OLD-TIME SOUTHERN LIFE FOUND IN HIDDEN COURTYARDS OF NEW ORLEANS: BY CAMPBELL MACLEOD

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

You leave Canal Street, which is the principal thoroughfare of New Orleans and the neutral ground between the old and new sections of the city, and turn your footsteps down the old Rue Royal, Rue Bourbon or Rue Chartres for a glimpse into story-book land. This French quarter is the most picturesque and interesting part of the city. Every square has its legendary or realistic story. In order to see this French quarter at its best and breathing in these later days all the quaint poetry and atmosphere of the early days of New Orleans you must rise early and loiter lazily through the quaint Faubourg. These streets are very narrow and very dirty.

“But where are the courtyards?” you are asking as you stand before one of the windows of the most famous of the antique shops that flourish in this section. Right at your very hand! Turn away from this “shop of tears.” See, that green door. Walk up boldly and pull that shiny iron knob. Once, twice, yes, three times. It’s ten to one that the servant whose duty it is to admit visitors is taking her noonday siesta. Far inside you can hear the tinkle of the bell. Presently shuffling footsteps approach. The door is opened cautiously by an ancient negress. Don’t get frightened or confused because you happen not to be on the visiting list of the family whose
Photograph by Elizabeth A. Pinckard

OUTER COURT AND STAIRWAY OF THE OLD ABSINTHE HOUSE
"IN THE HEART OF THE CITY THE CREOLE PRESERVES
THE INTIMACY OF THE DOMESTIC CIRCLE"
LANTERNS OF COLONIAL DESIGN ARE FOUND IN SOME OF THE OLDEST COURTYARDS

Photograph by Elizabeth A. Pinckard
threshold you have asked permission, as it were, to cross. Instead,
demand boldly if this isn’t the courtyard of the house that was built
for Napoleon. (You’ll find more than a dozen mansions claiming
this distinction on Royal Street alone.) She courtesies low. Listen,
she avers without hesitation that most certainly it is. To her,
Napoleon? that name sounds familiar—ah, well, everybody who is
anybody has partaken of the hospitality of her white folks. Most
certainly he of whom you speak,—he must have come with the others.

BUT you have accepted her invitation to enter, for the courtyard
seen through the long porte cochere is most alluring, and a
closer view, now the door has clanged and the key is turned,
does not dispel the atmosphere of unreality. Such a feast of bloom
and blossoms! Such a wealth of luxuriant, tropical plants as one
might expect in South America or on the bank of some lush bayou,
but never in the heart of a great city in a paved courtyard! A
fountain, rather what was once a fountain, is the receptacle of violets
and “sweet Alice.” Mingled with the fragrance from these is the
sweet olive. Pots of every shape and size are placed here and there
and everywhere. These hold geraniums and dwarf orange trees.
Tucked in the corners of the yard are orange trees of a larger growth
on which blossoms and fruit hang in every stage of maturity. Here
the Sacred Palm used in ceremonials in the Catholic church on Palm
Sunday is usually found. Also the vivid cannas, banana plants and
luxuriant caladiums. The backgrounds of these courtyards are tall,
brick walls, which are often times hung with a heavy curtain of ivy
or some creeping plant. Not a few of the plants most tenderly
cherished by these good and superstitious Creoles are nurtured like
aristocratic infants for the good luck they are supposed to bring those
who tend them. “Sweet Basil” is always to be found in the borders
to some of the beds, likewise the “Guinea pea,” which bears an oddly
shaped lavender blossom. Both of these are believed to bring money,
lovers, health and all sorts of good fortune.

Old Spanish water jars and Ali Baba vases are placed effectively
about the entrance. In these the many jessamines, dear to the south-
ern heart, grow to perfection. In every courtyard, too, are found the
old cisterns, often piled three deep, one on top of another. New
Orleans is peculiar in that no well can be sunk or bored in it. The
lamps or lanterns used in the Colonial period in Louisiana are found in a number of the older courtyards in an excellent state of preservation.

Don’t, if you are a student of architecture, attempt to classify the building of these courtyards. All through the Latin quarter the houses retain many of the characteristics of the French and Spanish domination. The tunnel-like entrance to the houses, enriched with the mullioned windows and the spiked galleries that project over the sidewalks, are much the same as are found in Mexico, Cuba, Spain, and in fact all Latin countries. The galleries, constituting the real living-room of the family, extend all the way around the courtyard. On these the Creole families gather in the evening for the confidences so dear to the feminine heart or for the men to smoke their everlasting cigarettes. These galleries were many years ago, when the old part of the town flourished in all its splendor, the theme of the poet and the story teller. From them, the fair senoritas flirted with and cast flowers to the enamoured swains below. The Spaniard of those days, like the un-Americanized Creole of to-day, was entirely indifferent to the location of his house. It might be over a bar-room or a tailor shop. For once through the door leading to his courtyard he shut the world out and took his ease under his own vine and fig tree. Both of which flourished wonderfully in these courtyard confines.

NOW that you have discovered the open sesame into one, you will find a number of interesting courtyards up and down the street mentioned. Here are a few of the most famous. But even these show signs of neglect; the former beauty may be judged by the possibilities the deserted and dilapidated remains present to-day.

One of the most picturesque courtyards, and most interesting, is that of the Old Absinthe House which was built in 1798. It was here that absinthe was first sold in America. This house is still open and is one of the most interesting places of the old quarter to the stranger.

Paul Morphy, renowned as the champion chess player of the world at nineteen, lived in an interesting and typical old house on
HIDDEN COURTYARDS OF NEW ORLEANS

Royal street. The courtyard to this is one of the most picturesque on that street.

The house that was used as Jackson’s headquarters in the war of 1812 is now used as an antique shop, but the courtyard is large and must have been very beautiful when well kept. The staircase leading to the gallery from the lower court is made of solid mahogany, carved in one piece.

The oldest building in Louisiana, the ancient Archbishopric, on Chartres street, boasts of one of the handsomest courtyards. The building was erected in 1727 and remains exactly as it was first erected. Visitors will remark the ancient staircase of cypress, worn by the passing of generations. In the courtyard is seen one of the oldest and best preserved specimens of the “Spanish dagger.” It dates back, so those who claim to know aver, to the building of the palace, and indeed its height and dignity indicates anything but youth.

Secure from vulgar curiosity the Creole and his family in the heart of the city preserve the intimacy, the privacy of their domestic circle. Indeed, it is as if one passed for a brief space through the fence leading to wonderland. For back of those unpretentious green doors another language is spoken, other customs and manners obtain and even a type of people separate and distinct from the American lives its own care-free life, enjoying to-day and leaving to-morrow to bring its own care and sorrow.