

Also by Frances Patton Statham

Bright Sun, Dark Moon

Daughters of the Summer Storm

Jasmine Moon

Phoenix Rising

From Love's Ashes

On Wings of Fire

To Face the Sun

The Roswell Women

The Roswell Legacy

Trail of Tears

Mary Musgrove, Queen of Savannah

The Silk Train

Mountain Legacy

Murder, al fresco

Flame of New Orleans

Frances Patton Statham

Bocage Books

Flame of New Orleans

Copyright (c) 1977 Frances Patton Statham

First Edition: 1977 Fawcett Gold Medal Books,

A unit of CBS Publications

Second Edition: 2012 Bocage Books

www.bocagebooks.com

ISBN: 0-9675233-9-7

(Previously ISBN: 0-449-13720-1)

Cover Design by Steve McAfee

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this
book or portions thereof in any form.

All characters in this book are fictitious, and any
resemblance to persons living or dead is purely
coincidental.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

To my sons—

George and Tim

Flame of New Orleans

Prologue

"*T*hey're coming!" a childish, high-pitched voice shouted. "They're coming from the levee!"

The belfry from Christ Church on Canal Street began to toll the alarm and the news rapidly spread to every corner of New Orleans.

The sky was still black with smoke. Flaming ghost ships sailed unattended down the river and the sickening odor of burning cotton and sugar permeated the air.

Frantic, shrill voices of mothers calling to their children added to the din of bells and the drubbing of feet against the cobblestones. Children were snatched from open doorways, doors were barred, and suddenly the only signs of life in the Vieux Carré were the enormously wide frightened eyes staring from behind tatted lace curtains—eyes watching warily for the approach of the enemy.

At the noise and uneasiness along the levee, an old brown pelican extended his six-foot wing span and, hoisting his awkward body from the wooden pile, he flew to a deserted lagoon where he could watch in peace for the mullet and menhaden to fill his empty pouch.

Aimée, hearing the alarm, hurried from the shelter of the walled garden onto the banquette, anxious to see these Yankees who had come to take over her city. Her foot slipped and splashed in the gutter, where molasses flowed in a sluggish torrent. Not waiting to rescue the slipper caught in the sticky morass, she walked quickly on, pressing her hooded cape close to her in an attempt to keep the rain from her face.

A newspaper caught against a lamp post fluttered in the breeze, its headlines streaked by the rain. Only the date, April 25, 1862, was readable in the top right-hand corner. But Aimée had no need to scan the paper. She knew the news by heart.

The two lonely forts at Plaquemind Bend, guarding the seventy-odd miles of river, had not been sufficient defense, as Beauregard had warned, to repel the enemy. And so, the flotilla of ships, gunboats, and smaller vessels had sailed from the Gulf, breaking the chain across the river channel, hurrying past the ineffective guns of the forts, in its unceasing drive to the very doors of New Orleans.

And now, the general in charge of defending the city was evacuating his troops farther upriver, since the city was lost.

Still, Aimée could not believe that this was actually happening. When the war first started, her brother, Etienne, had teasingly pinched her cheek and said, "Do not worry, *ma petite*. We will have the Yankees whipped in no time. Have the gumbo waiting on the stove. I like it hot, you know." But despite his attempt at lightness, he had left with a heavy heart.

Never again would he taste the hot gumbo he loved, or dip the hard crusts of bread into the thick, black coffee. Never again would he tease her, pulling her curls or pinching her cheek—for Etienne had fallen at Shiloh.

Aimée's tears of silent, frustrated anger mingled with the drops of rain falling on her cheeks.

Closer to the square, the people crowded the banquettes and spilled over into the streets, but they made little noise, for they were listening for the tramping of feet.

Aimée stood on tiptoe, but she was too far back to see everything.

"*Mon Dieu*, they are fierce looking," someone whispered.

Just then, she found a small opening and quickly pressed through to see the sailors and marines marching up the street. Their bayonets were fixed and their faces alert to the hostile expressions of people lining the streets.

There was no military authority present to answer the formal demands of surrender. The only civil official on hand, the town mayor, took no part in the ceremony, but walked down the steps and stood with arms crossed, directly in front of one of the howitzers, in an attitude of protection for his people.

Aimée clenched her fists as the pelican flag was replaced by another flag, but there was nothing she could do, nothing anyone could do, with the howitzers pointing at them, ready to fire at the first sign of disorder.

As quickly as it had begun, the ceremony was over. The uniformed squads moved across the square, taking their weapons with them. The city now belonged to the enemy.

Dejectedly, Aimée drifted from the square with the other spectators surrounding her. The rain had slackened and Aimée, now conscious of eyes turning in her direction, watching her furtively, and elbows jostling her with an occasional jab as she picked her way through the debris of the streets, felt a tremor of alarm. What would Grand-père say if he should discover that she had gone to the square alone?

She had tried so hard to please Grand-père and Tante Dee Dee ever since she and Etienne had come from Thornfell to live with them. But she had constantly been in trouble because of her impulsive, exuberant behavior. Today there would be only one person to reprimand her for her actions. The fever had carried Tante Dee Dee away, and only Grand-père remained—kind, sweet Grand-père, who was at a loss to oversee an impetuous virgin of marriageable age, without Tante Dee Dee's firm hand.

Up Royal Street Aimée went, until the three-storied old pink stucco and brick house, with its black shuttered windows and wrought-iron balcony covered with bougainvillea, came into view.

She opened the gate and walked down the passageway into the walled courtyard, until she faced the door framed by leaded, fan-shaped glass. The dull reflection of her movements brought the glass to life as she stepped out of the one remaining slipper and shook the water from her cape before opening the heavy oak door.

"Aimée, child, where have you been?" the frail old man's voice demanded from the edge of the stairs.

"To...to the square, Grand-père." Aimée quickly swallowed and nervously pushed back the wet, red-gold hair that hung limply in her face.

"The square?" Grand-père questioned. "You went to the square with *canaille* crowding the streets today?" The blue eyes were piercing and Aimée hastily explained.

"I had to see for myself these enemies—these Yankees."

Grand-père clucked his tongue in disapproval. "That was not wise, *ma chère*. But I suppose I shall have to be satisfied that you came to no harm with Lisette accompanying you."

At her sudden start, his eyes narrowed. "Lisette *did* go with you, did she not?"

Aimée hesitated but she knew she must tell the truth. "No, Grand-père. Lisette was busy."

"So you went alone," he said, shaking his head sadly and sighing. "So headstrong. In my day, a young girl's reputation was ruined if she appeared on the street without a maid or chaperone. If you had only taken Lisette." Again, he sighed. "What would Dee Dee say, if she knew?"

"I'm sorry, Grand-père. I hope you're not too angry with me."

But Grand-père made no reply. His eyes had become hazy and his thoughts were seemingly lost in the past. Aimée gazed at him, her face showing her love for the white-haired old man.

His elegant way of life had disappeared and there was little left of the society he knew, with all the young men away at war. As the days passed, even the servants had become more insolent, sensing the change in the air. But Grand-père, so attuned to the tradition of the world he knew, refused to face the change and, perhaps for him, it was best. He would not understand alien things.

Let him remain happy a little longer, Aimée prayed, lost in his world of what used to be—what used to be before the enemy came.

Chapter 1

"*Aimée!* *Aimée!* Stop your dancing and settle down. If you want to be at your prettiest tonight, you must rest the entire afternoon. And do put your dress back before you spoil it."

"But Tante Dee Dee, I'm too excited to rest. And isn't it the most beautiful dress in the whole world?"

Whirling about the room, *Aimée* hugged the white debutante dress to her slim body until her dizziness forced her to release it to Tante Dee Dee's outstretched hands, before collapsing on the high tester bed whose mosquito netting had been pushed out of the way.

"Just think," *Aimée* said, bouncing up immediately. "I am sixteen today, and in a few hours, I shall be sitting in the opera box, like any other grownup, wearing a Paris gown and waiting to be presented to society."

The turquoise eyes clouded momentarily. "Do you think I shall be ignored, Tante Dee Dee? I will die if none of the young gentlemen come to our box during intermission."

Tante Dee Dee's voice rang through the room in an amusing ripple of laughter as she hung up the dress.

"You? Ignored? *Ma chérie*, that is an impossibility. Have I not seen how Etienne's friends have watched

you with covetous looks? I only feel sorry for the other young girls who do not have your bewitching turquoise eyes and flaming hair. And I should not be surprised, *Aimée*, if several young gentlemen were to ask your grand-père this very night for his permission to call upon you tomorrow."

"Do you actually think so? Or are you only determined to make me feel better?"

"I am *determined* to get you to rest. It would be embarrassing, would it not, to go to sleep in the opera box like some *enfant* kept up beyond her bedtime?"

"Oh, Tante Dee Dee!" *Aimée* responded in an exasperated voice. Immediately she curled up on her bed and shut her eyes. The door closed softly and the footsteps of her aunt vanished down the hallway.

When *Aimée* awoke, a shiver of excitement ran through her body. She made a long, lazy stretch, lifting her arms high over her head and touching her toes to the carved footboard.

Her eyes, sweeping over the room, focused on the pale pink chair tied with bowknots of ribbons, on the armoire carved in the rococo manner with cupids and flowers, and finally latched onto the shelves near the window. The row of dolls sat on the top shelf and stared at her with their painted eyes—one doll for each year she had lived with Tante Dee Dee and Grand-père.

Suddenly she frowned as the realization struck her. It was a little girl's room. The dolls should have been relegated to the attic long ago, with Etienne's toy soldiers and other amusements that she and her brother had outgrown.

The noise of the rattling tray brought her back to the present, and *Aimée* sprang to her feet, her nose wrinkling at the aroma of food nearby.

"Supper will be quite late tonight, *Aimée*, so I had Lisette fix you a tray," Tante Dee Dee explained,

carrying the food into her room and setting the tray by the bedside.

"You are spoiling me, Tante Dee Dee, bringing food up to my room. I could have come downstairs for it myself."

The gray-haired, plump little woman smiled. "It is not every day that the Saint-Moreau family has a daughter come of age," she said, walking back toward the door. "A little cossetting will not harm you after so many years of being forced to conform to our strict ways." Tante Dee Dee held to the knob, while glancing over her shoulder at Aimée. "But it was for your own good, even if the lessons were hard to take."

"All for '*le nom de la famille*,'" Aimée said softly when the door had closed. And then she blushed, remembering the day Tante Dee Dee had caught her swinging on the gate to the street with Etienne. How ashamed she had felt to be reprimanded not only by Grand-père in his study, but later upstairs in her bedroom by Tante Dee Dee.

"The honor of the family is in your hands, Aimée, and you must never betray it."

That lesson had been branded on her mind by Grand-père's quiet, sober words. His soft syllables had seared the message far deeper into her Creole heart than any sterner tone could have done.

"It is not appropriate for a Saint-Moreau to be seen flagrantly showing her petticoats to passersby," Tante Dee Dee had added in the privacy of the bedroom. "If one breath of scandal were even whispered about you, Aimée, no Creole gentleman of any standing whatever would offer marriage. And such disgrace to the family—you might even be forced to marry one of those *Americains*," her aunt said disparagingly. "That is, if you did not wish to remain a spinster. Do you understand, Aimée?"

She nodded and the slow, burning blush of remorse crept up from her neck to spread over her cheeks.

Aimée's fingers touched her cheeks as she remembered. "I was only a child then," she said aloud. "Today I am a grown-up." She smiled to herself and picked up the piece of chicken—picked it up and daintily stripped the meat to press into her mouth.

The house was soon filled with the rush of getting dressed for the opera. Lisette ran from one room to the other, helping first Tante Dee Dee and then Aimée, using the curling tongs to make several last minute repairs on Aimée's curls after she had slipped the shimmering white satin gown over her many crinolines.

"I think I shall faint, Lisette—if not from excitement, at least from this tight corset," Aimée complained.

"Now, Miss Aimée, I did jes' what Miss Dee Dee tol' me to. You can't go to the opera house without a corset on. You's a lady now and you jes' has to get used to feelin' like a lady."

"What is my niece complaining about, Lisette?" Tante Dee Dee asked, appearing at the door and patting her salt-and-pepper curls that had been darkened by the coffee rinse.

"Miss Aimée don't like the feelin' of her corset nippin' at her waist. I tol' her all the ladies wears 'em. Ain't no use to complain."

Tante Dee Dee scrutinized Aimée's appearance from the top of her head to the dainty white satin slippers that matched her dress ordered from Paris months before, in anticipation of her debut into Creole society.

"My dear, you should be happy that you have so little to worry about," her aunt admonished. "Now, get your bouquet. It's time to go. I can hear your brother Etienne and Papa downstairs. They won't wait forever for us. Do you have your lace fan?"

"Yes, Tante Dee Dee."

Aimée made her way downstairs—walking behind her aunt, since her white dress and crinolines took up the entire width of the stairs.

"The horses are getting restless, Grand-père," Etienne's voice complained. "I wish they would hurry." Etienne's voice stopped and he stared at the two who had come into the hall.

"Tante Dee Dee, you look quite elegant tonight."

"Thank you, Etienne."

Then he turned to stare at Aimée. "But I don't recognize the young lady with you. She looks as if she has just stepped out of the chinoiserie wallpaper—all white and gold." His eyes opened wide and, mockingly, as if he had made an important discovery, he teased, "Can it be my little snippet of a sister who had jam on her face this morning? How did you perform the miracle, Tante Dee Dee?"

"Etienne, if you don't stop your teasing, I'll...I'll..." Aimée headed toward her dark-haired brother, handsomely attired in evening clothes, but he quickly stepped aside.

"Yes, it's my little sister, all right. I recognize her temper."

"Now, Etienne," Grand-père said in an amused voice. "Do not disturb Aimée. This is an important night for her." Grand-père walked to Aimée's side and offered his arm. "Come, my dear, and make an old man happy to attend the opera with the most beautiful young lady of all by his side."

"Thank you, Grand-père," Aimée said gratefully, reaching up to kiss him on the cheek.

"Well, Tante Dee Dee, shall we show these two what true elegance is?" Etienne bowed low before his aunt and placed her cape over her shoulders with a flourish before holding out his arm for her plump hand.

Raoul drove the carriage down the drive and onto the street. He headed for the corner of Bourbon and Toulouse streets, where the French Opera House waited with its chandeliers of a thousand twinkling prisms that put to shame the meager light of the street.

Grand-père, Aimée, Tante Dee Dee, and Etienne stepped down from the carriage and onto the carpeting that had been spread at the entrance to save the beautiful gowns from being ruined by the mud.

Other carriages were lined up to deposit their passengers and Aimée gave a startled gasp at the beauty of the woman being helped from the next carriage. But Tante Dee Dee quickly diverted Aimée's attention to the chandeliers as they climbed the flight of carpeted stairs to the horseshoe-shaped boxes of the opera house.

Their box was filled with flowers, as were many others that contained young girls now at an age to be launched into society. Aimée took her seat and her turquoise eyes showed her excitement at being treated as a grown-up, while her fingers worried the streamers to her bouquet.

"I am so excited." Aimée whispered to Grand-père, "that I have forgotten which opera is being given tonight."

"It is *La Fille du Régiment* by Donizetti," he replied. "The new soprano, who has just arrived to sing the leading role, has been widely acclaimed in Europe. I am eager to hear her sing—to compare her with La Belle Marie, who sang the role last year."

Grand-père's eyes twinkled and he leaned in a more intimate pose. "But I will keep the comparison to myself, lest Pierre Marin challenge me to a duel if I should think her better than La Belle Marie."

"Oh, Grand-père, would he really do that?"

"You must not talk, Aimée," Tante Dee Dee scolded. "The opera is to begin."

Aimée, happy to have the lights dim, straightened in her chair. At least for a little while, she was safe from the indignity of being ignored. But at intermission—oh, how she wished that intermission would never come.

As the conductor walked to the orchestra pit to the applause of the audience, Aimée turned her head slightly and gazed upward to the balconies. In the hierarchy of seating, Raoul would be in the top balcony with the other blacks who had come to the opera, but Aimée could not see him. And the young gentlemen, including Etienne's friends, who she was so afraid would ignore her, were scattered throughout the boxes, as well as the orchestra section. No woman would dare sit in the orchestra section, for that was reserved for men alone.

Aimée heard very little of the music after the overture. The soprano was too plump, and the tenor was squat and solid, not at all the type for a hero. But much too soon, they had stopped singing and the audience was applauding.

There was nothing Aimée could do but wait miserably for her humiliation. As soon as the house lights brightened, she turned to Tante Dee Dee at her side and whispered, "I don't feel well, Tante Dee Dee. May we...may we leave now?"

"Etienne, old fellow," the voice called out from the back of the box, interrupting Tante Dee Dee's answer. "I missed you today at the Metarie races."

"Prosper," Etienne's voice replied. "What a surprise to see you here. I was not aware that you enjoyed opera."

"Well, you know how it is," he answered smoothly. "A little culture is not a bad thing to have."

"Tante Dee Dee," Etienne began, "may I present my friend, Prosper Gautier."

Aimée glanced up and saw the interested look in the tall, handsome, fair-haired man's eyes. She immediately brightened as she was introduced to him, but there was no chance for conversation, for two others had made their appearances at Etienne's side.

There was a telltale look of triumph in Tante Dee Dee's eyes when the three young men cornered Grand-père for conversations before leaving the box.

Aimée nervously fluttered her lace fan while the male eyes continued to scrutinize her appearance much more thoroughly than Tante Dee Dee had before they left home.

I wonder if they would like to look in my mouth to see the state of my teeth, mused Aimée, feeling like a filly they were considering purchasing. The thought made her giggle, but at Tante Dee Dee's stern frown in her direction, she quickly lifted her fan and hid the smile lurking at the corners of her mouth.

With the steady coming and going of young men anxious to be presented to the flaming-haired girl, Etienne had disappeared—probably to do a little close-up investigation of his own, thought Aimée. She saw him in the next box as he talked with the parents of her best friend, Michele.

Michele also had admirers surrounding her, and her dark beauty was emphasized by the elegant white dress decorated with pale pink rosebuds at the sleeves and neck. Michele lifted her head and, turning in Aimée's direction, smiled at her, acknowledging their friendship and the success of their first night at the opera. Of course, it was no surprise to Aimée that Michele was a success. For two years she had been practicing the pretty pout and the sudden lowering of eyelashes that so devastated a man. But it was Etienne that she was determined to bring to quarry, and now he had disappeared from her box.

Michele suddenly flipped her fan shut, indicating her annoyance at the conversation around her.

As the lights lowered for the second half of the opera, Etienne slipped into his seat behind Tante Dee Dee.

"Etienne," Grand-père said beside him in a low, disapproving voice. "Did I see you with Madame Calti a moment ago?"

Aimée watched while Etienne's face colored and his voice stammered. "I...I went to speak with her escort about the race."

"It would be better for you if you did not seek out such questionable company, especially with all the young ladies' mothers watching you. Your timing is off, my son."

"At least the man had the grace to hide her in one of the *loges grilles*," Tante Dee Dee added.

"Who is Madame Calti?" a curious Aimée asked.

"You are not to speak her name, Aimée," the woman replied. "For you, such creatures do not exist." And that was the end of the conversation.

The singers began and, for the first time that evening, Aimée relaxed to listen to the music. Forgotten were the incongruous appearances of the singers. The music was all that mattered—the spinning of golden threads of sound throughout the French Opera House. No wonder the performances were discussed for days in the coffeehouses and barber shops, with tempers sometimes flaring into a duel at The Oaks because of some imagined slur on a favorite singer.

Aimée's heart responded to the music and with the response came a new understanding of her grand-père's world of pride, elegance, and beauty. She joined in the enthusiasm, applauding the singers for their performances as the curtain fell. Red roses were carried onto the stage and the soprano graciously accepted

them and acknowledged the applause with a kiss nimbly conveyed from her lips to her outswept fingers.

"She is far better than La Belle Marie," Grand-père whispered to Aimée, "but I shall never mention this to Monsieur Marin."

"Where do we go now, Grand-père?" Aimée asked, leaving the opera box under his guidance.

"I have a small supper arranged at the St. Louis Hotel—and I have asked Prosper Gautier to join us there."

So Prosper Gautier was the one that Grand-père had given his approval to as Aimée's suitor. Clinging to his arm, Aimée was not sure that she wanted to enter the grown-up world after all.

The next day Aimée sat in the formal salon of the pink stucco and brick townhouse with her aunt, tensely waiting for the three men who had asked permission to call on her. One was Prosper, who had gone to supper with them the evening before, but she could not remember the other two.

Prosper was nineteen, the same age as her brother Etienne, and already Tante Dee Dee had started extolling his wealth.

"He will have a fine inheritance one day, with the magnificent plantation up the river, as well as the house in town. And you are very lucky, Aimée, to be singled out by him, especially since your papa gambled away Thornfell and most of his other assets before he died."

"Then I will know that he is interested in me and not my money," Aimée answered haughtily, miffed that Tante Dee Dee should speak about her papa in such a way. "At least I have been spared the insult of having my name listed in that horrible book, with the amount of my inheritance opposite it."

"Only the initials were used," Tante Dee Dee corrected her. "It wouldn't have done for a lady's name to be spelled out. But although Prosper Gautier does

not need a rich wife, Etienne should purchase a copy of the book. To marry an heiress is the only way he can continue being a gentleman of leisure."

Grand-père walked into the room and, taking his place in the chair by the window, he opened the paper to read. He usually left it where Aimée could find it, although Tante Dee Dee subscribed to the old-fashioned idea that no young girl had any business reading a newspaper.

"I do hope that Etienne will find something else to do," Aimée ventured aloud, "before Monsieur Gautier and the others come. I am nervous enough, as it is."

"You should not feel that way, Aimée." Tante Dee Dee frowned at her over her needlework. "After all, Etienne is your family, too, and has a responsibility towards you."

"But he teases me so. And I am sure he will do something to embarrass me before his friends."

"Well, you can hardly be left alone with these gentlemen. And at your age, you are not expected to carry on an intelligent conversation with men. It will be much easier to have Etienne present."

"Did I hear myself being discussed?" Etienne sauntered into the salon and draped himself over one end of the high-backed sofa.

"Dee Dee was only reassuring Aimée that you would help the time pass pleasantly this afternoon, Etienne," Grand-père explained.

Etienne grinned at Aimée and asked, "Are you afraid that I shall tease you in front of your suitors, little one?"

She stuck her tongue out at him, but at the sound of voices in the hallway, she quickly assumed a more demure pose, punching halfheartedly at the needlework Tante Dee Dee insisted she work on.

Prosper, dressed in a dark suit, high cravat, and gloves, and carrying a walking cane, changed the tenor of the room immediately.

"You are quite lovely this afternoon, mam'selle," Prosper said, stopping before Aimée.

"*Merci*, monsieur," she answered shyly and then looked down again at her needlework.

He continued watching her while he conversed on the other side of the room with Grand-père and Etienne.

Again voices sounded in the hall, and within a short time Lisette was showing the other two young men into the salon. Both men were dark, in contrast to Prosper's fairness—one tall, the other shorter and much more muscular.

For a while, upon finding Prosper Gautier already ensconced with the family, their dark scowls were dulled sharp. But with glasses of madeira in their hands, the men drifted into a polite conversation of politics and the national election. Aimée, interested in their comments, forgot her needlework.

"They say the election is to be between Breckinridge and Bell," Prosper stated.

"Yes, it was too bad Douglas was nominated. That was bound to split the Democrats," Grand-père said.

"But what about Lincoln?" asked Etienne. "Is he not someone to be reckoned with?"

The tall, dark man, Jean Brisot, laughed and said, "I daresay he won't get a single vote in Louisiana."

Aimée without realizing the enormity of breaking into the men's conversation, said, "That would not be surprising, since Monsieur Lincoln's name won't even be printed on the Louisiana ballot."

"Aimée!" Tante Dee Dee reprimanded, shocked at her lapse of good manners.

The men continued as if they had not heard her, but Jean Brisot's amused eyes found hers for a moment before he rejoined the animated discussion.

"Well, one thing is certain," the other man interjected. "If Lincoln is elected, the South will secede from the Union."

Prosper did not remain for long. He returned to Tante Dee Dee and Aimée, said his farewells and left.

With Prosper gone, the heart went out of the conversation and the other two young men soon made their excuses and left.

"I hope you will not encourage that Jean Brisot, Papa," Tante Dee Dee said when he had gone. "He has 'a heart like an artichoke—a leaf for every girl.' "

Grand-père laughed. "He is an amiable young gentleman, Dee Dee, with fine ancestors. I knew his grandfather well. And do not be too hard on him just because he has not yet found a proper wife. It takes some men longer to look than others. And besides, he is giving Prosper some competition in courting Aimée."

Chapter 2

The round of balls and soirées began, and Aimée, still strictly chaperoned, joined the gaiety. The Creoles, proud, aristocratic, saw nothing wrong in sampling life at its fullest; for one who was well in the morning could easily be dead by nightfall from the fever that struck so insidiously.

Fortunes were won and lost at the gambling tables; Creole gentlemen kept their quadroom or octoroon mistresses apart in little houses along the Ramparts; the land of sugarcane and cotton supported the habits of intense, fiery men, among whom the smallest slight, the merest hint of disapproval, brought a challenge with swords, and the fencing masters, housed along Exchange Alley, were the greatest gods of all, emulated and adored for their prowess with the sword.

Of course, Aimée, strictly brought up and educated by the Ursuline nuns, was supposed to know nothing of this underworld of society, but she had listened to the adolescent comments made by Etienne, and had seen for herself the beautiful young girls, dressed in fine clothes and jewels, out for drives in their own *calèches*. Many resembled their white half-sisters, and Aimée could not help wondering if one day she would see a girl with her same features—sitting in the upper tiers of