

## A Baratarian Elaine.

BY HENRY E. CHAMBERS.



INTO the northwestern corner of Barataria Bay, one of those many indentations in the coast of Southern Louisiana, extends a small bayou. Up this quiet inlet about half a mile the land attains a height unusual to marshy stretches of country, owing to accumulations of sea shells so vast as to form a miniature island.

Upon this island, surrounded by massive live-oaks whose gnarled limbs, festooned with long pendants of gray Spanish moss, sway lazily in the Gulf breezes, stands a cottage of unique structure. Timbered pillars hold it six feet from the ground. Along its whole front extends a broad porch from which descends a wide stairway to the shell walk leading to the primitive wharf in front.

The cottage is built of nondescript material. Posts, planks, puncheons, slabs, shingles, sheet iron, and patches of zinc — all enter into its composition; but age has so cast her tints of grays, and browns, and brownish greens about the whole structure that all incongruous elements are blended into a pleasing harmony.

Up the front steps the visitor may go, and, whoever he may be, he invariably receives the same greeting from the three occupants. At the head of the steps will stand an old man of massive proportions, ruddy, unwrinkled face, and luxuriant white hair and beard. Framed by the doorway at the left end of the porch, or gallery, will wait questioningly a girl, whose slim figure and spirituelle beauty are emphasized by flowing garments of spotless white, almost Greek in their simplicity. Peering from a small opening at the other end of the gallery will appear a weazened, wrinkled, scowling black face, surmounted by gray, wiry wool. The old man will extend his hand to the visitor; the maiden will silently withdraw from the doorway; and a sliding shutter will be slammed over the opening used by the black for observation.

There are no other houses in the neighborhood. Ten miles down the bay where the scattered fisher settlements begin one may learn, upon inquiry, that the venerable man at the head of the steps is old Majeur; that the girl in the doorway is his granddaughter, Lasthenie; and that the black face belongs to Zabo, a faithful family servant. One may also learn that Majeur went to the island many years ago; that the greater part of his life has been spent in search of the treasure of the pirate smuggler, Lafitte, supposed to have been buried thereabout; and that one must look well in roaming over the island, since the evidence of this life-long search still remains in numberless weed-covered pits, into which the unwary may fall.

As to the granddaughter — well, the swains of Caminada have never given themselves any concern over the girl upon Shell Island. The distance to paddle in a light pirogue is enough to cool the wooing ardor of even young men of Latin race.

Moreover, to them she seems not strong. She would not, in their opinion, be equal to the duties of the Caminada housewife, — duties that include the portering of heavy baskets of oysters, the stringing, in season, of countless catches of wild ducks for the New Orleans markets, and, incidentally, the bearing and rearing of a score or more of children.

To this household, so isolated, so unique, it was an event of red-letter significance when, in the sunset, one November evening, a strange white craft, almost supernatural in its spotlessness, rounded the innermost portion of the inlet and cast anchor in the lagoon-like portion of the bayou, on which the cottage fronted. A pleasure yacht an observer might have guessed, but though everything about it from snowy sails and tautly drawn cordage to white, spotless hull betokened a vessel designed for no gainful usage, it was no pleasure trip that had brought the *Duchess* to this remote corner of the world. A cruise in the tropics had indeed been the ostensible purpose of its owner, Lord Beresford, but the real clue lay in a certain time-yellowed chart, the gift of a dying sailor, in which the location of great treasure was ascribed to a region marked Baratania.

With these details, however, this narrative is concerned only so far as it serves to introduce into the family life at the cottage

the one member of the yacht's party not involved in the quest for treasure. A quest, indeed, Wyatt Astley had engaged in when he became Beresford's guest, but one of subtler nature.

Five years before, Wyatt Astley had gone from a rural shire in England to the art schools of Paris, poor in technique but rich in dreams. At the end of those years he had become a master of coloring and drawing, but his dreams no longer inspired him. That they still lived is evident from the fact that, his apprenticeship finished, he chose for his masterpiece that subject which had for years beckoned to him—the portraiture of Sir Galahad, the Pure. But the inspiration by whose fire alone he could forge success of conception or execution had been frittered away in lesser impulses.

Though perfect in technique and applauded by his fellow-artists, his picture lacked the spiritual quality by which, alone, a painting becomes great.

His Sir Galahad was only a costumed model!

In the light of this self-knowledge Astley had, six months ago, abandoned his profession. This decision, unexplained, undefended, had brought about estrangement from his family, and after weeks of apathy and idleness he had accepted with thankfulness an invitation that would put half the world between him and the scene of his failure.

In short, he had come in search of the draught of forgetfulness.

With his first day at Shell Island, however, the picturesque aspect of that simple habitation, and its unworldly atmosphere had roused the artist in him. Obtaining the good-natured acquiescence of old Majeur, he devised with screens and rugs from the yacht an impromptu studio at one end of the broad gallery. Here he established himself while his companions made their expeditions to various points, old Majeur, meantime, chuckling over the fact that there were other treasure-seeking fools in the world beside himself.

With the old man as model, Wyatt made a number of studies and sketches of great strength and excellence. While he was thus engaged there flitted about him the girlish figure of Lathenie in its graceful garb of white. Wyatt could not help but observe the fresh, rare beauty of this product of the Louisiana

marshes. He wondered how one sprung from the Latin antecedents which the neighborhood indicated could have hair as yellow gold as that of the purest Saxon type, and flesh tints as pink and white as are boasted by England's proudest beauties. All about her clung an indescribable air of maidenly reserve and modesty which bespoke purity and innocence of mind and heart. The tear shine which made the whites of her eyes to sparkle at times, even extending as dew dust to the long, drooping lashes, gave indication of deep and easily stirred feeling.

It was while noting all this that an inspiration came to Wyatt, as it comes to many a man in the presence of a pure, good woman. He would turn his back upon the past, and become one of this humble primitive household. He recalled the many instances which history gives of spiritual exaltation following upon renunciation and seclusion. He would reduce the terms of his life to simplest form, tear out the brambles that, crowding upon sincerity and rectitude, had been feeding upon the soil of his finer qualities. Not that he had been any worse than others of his set and class, but he had been no better; and whoever would be a leader of the thought and feeling of his fellowman should himself be above those whom he would have to follow him.

So Wyatt decided to begin anew to make his way to that higher spiritual plane from whose winning he had turned aside. To him Lasthenie became an idealized being. From the spotless page of her pure life unfolding before him he began to study anew the lesson of existence. Never before had he so understood the peculiar fascination which memories and traditions, relics and portraiture of maiden saints have for the minds of devout male worshippers.

And Lasthenie, standing upon the threshold of womanhood when he first found her, crossed over at his coming to the region beyond. All around were voices calling to her, voices as sweet as angel's whisper, for they told of inexpressible happiness. She did not know that they were the voices of love, and that exquisite happiness sometimes meant exquisite pain.

So the *Duchess* sailed away from her fruitless quest, but Wyatt remained behind.

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Some six months after the *Duchess* sailed, Wyatt stood one morning in the gallery studio before a painting which he had examined for the last time, — and found no need of further finishing touch. Once more he had drawn upon the legends of King Arthur for his subject. Upon the easel was a picture of Elaine of Astolat. The maiden was represented as standing by the shield which Lancelot had entrusted to her keeping. One hand held by her side the cover she had broidered; the other was pressed to her bosom as if to still the uncertainty that was clinging about her heart. She had withdrawn her gaze from the shield, had ceased for a time to speculate upon cruel dent and blurred marking. Her attitude was one of meditation. All infinity seemed to look forth from her eyes, and her face was wondrously illumined, — the face of a maiden whose thought was of a lover good, strong, brave, and true, wearing even then her favor upon distant field of journey. Hung in the salon of some art center it were an exquisite example of the ideal in art. Here on Shell Island it was realism itself, for the face, the expression, the pose, the personality, was each that of Lasthenie.

Throughout the time that Wyatt had been at work, Lasthenie entered tirelessly into every one of his plans and suggestions. He had read and reread to her Tennyson's rendering of the story of Elaine, until its spirit seemed to take full possession of her. The wonderful responsiveness of her expression as successive passages were expounded to her had done as much for the work as his own skill. To her he owed it that at last he had painted a picture that would live.

He was now ready to make his way to England. He knew that this product of his brush would there be crowned with laurel. He had a deeper purpose in view, however. It was to become reconciled with his family, so that when he again returned with the Baratarian maiden an agreeable environment would be prepared for her.

He would not tell Lasthenie of the love that had taken full possession of him. She might not yet fully understand, and even if she did, his absence might cause her uneasiness should he knot any more firmly the ties that already bound them. He, however, spoke freely about his contemplated prompt return to Shell Island.

So Zabo was sent to Caminada to leave word that the first oyster-lugger leaving for New Orleans should stop and take the Englishman and his baggage aboard. A day or two afterwards, at daylight in the morning, a hail from the bayou was heard. Wyatt hastily dressed, and, with his picture carefully wrapped and boxed, made ready to go aboard the waiting lugger.

Majeur and Zabo were up, and Wyatt wrung their hands in parting. Lasthenie he did not see, but she, pale faced and moist eyed, was straining her gaze to get a last view of him from behind the edge of her curtained window. Softly he wafted a kiss in her direction, little knowing she was behind the shade. She saw and her sorrow was lightened, but not to such an extent that she did not fling herself upon the floor before the little shrine of Saint Joseph in her room and give broken utterance to prayer until almost exhausted. She prayed for the saint's care of him now making his way to the distant land where perhaps was only oblivion of such as her. She prayed for pity for herself.

After the departure of Wyatt the usual quiet of Shell Island seemed to take on a greater intensity. Into the starved lives of the island's three he had come, imparted a vast store of new ideas and experiences, and left a rich legacy of memories and reflections. He was always uppermost in their minds. Sentences spoken between long intervals of silence were threaded into connectedness by intervening periods of thought of him.

His studio had been left intact as earnest that he would come again. A life of expectancy is one not difficult to live, but when hope sinks into hopelessness the reaction bears heavily upon mind and spirit. What could be keeping him was the question which Lasthenie silently and continually asked herself as the days sped by. Surely he said that it took only fifteen or twenty days to reach his country. He promised, oh, he promised to return!

Much of her time Lasthenie spent in the studio. There, seated upon a low footstool near the easel, she would meditate amid the surroundings once animated by his presence. There was his palette. How like a shield it was! Every splotch upon its surface was where he had dipped the spear-point of his brush. Had he come into her life only to wound and hurt her? See, there is where he mixed the colors for her arm and shoulder,—a little

carmine, a very little pale yellow, and a great deal of flake white. This blue spot is cobalt. That is what he used for the eyes. Were hers really as blue? How he did look at her while he was at work upon that part of the picture, and how hard it had been for her to gaze as unflinchingly as he wanted her to, and she knowing all the time that his own eyes were steadily upon her! Thus would her thoughts run along.

But months came and went until she counted that eight times had the new-born crescent moon peered in at twilight through the little side window of her modest room. Each time she had carefully posted herself in such manner as to catch the first glimpse of it over her right shoulder; for Zabo, in the days of her earliest recollection, had instilled in her mind the efficacy of this all-compelling ceremony to bring about good fortune.

But the good fortune still delayed. Hope turned into apathy. She was in very truth Elaine, Elaine the lily maid, forgotten and forlorn. Singular it was how the vigor of youth began to leave her limbs, and to what low ebb her vitality was sinking. Men of science are wont to shrug their shoulders at any suggestion of a cause of disease other than a purely physical one. In Lasthenie's case they would have pointed to the surrounding marsh, and laid the blame upon its miasms. Yet sickness of spirit is a reality tangible enough to find expression in any highly tensioned human being; and it was with such sickness that Lasthenie was stricken.

One morning in early October, however, Lasthenie came from her room with a shining face. "She had a good dream," was all that she said to her anxious father; but all that day she sang softly to herself, and that evening she called old Zabo to one side, with a look that made him ejaculate that she surely had her good fortune at last.

But pleasure changed to consternation on the black, wrinkled face, and the bent body, gnarled, knotty, and long limbed as any near-by oak, cringed in an attitude of remonstrance and supplication when the old servant listened to the instructions that his young mistress laid upon him.

Yet silent and grotesquely unwilling as he seemed, Lasthenie knew his devotion; she knew that he would carry out her wishes to the end.

Once again night descended over the dark waters of Barataria, and found the white yacht, *Duchess*, at anchor before Caminada. Although upon her was one impatient of delay, not until morning would she spread her white wings and sail for the northwest corner of the bay.

Aboard was a lively yachting party, friends and relatives of Wyatt Astley's, who had heard from the artist himself the story of his masterpiece, and had come out with him to meet the original, and reassure her as to the welcome that would await her in England. For the painter of Elaine had not deceived himself. Heart and hand had worked in such harmony as to produce a picture that won the twofold applause of people and critics. In the elation of success he had sought and achieved reconciliation with his family, and what with the renewing of old ties and the weaving of new affiliations months had melted away with the apparent rapidity of years on the stage. Yet all the time the undercurrent of his thoughts had flowed toward Lasthenic. For her he had delayed in London, to establish himself with friends and relatives, critics and art buyers; and to-night as he sat with the gay party on the after-deck he tried vainly to appear one of them. Little by little there stole over him a feeling of depression and uneasiness, until the sound of merry young voices, the tinkle of mandolins, the strumming of guitars, seemed thousands of miles away.

So deep was his reverie that he failed to note, presently, when the music died away, and the eyes of the rest of the party were turned toward a light that moved slowly over the bay. Neither did he hear their whispered questionings as to the nature of that blazing spot of fire, or their awed exclamations as little by little it approached nearer and still nearer to the vessel. He was not roused even when one after another those around him stole to the gunwales, leaning far out to follow the movements of the mysterious light, and to watch emerge from the darkness some low craft to which it was attached.

A long dugout or pirogue it seemed to be, and it moved to the slow and steady stroke of a paddle. And presently as it crept still nearer to the yacht, upon those watching above fell the silence of awe; for stretched out apparently asleep in the center of the little



craft was the form of a maiden draped all in white. Marsh lilies were about her head, clasped in her folded hands, and strewn over her coverlet. In the stern sat a black, grotesque creature, glaring upward and plying the paddle. Back of him, extended over the wake of the canoe-like boat, was a long pole, at the end of which was fastened a pan-like utensil. Upon this had been placed some sticks of resinous wood, whose flame was now casting a ghastly light over the whole.

And suddenly the flaring light fell upon the face of Astley, and his eyes were unsealed.

With an exclamation long remembered by those who heard it, he sprang to the taffrail. The negro saw him.

“Ay yi yah! De *Bon Dieu!* M’sha As’lee!” the gnome-like creature gibbered. “Hyeh Lashenie. Yas, das she. Das Lashenie. She say yo’ come when she daid. She learn it in a dream. She know, *pauvre petite*. She mek me do lak dat, — mek me tek beh to Caminada lak dat.”

The black continued, little heeded by the spell-bound spectators, as if communing with himself aloud.

“She say, ‘Zabo, yo’ bin one good nigga.’ Me, I all time do lak she say. She say, ‘Zabo, when I daid, yo’ tek pirogue. Yo’ put me in pirogue. Yo’ cov’ me all wid white, — no coffin, no nuttin’, only white dress, white sheet. Yo’ cross my han’ lak dat. Yo’ get some lily; yo’ put plenty, plenty — some by d’ haid, some by d’ han’, some here some dere. Yo’ get in pirogue. Yo’ paddle *doucement*, — slow, slow. Yo’ ain’ got fo’ hurry, Zabo. Yo’ tek me to Caminada. Yo’ tek me to d’ pries’. He goin’ put me in d’ groun’.’ Me, I do lak she say.”

The whole story was evident at a glance. Wyatt felt as if a hand were grasping at his throat, and cords were being tightly drawn around his heart. He would have fallen to the deck had not Beresford stepped up and put an arm around him.

“Order out the yawl, Beresford,” he brokenly said. “I go to Caminada to-night. I must be there when she lands. God help me, those lilies are for me. I delayed too long.”

Wyatt was ashore awaiting the corpse when it landed. He was in the little chapel when the priest performed the last sad rites. He and Zabo were the only mourners at the grave side,

although the kindly disposed Caminada folk contributed their respectful presence. The shock of Lasthenie's death had greatly enfeebled old Majeur. Wyatt went to him, and remained with him to the end. Then he took up his abode upon Caminada. Such articles as he needed or desired came to him once or twice a year from England.

For years excursionists to Caminada from the neighboring summer resort of Grand Isle often noticed the tall, white-haired Englishman that lived in inseparable companionship with the kindly Catholic priest who ministered to the spiritual needs of the humble fisher-folk. Only last year he was seen no more, and another mound made its appearance beside the spot where Lasthenie was laid. To the very last the fact that he had kept his promise and returned to her was a great consolation to him. At least he had been spared the anguish that would have unceasingly been his had she made that last sad journey with the lilies in her hands for him, and he not at the journey's end to receive her. If fidelity to love's memory makes love eternal, then must we believe that all is well with the two sleepers upon beautiful Caminada.

