A ROMANCE OF BITTERNESS

THE FIRST "CARPET-BAG" GOVERNOR OF LOUISIANA.

How Gov. Claiborne Was Persecuted by the Creoles.

The Story as Told by a Newspaper File 73 Years Old.

Searching for the Grave of the First American Governor of Louisiana.

The Ghastliest Cemetery in the Civilized World.

Correspondence Cincinnati Commercial.

I do not know whether carpet-bags had been yet invented at the time when W. C. C. Claiborne was first appointed by President Jefferson as Territorial Governor of Louisiana, but I may speak of him as the first "carpet-bag Governor" of Louisiana, insomuch as he was regarded by the Louisianians of his day much as Warmoth was regarded by the Louisianians of a later day. The Creoles hated him with the bitterness of hatred, and persecuted him so far as they dared. He was accused in the public prints of bribery, embezzlement, misappropriation of public funds, and everything but cowardice. Of that, indeed, none ever ventured to accuse him. He was taxed with attempting to interfere with the customs of the French gentry, and with the laws of the land. He was abused with the name of tyrant, and ridiculed as a country bumpkin. "Why did Claiborne come down here?" was the cry of that day; "we do not want him!—we do not want his American manners forced upon us." Repeatedly the public press requested him to resign. His private life,—even his domestic affairs were made subjects for savage satire in the Creole organs. There was a strong, frank, rude manhood about the Governor which the highly polished and highly aristocratic French folk deemed simply unendurable. They could not well provoke him into a duel during his term of office, but his American officers were forced to fight duels with fire-eating Creoles who had graduated in the first fencing schools of Paris, and delighted in the assertion that "the Americans wore swords without knowing how to use them." What especially maddened the Creoles was that Claiborne did not appoint Frenchmen to all the State offices; that he insisted—inasmuch as he was ignorant of the French tongue—upon transacting official business in the English language; that he gave Gubernatorial balls at the Government house whereat American and not French dances were danced, and that on several occasions he sat in the theater with his hat on. I fancy that wearing of the hat before those terribly cultivated and excruciatingly courteous Creole audiences must have been at first a mere oversight; but that poor Claiborne naturally got stubborn when such an outcry was raised about it, and with an angry pride of manhood peculiar to good American blood, swore "by the Eternal" that he would wear his hat wherever he pleased. Don't you almost wish you could slap him on the shoulder with that truly American slap of approbation?

History has more than redeemed the character of Claiborne from the slurs of that day, and I believe that even the implacable Creole element must have at last recognized his true worth. Twice was he appointed Governor of the Territory by Jefferson—because, indeed, murmured the Creoles, he had aided materially in giving Jefferson the Presidency—but he honored the high office, and when Louisiana became a State, its American settlers made him again Governor, and at a later day Senator. He died, I think, before his latter term of office as Senator expired.

Now let me ask you to read some extracts from the files of the Louisiana Gazette, published at New Orleans in the years 1804-5-6. The paper was a small, four-page sheet, sometimes half English and half French, and its editorials were all free contributions. In those days the newspaper seems to have been neither more nor less than a public spittoon—every man flung his quid of private opinion into it. The Louisiana Gazette was published but twice a week—on Tuesdays and Fridays, which doubtless afforded the volunteer editors ample opportunity to polish their leaders. A number of them are certainly of marked ability and elegance of style; and many of them malevolent as well. These latter were usually attacks upon the Governor, and beside being given the most prominent position in the paper, were moreover double-leaded or sometimes triple-leaded for the purpose of attracting notice. Suppose we look over some of these leaders. Here is one that is a curiosity in its way:

TUESDAY, January 22, 1805.

THE SEASONS.

LAST WINTER—There were public Balls held at Madame Le Gendres'. A certain American Governor, who could not converse with the French society; who could not dance French Country Dances, and who was tired of the insignificant part he acted in the circle, sat down to amuse himself at Brag. He found it so amusing, though it proved expensive, he disinterestedly continued it until the next morning, and sneaked home at sunrise.

LAST SPRING—This same Governor, hearing, in a cause tried before him, that it had originated at a Gambling Party, sent for every person present, and patriotically fined each of them Fifty Dollars!

LAST SUMMER—The *odds* were so much against his continuance in office that he would not play at all.

THIS WINTER—The same Governor, having shuffled until he got the Honors, was seen Gambling in a public Ball room where all but a few, seduced by his Excellency's example, respected the laws of the country, fearing his Excellency's former sentence. * * *

Here is something more explicit, and much more abusive:

FRIDAY, January 25, 1805.

A decent respect is due to the manners and customs of a free people. In all countries the most barbarous conquerors have in some measure conformed to them, and paid at least an outward respect to opinions and habits. There are certain inferior privileges that may be indulged without endangering the sovereignty of a country, and which are allowed the conquered as a matter of right. The most cruel Roman tyrant never ventured to infringe the amusements of a people, much less to control and alter them. Bonaparte, when he overthrew the remains of Gallic liberty, and concentered all the power *in his own hands*, increased the amusements of his countrymen. Nay, even the Negroes on board their prison ships, are allowed their native amusements; and their keepers will join them, while they clank their chains to the dance or the song. Then, for a time drown their cares, and lighten the yoke that sits so heavy on them.

Let me now ask, What was almost the first deed of notoriety in the Governor's administration? An interference in the amusements of the country. An attempt to introduce dances with which we were unacquainted—which ended in a battle, and broke up the public amusements for the whole season. We were in hopes that such improprieties would have ceased with last winter, and that the Governor would have seen their evil consequences. But not the same blunders still continued. Some new act of clownishness is daily to be recorded, and we behold him at the theater insulting the feelings of a whole audience. Will it be said, too, that this *is an error of his head, and not of his heart*,—that the Governor is not accustomed to theaters, and that he is ignorant that it is not *à la mode* to sit with his baton. We believe that he has visited theaters in the United States, and he knows that even the President dare not in such manner insult an American audience.

If the indignity was not premeditated, why was it repeated? Did he not see everybody uncovered, and mark the indignation of the audience? Does he fancy it a privilege attached to his office, or that he is among Indians or Yahoos? In either case he is mistaken. It is not any official privilege, and he is among a polite and polished people.

The following extracts, chosen almost at random from a mass of double-leaded abuse, appear to have been written by some one individual whose leading motive seems the gratification of a personal malice. They are all headed with the word "Communicated," in italic capitals:

[Louisiana Gazette, Tuesday, January 29, 1805.]

* * * If the approbation of the people is proof of a good administration, try Claiborne's by that touchstone. Let him take a vote in Louisiana, and not *ten* inhabitants will be found in his favor. * * * * *

[Louisiana Gazette, Friday, February, 1, 1805.]

Communicated.

What use is made of the public property in this city, consisting in houses, stores and fortifications? Is the income, which a part of the aforementioned property would bring, deposited in the public treasury or are the houses and stores bestowed on favorites rent free?

Who suffers the fortifications in rear of the town to go to ruin, the works to be tumbling into the ditches, the bridges to be ripped up and borne off, and the powder magazines to be falling to decay?

Who gave a public building to an editor with an idea of having his own acts, right or wrong, stupid or nefarious, defended?

Who is so very fond of eulogy as to fix a press in the very yard of the Government house, that "praise in grateful strain might greet the ear of majesty?"

Who has suffered Spanish troops to occupy two or three of the public buildings, when the same buildings would rent for a considerable sum?

Let us now follow these queries with a statement of the public property and its annual worth:

The house given to a Colonel of troops	$1,[illegible]00
The old Custom house	2,[illegible]00
The building given to the editor of the New Orleans Gazette	1,[illegible]00
Ditto given to the Spanish guard	[illegible]00
Total	$4,[illegible]00

Four thousand five hundred dollars is no inconsiderable sum. It is almost equal to the salary of the Vice President of the United States, and more than the salaries of two Territorial Judges. * * *

* * * Which is the greater crime—to embezzle or to malappropriate the people's money?

TUESDAY, February 5, 1805.

* * * However well disposed the people may be to overlook lesser foibles or constitutional weaknesses,—though they might (which heaven forbid!) suffer a Governor with rash unthinking hand to tear asunder the most sacred of all ties,—yet, they will not permit for a long time any man to hold an office who can not render an exact account of public property committed to his charge. Governor Claiborne has so long beheld an almost total silence of the press that he fancied himself secure, and, like an eastern despot thought no trembling subject dared to question the propriety of his measures. He is however mistaken; and it is not in his power to smother in our breasts the sacred flame of liberty! Not it burns with a pure and hallowed lustre, and not all blind, hired efforts of despotism can extinguish it. Neither the Governor nor his favorites will be suffered to fatten on the people, nor to sport with any part of that property for which we have given *fifteen millions*, and for which our houses, our lands and posterity are pledged to pay. * * *

* * * We hold a lash of scorpions the enemies of the people shall feel it. Come not within its lash,—leave the Governor to his fate. Approach him not. It will require a giant's arm to save him. * * *

Now here is the "lash of scorpions" in the hands of this "polite and polished people," who could not forgive the mortal offense of sitting in a theater with one's hat on. The lash is in the second article especially. Read both with care.

[From the Louisiana Gazette, Friday, Feb 8, 1805.]

A great part of the city have heard the Governor complain of his salary. Repeatedly in the course of last summer we have listened to his moans. He has often said that "any Governor for this country must certainly in the period of two or three years become a bankrupt." This created in our minds some surprise. The question was asked, why a man who felt so uneasy in his situation did not resign. Even this he has said he would do; and report more than once went so far as to say his resignation was sent to Washington. But, lo! the moment the new commission arrived, and he found himself snugly seated for four years, his talk about resigning finished. We behold him pathetically addressing the people and quietly assuming the reins of government. Ambition, a love of fame, a fondness for military parade or some other passion might have induced him to do this. In what manner he could surmount the pecuniary difficulty we were a considerable time ignorant. Some said he intended to make up the deficiency by matrimony; and it is confidently asserted that he has already offered himself to two rich women in town. As of this fact, however, there is no positive proof. We were still in doubt until we read a late Louisiana Gazette. This at once solved the mystery, and we all concluded that nine or ten thousand dollars per annum ought to content a plain, republican Governor.

[Also from the Louisiana Gazette, of February 8, 1805.]

A DREAM.

METHOUGHT it was a night in the month of December, A. D. 1804. All in the city were hushed and still. I was passing near the Government House. Suddenly the sound of music burst from the hall. I listened—the guests were dancing. Surprised, I advanced toward the sentinel, who was pacing with slow and measured steps before the building. From him, also, I learned the fact. His arms glittered in the moonbeams. At this moment the Convent bell sounded; a noise like rustling silk was near; I turned my head. A female figure stood before me. She was tall and graceful, displaying a perfect symmetry of features. Her countenance was mild and beautiful, but shaded with sorrow. I gazed upon her beauteous face. At that moment a new strain of music sounded; the shouts of the guests grew louder, they seemed to pierce her soul. She clasped her hands in agony; she turned her eyes to heaven. Then, meek, resigned, sorrowful and lovely, she bent her *willing steps* toward the graves of Louisiana. FIDELIS.

Mark the words "with *willing steps*." Now read the explanation of the Dream. Its mystery has doubtless puzzled you. Here is the key to its interpretation:

[From the Louisiana Gazette, Friday, Sept. 28, 1804.]

DIED—On the 26th inst., MRS. ELIZABETH CLAIBORNE, the Governor's lady. This lady possessed an elegant person, with every qualification that would render her dear to society. Her conciliating manners and unaffected modesty, added to the most benevolent disposition, made her the admiration of all who had the honor of her acquaintance. Regret could not be more strongly manifested than by the conduct of the citizens of every description on this occasion. Many thousands attended her interment and that of her infant daughter, who died the same day. Business of almost every kind was suspended.

And now it only remains to present you with the sequel of this manly method of newspaper warfare, conducted by the mouthpiece of a "polite and polished people." It needs little comment from the moral standpoint. But mark well the icy style of the writer—his condensed power of description and his abrupt, unsympathetic conclusion. I think it a masterpiece of writing. The whole scene is placed before your eyes in a few powerful sentences—the brave boy goaded to his death by the suggestion that he must avenge the insult to his dead sister; the Creole fire-eater, politely cool in the consciousness of his deadly skill; and that terribly pathetic "I believe——" that was never finished:

FRIDAY, February 15, 1805.

We mention with peculiar regret the unhappy fate of Mr. M. G. LEWIS, brother of the late Mrs. CLAIBORNE, who fell on Tuesday last, in a duel with Mr. ROBERT STERRY.

Mr. LEWIS was a youth of amiable deportment and promising character. We have heard that the *Dream* of FIDELIS, in our paper of Friday last, created the misunderstanding that has terminated so fatally. We have been at some pains to learn the circumstances of the duel, and believe ourselves correct in the following statement.

Mr. Lewis, with his friend, called at our office for a knowledge of the author. We begged time to ask approbation. Before we could make Mr. STERRY'S communication, it seems FIDELIS became known through some other medium. A challenge then ensued from Mr. Lewis, which we have understood, left no means of concession, it requiring no explanation, but immediate satisfaction for the outrage committed on his feelings. It being accepted, the parties met, and were to wait the count of 1, 2, 3, and at the succeeding word of "fire" to fire. Mr. Lewis's pistol flashed before the time, at the word "three," and he therefore lost his chance of fire. Mr. Sterry, seeing this, immediately turned, and fired backward in the air. No offer of accommodation was, we believe, made; and the parties again fired, nearly at the same moment, —when Mr. Lewis received a ball which passed through his heart, and out at his left side. For a moment he continued his attitude, when, casting his eyes to his friend, as if first conscious of his wound, he could only utter,—"I believe ——," and fell a lifeless corse.

The deceased was the succeeding day buried in this city, and attended by a large concourse of the most respectable inhabitants.

Well, I was glad to find that the Louisiana Gazette left poor Claiborne alone for a long time after that duel. The young American Governor did not resign, as the malcontents hoped. Perhaps he secretly resolved never to leave the neighborhood of the little Protestant cemetery, where his beautiful wife, from Tennessee, and his little daughter, and the brave boy, Micajah, were all sleeping together. In after years he married again, into a powerful and wealthy Creole family, and then all the old hatred became torpid, and finally died altogether.

A few days ago, accompanied by a gentleman—who is one of the very few living in New Orleans that know where the Claibornes are buried—I went to the old St. Louis Cemetery, on Basin street, to see the tomb of the first American Governor of Louisiana.

This cemetery is one of the most curious, and, at the same time, one of the most dilapidated in the world. I have seen old graveyards in the North of England, and tombs in Wales, where names of the dead of three hundred years ago may yet be read upon the mossy stones; but I have never seen so grim a necropolis as the ruined Creole cemetery at New Orleans. There is no order there, no regularity, no long piles of white obelisks, no even ranks of grey tablets. The tombs seem to jostle one another; the graveyard is a labyrinth in which one may easily lose oneself. Some of the tombs are Roman in size and design, some are mere heaps of broken brick; some are of the old-fashioned table form. From a vast number the glaring plaster has fallen off in patches, exposing the nakedness of the brick framework. Many are nameless and will remain nameless, because the sexton of a former generation, on being discharged from his office burned the records of the cemetery to satisfy his indignation. Here lies Dominic Hall, the fearless Judge who fined Andrew Jackson for contempt of Court; his tomb is a shapeless heap of broken bricks. Here—somewhere—lies General Humbert, who attempted to aid the Irish revolt of 1798 with a body of French troops. Here lies the famous planter, Etienne de Boré, who first successfully cultivated the sugar cane in 1794 upon the soil of Louisiana. Here lie many officers whose names are famous in the annals of the battle of New Orleans. Here lie Spanish grandees and Spanish knights—all with feet to the west and faces to the rising sun. And here lies Claiborne's Creole wife—Clarisse Durald Claiborne—who being a member of the Catholic faith, was buried, not with the heretical Claibornes, but in consecrated soil. She was only twenty-one years of age. Poor Claiborne was unfortunate in his marriages! Her tomb is well preserved, although the crawfish have undermined the soil all around it with their hideous little holes. The broken oyster shells, with which all the cemetery walks are paved in lieu of gravel, are dotted with their little chimneys of clay. Opposite the vault of a noble French family I perceived a little grave so closely adjoining it and so peculiarly situated, that I resolved to examine it. I found it to be the grave of a favorite negro slave. So I copied the inscription, which was cut in script-letter, as a curiosity:

"*Jean Baptiste Aperié, né près d'Akara en Afrique, repose ici le 19 Septembre, 1821, agé de 30 ans. Domestique accompli et infatigable, et probe, il a servi 15 ans sans avoir merité le plus leger reproche.*"

[John Baptist Aperie, born near Akara, in Africa, lies here, September 19 1821, aged thirty years. An accomplished, indefatigable and honest domestic, he served us fifteen years without ever having merited the least reproach.]

"But where," I asked, "is the grave of Claiborne?"

My companion led to the back of the cemetery, and to a small strip of whitewashed plank fence that closed up what seemed to have once been a gate in the great wall of pigeon-hole tombs. I began to wonder whither we could be going. He smiled, and silently pointed over the whitewashed fence into a wilderness of weeds beyond, bounded on its three remaining sides by crumbling walls of ivy-clad brick. "This," he said, "is all that now remains of the old Protestant Cemetery." He climbed over the fence, and I followed him into the space of "unconsecrated ground,"—unsanctified by holy water; unblessed by priestly prayer.

We walked knee-deep in a clinging net-work of ivy and creeping plants over mounds that were tombs,—mounds of marble-topped brick, but so devoured by mosses and overgrown by weeds that they seemed but mounds of clay. In the interspaces between them, which it required the greatest care to avoid falling into, a hideous reptile life had found a home. The ghastly crawfish had undermined the damp soil with little galleries; and their earthen "chimneys" were innumerable. Lizards of many colors were running hither and thither; and once I caught a glimpse of something that was not a lizard, writhing its way through the underbrush.

"Why, there are snakes here!" I cried.

"Very probably," replied my companion. "They love the dwelling places of the dead, and it is not uncommon to find a snake coiled up in the seat of the brain, protruding its head through the eye-socket of the skull."

In the midst of the desolation there was a black hollow, filled with the ashes of burned coffins, and the tinsel of the undertaker, blackened by fire—the plated nails sold for silver in some forgotten year and the plated crucifix of sheet iron fastened upon the coffin, to aid the poor soul over the Phlegethon of Purgatory, as was the *obole* placed in the mouths of the antique dead to pay the Ferryman of the Styx. But these were from the Catholic cemetery on the other side. For the pigeon holes in which the dead are filed away are only rented for a term of years, and when the rent expires, the coffins are withdrawn, the bones taken out of them and replaced in the furthest end of the narrow tombs, that there may be room for other coffins and other generations. And it is in the remnant of the old Protestant cemetery that these mouldering coffins are burnt, after the worms have done their work.

My companion led me to the solitary tomb that rose above the level of this wilderness of ruins and weeds. It must have been a costly tomb seventy years ago, but giant growths of pallid ivy had climbed up its four sides and over it, as though striving to pull it down. I strove to pull away one of the plants, that I might the more easily decipher the characters upon the tomb; but I could not; for the weird plant clung to the stone with a strange fleshless strength, that seemed akin to the strength of the Skeleton, Death. Nevertheless, with the help of my friend, I succeeded in reading the epitaphs. On the south side I discovered the following inscription, of which the words "Hic Jacet" were lost by the crumbling of the sandstone, and I saw that a single rude touch would have caused the whole surface to crumble:

"Here rests the mortal remains of Eliza Washington Claiborne, daughter of Major W. T. Lewis, of Tennessee, and wife of William C. C. Claiborne, Governor General of Louisiana, who died at New Orleans, 27th September, 1804, in the 21st year of her age."

On the north side the following inscription was still discernible, although the ivy had planted its green feet so firmly upon the faces of the letters in many places that it was impossible to tear it away:

"Also of Cornelia Tennessee Claiborne, only child of Eliza W. Claiborne, who died the same day with her mother, aged three years."

And lastly, on the west side, I found this:

"Here also rests the body of Micajah Green Lewis, the brother of Eliza W. Claiborne, and private secretary to Governor Claiborne, who fell in a duel, February 14, 1805, in the 25th year of his age."

Some barbarous effort had been made to efface the words "*fell in a duel*," but they were still discernible.

On the eastern face of the tomb there was a bas-relief, which had evidently been executed in the best Italian marble. The design was antique, and the work of an artist. A young mother sleeping on a bed of death, with her child sleeping in her arms, an angel hovering above, about to bestow the wreath emblematic of immortality, a strong man bowed in grief at the foot of the couch; and at its head the symbol of the Roman lictor's *fasces*, surmounted by the cap of Liberty. I noticed that the face of the angel and of the female figure had disappeared, the wreath remained, but the angel's arm was gone; and the relief had been otherwise disfigured. The good marble had cracked and crumbled in the heat of the burning coffins, when the ghastly fires were blazing in the hollow.

"And Claiborne's grave?" I asked.

"There it is, under the shadow of the fence," answered my guide—adding, with irony, "*Why did Claiborne come down here? We did not want him! We did not want his American manners!*"

The grave was only a nameless mound of broken brick, earth, and creeping plants. Yet there is a "Claiborne" street in New Orleans! Yet there is, I believe, a rich firm in New Orleans proud of the name of *Claiborne*, in letters of gold, on the doors of their warehouse! But there are *not* five people in the city of New Orleans who could point to that hideous and lizard haunted tomb, and tell me, "Sir, this is the grave of W. C. C. Claiborne, the first American Governor of Louisiana."

Then I perceived, at the west side of the cemetery, a broken tomb, half bare to view. It was broken because a sinewy young tree had grown up through it and pushed the slab half-way off. It was half bare, because the drooping foliage of the tree had protected it from the consuming grasp of the ivy. But the ivy had seized the tree, and was slowly but surely strangling it to death.

We approached the tomb, and with difficulty clambered upon the inscribed stone. It was moss eaten, and the ivy, in its deadly wrestle with the young tree, blocked the way. Half an hour was expended in efforts to clear the surface of the broken tomb, and to scrape the fungus growths from the graven letters. And then we read this:

In Memory of
WILLIAM P. CANBY,
Midshipman of the United States Navy,
Born in Norfolk Va., August 30 1798,
Who fell in the Unequaled Contest
Between the United States Gunboat
Squadron and the British flotilla
In Lake Borgne, near
New Orleans, December 14,
1814

This was a discovery indeed—the tomb of an officer who had fallen in the battle of Lake Borgne—the fatal engagement in which the English won so dear a victory. "I believe," said my friend, who is a thorough historian, "that we have no record of the grave of any other American officer who fell in that battle. Perhaps a relative of that General Canby killed by the Modocs!"

Is it thus, Louisianians, that ye care for your historic dead!

Then I saw, alas! that the graves had been defiled, the dwellings of the dead had been, in the language of Isaiah, "converted into dunghills." And yet the sexton must have suffered it!

O, hundred-handed ivy, weave yet more closely thy monstrous mesh of tendons and tendrils!—tighten thy strong skeleton grasp upon the stones of these poor tombs till they burst and crumble down upon the crumbling dead!—hide with thy heart-shaped leaves this record of heartlessness, till kind Nature, our all-loving, all-forgiving Mother, shall have effaced the last trace of inhumanity!

OZIAS MIDWINTER.