immense cupola of light. Large fishing birds wheeled in the air. Sometimes an eagle soared by, waiting for an easygoing bird to make a lucky catch. The eagle would then pursue it and force it to release its prey, which the eagle then caught before it could fall back into

the water. Near the shore, the Negroes' pirogues glided like waterbugs, and farther away, in the bays of the island, ships with white sails appeared, like dragonflies poised on a leaf at the edge of a pond. Fields of cane extended even along the shore, interspersed with villages and covered with the trailing smoke from factories. Farther on, the hills rose up, cut through in all directions by ravines and bearing thick forests in their valleys. Beyond this first range of green hills was another range darkened by distance, and beyond that, a blue jagged range. Finally, above all these levels of summits, a great peak thrust its point to a height of 2400 meters, and seemed to want to extend its enormous cloak of azure over all the island. And the peace, the tranquility, the power contained by the earth and the sea — how can they ever be described? It is said that nature knows how to enjoy its own beauty and doesn't ask for the sympathetic admiration of humans. In tropical passages, there is nothing gentle, delicate, melancholy, and familiar, like the lawns, the brooks, and the mists of our northern country. Here, nature is disdainful, impassive, and relentless in its beauty; it seems unaware of its children.

The following day, toward four o'clock in the afternoon, we were opposite the Grand Cayman, formerly the hideaway of brigands who had situated their den in the middle of the reef in order to better confront the enemy frigates. This island was now remarkable only for its memories, and I probably would have forgotten about it if, even while we were still in sight of its shores, a violent squall had not assaulted our ship.

No matter how courageous one is, one cannot help being shaken to the very core on seeing a storm amassing in the sky. But when the ship is already being bombarded and all of its ribs creak under the force of wind and wave, one assumes a brave spirit at the height of danger, and feels only virile courage in the face of the raging sea. At least, that is the general impression of those who have confronted such blasts of wind, and I experienced it also, like anyone else. For quite a while, a little grayish cloud had hovered over the island. Toward evening, it grew little by little, and soon, beach by beach, reef by reef, it covered the entire island, like an enormous veil drawn over the sky. Above our heads, the atmosphere was still a stunning blue shimmering like a soft fabric of sunbeams, but the black selvage that separated the cloud from the blue sky constantly drew nearer to our zenith. A brilliant rainbow advanced, carried on the mists of the storm, and its two ends, softly shading into the sea, extended another almost invisible semi-circle onto the foam of the waves. Preceding the dark mass, little waves arose as if spurred on by an underwater force, and their crests scattered in spurts of droplets. At the same time, the wind roared with a heavy bellowing noise, like distant thunder. The sailors, resolute and calm, agile and strong, climbed up to the yards and clambered along the rigging, clewing up the sails in the blink of an eye, looking at the rigging of the ship and the approaching storm with the same fearless eyes. The voice of the captain rose and projected with its clear and resonant timbre over the dismal rumbling. The sails were scarcely clewed up before the gusting winds of the storm rocked the ship and leaned it toward the sea. The rigging stretched and vibrated, the yards creaked, and to withstand the violence of the wind, the pilot tied himself to the helm. In a few minutes, the sea had become wild. Each wave became a horrible battering ram hurled against the sides, and with each new rolling, the ship took on more water. The chains clattered on the deck, the barrels rolled from port to starboard, the spars hammered forcefully against the partitions, the ship plunged and reared up like a frantic horse, and from their cabins, the passengers could see the wavecrests rising up above the poop deck.

But there was no need to worry, for everything turned out well. We were a considerable distance from the shore, the careening had stabilized, and the storm was short-lived. Our ship had behaved bravely and weathered Cape San Antonio without accident.

Our voyage had already lasted forty-five days, and despite my explorations of the hold, the launches, and the masts of the ship, I longed to touch soil. When I thought about the walks I would soon take on the banks of the Mississippi and in the woods of Louisiana, an impatient shiver passed through my body. Toward the second day of our voyage through the Gulf of Mexico, I looked anxiously toward the north and was completely unable to concentrate on the book at which I glanced from time to time. Suddenly, it seemed that the color of the water had changed. Indeed, it had turned from a dark blue to yellow, and I saw a straight line of separation, as if drawn with a taut string, extending from east to west between the two differently colored zones. To the north, a thin blackish line half-hidden by the fog indicated land. We were in the waters of the Mississippi! Soon after the ship had slackened its pace, it advanced only with difficulty and then came to a dead halt — its hull was stuck in the mud. Thus the voyage had come to an end, and we could do nothing but wait patiently in our slushy hole of liquid mud.

II. The Mississippi Delta

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

Toward daybreak, the captain pondered how to escape our bed of mud, and sent one of his launches to the mouth of the river to find a pilot. The craft soon disappeared in the morning mist and the sound of its oars, growing more and more faint, finally died away toward the north. We tried in vain to follow it by sight and sound without being able to penetrate the thick layer of fog that separated us from it. Suddenly, lifting our eyes, we caught sight of it again, seemingly suspended from a curtain of clouds. The launch, after having crossed the first trail of mist that crept on the sea and closed our vista for a few cable lengths, reached a space perfectly free of humidity and, appearing to us beyond the fog, seemed to drift through limpid air. These parallel zones of mist and of transparent atmosphere are not rare at the mouth of the Mississippi, where currents of fresh water and salt water meet and mingle in different temperatures.

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

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

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

Thanks to the speed of the tugboat, we advanced rapidly. I folded all my newspapers and stopped thinking about Sebastopol¹ to observe the appearance of the Southwest Pass, the main mouth of the Mississippi, in all its details. Several miles in front of the ship, a long, thin black line seemed to extend across the sea like an immense jetty. Beyond this dark line, the river appeared like a great white silk ribbon, then came another black line parallel to the first, and farther away the blue waters of the sea stretched out to the grey curve of the horizon. The Mississippi resembled a canal advancing toward the open sea between two long jetties, and the 40 or 50 ships, whose tapered masts we saw standing out vaguely against the sky, completed the picture. It is a spectacle that some day will be witnessed, on a much reduced scale, at the Suez Canal planned for the waters of the Mediterranean.

As soon as we arrived at the mouth, the tugboat slowed its pace a little to make its way cautiously among the buoyed channels that lead to the entrance of the river, for these channels are treacherous, and all the movements of the currents and of the tide create variations in depth. Ordinarily, alluvial islands emerge imperceptibly. During storms, the underwater terrain of the river’s mouth changes completely, and the ships can only attempt to enter after numerous soundings. In spite of his American audacity, our pilot still had several soundings taken.

Finally, we entered the riverbed itself and joyfully felt the pressure of its current against the sides of the ship. However, we still couldn’t see the banks of the Mississippi on which we were floating. It seemed like a river flowing miraculously in the middle of the sea, except that there were slight swellings to the left and right of silt spreading their vague contours on the water and marking the elevated areas of the underwater strand that arise between fresh and salt water. As we advanced, these islands of mud became more numerous and elongated. Soon, they were close to one another, resembling solidified waves, then connected end to end, finally forming an unbroken shore above the level of the current. Here the sandbar or alluvial embankment that forms through the mouth of the river reaches its greatest height.

Up to this point, the water displaced by the keel and pushed back with great churning in the wake was the clear blue water of the underwater counter-current that spreads under the yellow surface of the river. But as soon as the keel touched the sand bar and the impetus of the ship was slowed down by the resistance of the silt, the color of the wake immediately changed to dirty yellow, and swirls of mud again rose in the already muddy current. Then, the pilot had to grasp the helm with a firm hand and follow the channel with a sure eye, for the sandbar was close to a mile long, and a slight deviation to the right or left would be enough to commit the body of the

¹ A port on the Black Sea, famous for its heroic resistance under seige during the Crimean War, 1854–1856.

ship irrevocably. Once the keel is engaged in the muddy bottom, it lifts up fine particles of silt by its listing and makes them come up again toward the shallow current that pulls them along, whereas heavy grains of sand accumulate around the hull and, piling around it, finally hold it back like walls of rock.

Thus it takes very little to determine whether a ship was lost or safe. We saw ships with keels stuck four feet in the silt, that easily freed themselves with no tugboat, and reach deep waters, flags waving, sails up. On the other hand, many ships attached to a tugboat and passing in the middle of the canal must have been taken crosswise by the current and pushed toward the bank in a moment of indecision. Some meters from us, we passed by a magnificent three-master that was ruined in such a manner, and which could not be set afloat. Enormous banks of sand were already forming around it, like great masses of cork floating on the surface of the river.

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

The village of Pilotsville, where shacks made of boards rise up along the west bank, is commonly known by the name of Balize. Actually, this name belongs to another village established by the French settlers at the Southeast Pass, but since the Southwest Pass has become the principal mouth of the Mississippi, the pilots have transplanted both their industry and the name of their miserable town. Surely there are very few places in the world that look as sad and desolate as Balize. The narrow strip of land where the houses are clustered is the shore of both river and sea. Waves of salt water and fresh water lap over it in turn and meet there in a maze of ditches full of a viscous, putrid mixture. Wherever a spongy bulge allows plants to take root, wild cane and reeds grow in impenetrable thickets. The huts are constructed of boards as light as possible so that they don't sink into the waterlogged soil, and they are perched atop high pilings like roosts so that the moisture will penetrate them less. Also, when a storm blows and the waves of the sea crash one after another over the coastal strip into the river, the houses of Balize could very easily be swept away, were they not anchored like ships. Sometimes the village is even to the point of dragging its anchors. Fever and death ceaselessly emanate from the blanket of miasma covering Balize. Nevertheless, four hundred Americans have the courage to roost in these huts and sleep off their fever in hopes of being able to fleece the ships passing through.

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

It's a strange sensation to touch solid ground after treading on the moving, quaking surface of the ship for weeks on end. One feels dizzy like a convalescent trying to walk after a long illness. The feet become accustomed to a moving surface and finally get used to it so well that by contrast, the earth seems to be unstable, and it seems to vibrate as if shaken by a volcanic tremor. This strange sensation did not diminish the pleasure that I felt in treading once again on solid ground, and with the joy of a liberated prisoner, I sank into a thicket of wild cane. I had scarcely succeeded in creeping along a few meters in this thick mass of vegetation, and I was

already unable to distinguish the ship through the immense number of stalks waving back and forth. My every step made the dry reeds strewn about the ground crackle and crunch, and I was almost afraid that all the noise I was making might awaken some snake coiled around a root. The cane rose twenty feet above my head, and only allowed a narrow view of the sky and ... an electric telegraph wire.

Science seems out-of-place in the wilderness of Louisiana, and this wire that mysteriously transmits thought seemed all the more strange in that it passes above the reeds, far from all cultivated fields, between stagnant marshes and a muddy river. Such is the march of civilization in the United States: here, on soggy ground that is not even part of the continent yet, but only the residue of waves, the telegraph is the first work of humans. Before having disturbed this earth with pickaxe or plow, the American already has his thoughts circulating here — or at least his calculations. As soon as a ship arrives at Balize, this wire announces to the Orleanian merchants how many barrels of salt, how many immigrants, how many bolts of cotton fabric the cargo amounts to. Rarely does an employee come to examine whether the wire is sufficiently insulated. It sways amid the high stalks of cane, and so long as a speculator does not have it cut, it transmits the news quite well. Sometimes, wild cattle wandering through the thicket knock down the poles with their horns, but as long as electricity flows obediently through the wire, no one even thinks of putting them back up. These wandering cows belong to the Islingues, semi-barbaric people who are descended from the Islenots or Canariotes so numerous in Cuba and in the other Antilles.²

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

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

The only vegetation of these damp, narrow beaches is wild cane; trees cannot take root there. One must go about forty kilometers from the mouth to find a clump of earth high enough for

² This community, descended from immigrants from the Canary Islands is still well known in Southeast Louisiana as the "Islenos."

even a poor stunted willow to cling to. A few hundred meters farther, two or three braver willows venture out and huddle together. Farther on, clusters of willows gather, mingling their foliage and forming a continuous curtain of pale greenery. This hides the view of the sea from the voyagers traveling upstream, making the landscape appear more like the mainland.

The region of willows is followed by that of the Louisiana cypress. Although these trees require a firmer soil than willows, the ground in which they grow is still half-hidden under pools of stagnant water, and in fact disappears entirely during flooding. The cypress is a superb tree with a straight, smooth trunk, and no branches until 20 to 25 meters. Its base is supported in the ground by thick roots that project in all directions like buttresses. Conical excrescences resembling thorns several feet high rise through the pools of water around the cypress. They are actually aerators which serve to carry air to the underground roots of the cypress, which would otherwise be deprived of it by the layer of water. The foliage of the tree consists of needles that are much smaller than those of the pine, and the branches often are so bare that they seem to have been devastated by fire. Their only embellishment is long tresses of flowing moss, locally called "Spanish beard." The extraordinary appearance of these trees adorned with immense grey beards lends a unique and strange character to the landscape. Parisians can get a vague impression of this by going to admire the cypresses acclimated in Rambouillet Park.

Great savannahs sometimes extend between the cypress forest bordering the edge of the Mississippi and the already distant seashore. These areas are home to multitudes of birds. The hunters have found that the easiest way to make them leave their nests and shoot them in flight is to set the grass of the savannah on fire. This barbarous method is forbidden, because the fire can spread little by little across the grass to the plantations. But this does not in the least stop the hunters from resorting to this expeditious means of flushing out the birds. During the day, all these burning prairies cast at most reddish glow on the atmosphere, and one can only see black smoke extending heavily over the horizon. But the night reveals an awesome sight to the traveller. When the flames of several days of fire finally die out, the ground is covered with a thick layer of ash over an area of several square kilometers, and the marsh grass that composes the soil of the undulating prairies has been burned several feet deep. The hunters have achieved their end and had a terrific fowl hunt.

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

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

In the middle of one of these plantations, situated on the east bank of the Mississippi, rises a commemorative column in honor of the Battle of New Orleans. It was there that the British under General Pakenham were routed by the celebrated Andrew Jackson. The Americans were

admirably positioned and took advantage of the terrain to enclose themselves, as in a fortress. By digging a ditch, they cut the narrow isthmus that separated the Mississippi from the impenetrable cypress forests of Lake Borgne. Then they created a rampart that was impervious to bullets and cannonfire with piles of cotton bales. The British, marching in step over sodden ground, slow and unconcerned as if on parade, were shot down like wild game by the skilled riflemen from Louisiana and Kentucky. The true story of this battle is yet to be told. According to popular accounts, the British army supposedly lost 7000 men, more soldiers than it counted in its ranks, while the Americans lost only 7 soldiers. Such is the ratio: one to a thousand.

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

III. New Orleans

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

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

Obviously, the banks of the Mississippi, like those of all waterways that flood alluvial plains, are higher than the riparian terrain. Nowhere is this fact more evident than in New Orleans, for there is a difference of four meters between the parts of the city distant from the river and those near the embankment. For this reason, the structures are protected against the flooding of the Mississippi by a boarded levee one hundred meters wide. In addition, the flooding of the river always brings an enormous amount of sand and clay which reinforces the levee and forms a new batture¹, on which several streets have already been constructed since the beginning of the century. The districts far from the Mississippi are only a few centimeters above sea level, and people’s homes are separated from the alligator nests only by drainage pools of stagnant and always iridescent water. However, a certain bulge, called a “hill” in these parts, stretches between the city and Lake Pontchartrain. This swelling, imperceptible to the naked eye, might be one meter high. The plain is so level that the water, at its lowest point, falls only about 10 centimeters over a total distance of 180 kilometers, from the city to the Gulf of Mexico.

¹ Reclus writes “batture,” a term still used in New Orleans.

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

The American section, located to the west of the French Quarter on the other side of the wide and beautiful Canal Street, is inhabited mostly by merchants and brokers. It is also the center of political life. Here one finds hotels almost as beautiful as those of New York, cotton warehouses, most of the churches and theaters, and City Hall. This is also where the big slave market is held. A huge mob always crowds the inside of Bank's Arcade, the interior of which is dominated by a large counter, abundantly stocked with bottles and glasses. On a platform stands the auctioneer, a large, red-faced, bloated man, with a booming voice: "Come on, Jim! Get up on the table. How much for this good nigger Jim? Look how strong he is! He's got good teeth! Look at the muscles on his arms! Come on, now, dance for us, Jim!" And he makes the slave turn around. "Here's a nigger who knows how to do everything — he's a carpenter, a cartwright, and a shoemaker. He won't talk back — you never need to hit him." But most of the time there were long whitish rays etched by the whip on his black skin. Then it was a Negro woman's turn: "Look at this wench! She's already had two niggers, and she's still young. Look at her strong back, this sturdy chest! She's a good wet nurse, and a good negress for work!" And the bidding starts again amid laughter and shouts. Thus all the Negroes of Louisiana pass in turn on this fateful table: children who have just ended their seventh year and whom the law in its solicitude deems old enough to be separated from their mothers, young girls subjected to the stares of two thousand spectators and sold by the pound, mothers who come to see their children stolen from them, and who are obliged to remain cheerful under threat of the whip, and the elderly, who have already been auctioned off many times, and who have to appear one last time before these pale-faced men who despise them and jeer at their white hair. In the end, they are deprived of the most vile and pitiful honor, that of bringing a good price. Sold off for a few dollars, they might as well be buried like animals in the cypress forest. According to the advocates of slavery, all this is willed by the very cause of progress, the doctrines of our holy religion, and the most sacred laws of family and of property.

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

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

One night, early in my stay in the metropolis of the South, one of the horrible disasters that are so frequent in the United States occurred. Seven large steamships burned simultaneously. It was an awesome sight. The seven ships, moored side by side, looked like separate fireplaces joined at the base by a sea of flames. Whirlwinds of fire shot up from the bottom of the holds, and then swept back down below the galleries, revealing in all its ephemeral beauty the elegant architecture of these palaces glittering with gilding and mirrors. But soon the tongues of fire penetrated in successive jets through the floor of the galleries, and from top to bottom, the three decks of cabins were enveloped in a blazing hurricane. Above the ships, black smokestacks surrounded by swirling billows of flame remained motionless for a long time, like solemn ghosts, and the flags, hoisted to the top of the masts, appeared from time to time through the smoke, fluttering festively as if for a holiday. One after the other, the galleries caved in with a horrible groan, and the engines and furnaces, losing their center of gravity, suddenly leaned over, making the whole enormous conflagration oscillate like a pennant. The decks and the smokestacks collapsed successively, and the burning debris became a river of fire carried along by the Mississippi. The unvarying facades of the city, the docks covered with merchandise, the chaotic crowd, the great ships moored along the bank, and on the opposite shore, the houses and forests of Algiers — all seemed illuminated with a bloody glow. By contrast, the sky alone seemed black, and the stars had vanished. The screams that were heard for a long time coming from the burning ships intensified the horror of this frightful scene. Forty-two persons were burned alive before a rescue attempt was organized. It is a fact that from the construction of the first steamboat up to the present time, more than forty thousand persons have been burned or drowned in the Mississippi because of accidents of all sorts, including explosions, collisions, or fires — an average of one thousand victims per year.

The nightwatchmen are far too few in number to be of much use in preventing disasters. The city, almost seven miles long and an average of one mile wide, has only 240 watchmen, of whom

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

More than 2500 taverns are always filled with drinkers, and fuel the most violent passions with brandy and rum. Every big hotel opens its entire first floor in order to take advantage of the national vice of drunkenness. At the center, there is a large rotunda, a type of stock exchange where the merchants come to read their newspapers and to discuss their finances. It opens onto a gambling hall, where rogues rendez-vous with dupes. There is also a bar, with a table that is very richly and abundantly laid out for the public. The meal is completely free, on a first come, first served basis. One has only to pay for the brandy or rum. The picayune (25 cents) that one spends for each little glass is more than enough to cover all the expenses of this public banquet. Besides, the vast majority of persons who enter the hall don't even touch the food, and are content to drink. Thus, hundreds of drinkers rub shoulders, ignorant of the fact that they are footing the bill for a feast for famished paupers.

Especially during election time, the taverns are always full. The candidate has to justify himself to all who are voting for him. If he doesn't know how to drink a cocktail elegantly, he will lose popularity and be branded a traitor. When political adversaries meet in a bar, drunk or sober, insults followed by fistfights or gunshots are not an unusual occurrence. More than once, the conqueror has been seen drinking over the corpse of the conquered. It is true that it is against the law to carry concealed weapons. But during elections, the boldest among the citizens elude the letter of the law and furnish their belts with a veritable arsenal in plain sight. Most, however, are content to conceal a dagger or a pocket pistol in their clothing.

"Is it true that it is expressly forbidden by law to carry weapons on one's person?" someone asked a famous Louisiana judge.

"Certainly. We can't thank our legislators enough for having forbidden the carrying of concealed weapons."

"Then what would you do if I insulted you or slapped you?"

"What would I do?" And seizing a loaded pistol from his belt, he aimed it at the head of his questioner.

A misanthrope might compare the vices of our European society to a hidden evil that gnaws at the individual from within, whereas the vices of American society appear outwardly in all of their hideous brutality. The most violent hatred separates factions and races: the slavery advocate abhors the abolitionist, the white loathes the Negro, the native detests the foreigner, the wealthy planter disdains the small landowner, and rivalry of interests creates an insurmountable barrier of mistrust even between related families. In a society of this type, art cannot be seriously cultivated. Moreover, the periodic bouts of yellow fever eliminate all concerns other than commerce, and no merchant places any value on beautifying the city that he plans to flee once he has amassed a

sufficient fortune. Under the pretext of art, rich individuals confine themselves to whitewashing the trees in their gardens. This luxury has the double advantage of being pleasing to their sight and of costing very little. They cannot do the same to public promenades because these do not exist. The only tree inside the city is a solitary date palm planted sixty years ago by an old monk. On the other hand, the city holds the honor of erecting a bronze statue to its savior Andrew Jackson, but this statue has no other merit than that of being colossal and of having cost a million. The artist who modeled it and cast it, Mr. Clarke Mills, has been neither to Rome or to Florence, and has only studied in the studios of Washington, D.C. That is exactly what made his reputation among the locals, and those who advanced him money and provided him with work imposed on him the express condition of never travelling outside of his native country. His unquestionable claims to fame are still not enough for him to eclipse the sculptors of the ancient world. These consist of the patented invention of a very simple process for the fusion of metal, and of the art of perfectly balancing equestrian statues on the two hind legs without the help of a luxuriant tail or an obliging tree trunk. The city of New Orleans has commissioned from Mr. Mills a statue of Washington, which will be erected in the American quarter.

As for the public buildings, they are for the most part devoid of any architectural merit. The train stations are wretched hangars blackened with smoke, the theaters are mostly dumps at the mercy of fire, and the churches, with the exception of a type of mosque built by the Jesuits, are but large pretentious hovels. Moreover, of all the public buildings, the churches are most subject to the risk of fire or demolition. The congregations that gather there come together, separate, and meet again, only to disperse once more like flecks of seafoam or whirlwinds of leaves carried along by the wind. If a young man is gifted with a strong voice, if he has been successful in the drawing rooms, if he attracts attention by a religious zeal, actual or feigned, he can issue shares to raise money for the construction of a church, of which he will become absolute master. The church will be his thing, his capital, his business. If renting out the pews does not generate enough income, if his oratory is not fruitful, he gets rid of his church by bankrupting, selling, demolishing, or burning it, and changes his denomination. It's a kind of speculation that can very easily combine with others. Nothing prevents the minister of the Gospel from also being a banker, planter or slave merchant. The American never has a fixed vocation. He is constantly on the lookout for opportunities, waiting for fortune to pass by so he can hop on and be carried away toward the land of Eldorado. In the United States, everyone and everything changes and moves with a rapidity inconceivable to those of us who are accustomed to always following one long routine. In Europe, each stone has its own history. The church rises where the dolmen once stood, and for thirty centuries, the inhabitants of the country — Gauls, Franks, or French — have worshipped at the same consecrated place. We obey traditions rather than humans, and we let ourselves be governed by the dead more than by the living. In America, there is nothing of the kind. Not a single superstition is attached to the past, or to the native soil, and the population, moving like the surface of a lake seeking its level, distributes itself entirely according to the laws of economies. In the young and growing republic, there are already as many ruins as in our old empires. Present-day life is too active and tempestuous for the traditions of the past to dominate the soul. Instinctive love of country in its native simplicity no longer exists in the United States. For the masses, all feelings merge more and more with pecuniary interests. For those noble of heart — as rare in America as in all the countries of the world — there is no other country but liberty.

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Elisée Reclus
Fragment of a Voyage to Louisiana
1855

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The following introduction to and translation of Reclus' "Voyage" was published in *Mesechabe* #11 (Winter 1993), pp. 14–17 and #12 (Spring 1994), pp. 17–22. A revised version, with illustrations and a much expanded introduction is forthcoming as a pamphlet from Glad Day Books. The editors and translators have also completed a collection of Reclus' writings, with extensive commentary on his ideas, entitled *Liberty, Equality, Geography: The Social Thought of Elisée Reclus*. They are at work on another Reclus collection entitled *An Anarchist in the Old South: Elisée Reclus on Slavery and Antebellum Society*.

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