Thrilling Tales: “Jean-ah Poquelin” by George Washington Cable

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Hello everybody, welcome to Thrilling Tales. It’s nice to see you here today. My name is David and I am a librarian here on the third floor, I work in the Fiction Department so if you’re every looking for something good to read do come and see us sometime. Thrilling Tales happens usually on the first and third Monday of every month. However, our next Thrilling Tales for this month is not until next month which is April 4th - we’ve got a modern story of suspense called “Surveillance” by Jeffery Deaver. Sometimes we do recent stories, and sometimes we do very old stories. Today’s story is from the 1870s.

When I was a kid in the 1970s my two favorite rides at Disney Land were Pirates of the Carribean and the Haunted Mansion, and both of these rides were located, for some reason I did not then understand, in the New Orleans part of Disney Land. I am sure there were plenty of reasons for that, but one of the reasons is probably this story. The title of this story is “Jean-ah Poquelin” and it is by George Washington Cable.

In the first decade of the present century, when the newly established American Government was the most hateful thing in Louisiana–when the Anglo-American flood that was presently to burst in a crevasse of immigration upon the delta had thus far been felt only as slippery seepage which made the Creole tremble for his footing–there stood, a short distance above what is now Canal Street, and considerably back from the line of villas which fringed the river-bank on Tchoupitoulas Road, an old colonial plantation-house half in ruin.

It stood aloof from civilization, the tracts that had once been its indigo fields given over to their first noxious wildness, and grown up into one of the horridest marshes within a circuit of fifty miles.

The house was of heavy cypress, lifted up on pillars, grim, solid, and spiritless. Its dark, weatherbeaten roof and sides were hoisted up above the jungly plain in a distracted way, like a

gigantic ammunition-wagon stuck in the mud and abandoned by some retreating army. Around it was a dense growth of low water willows, with half a hundred sorts of thorny or fetid bushes. They were hung with countless strands of discolored and prickly smilax, and the impassable mud below bristled with dwarf palmetto. Two lone forest-trees, dead cypresses, stood in the centre of the marsh, dotted with roosting vultures. The shallow strips of water were hid by myriads of aquatic plants, under whose coarse and spiritless flowers, could one have seen it, was a harbor of reptiles, great and small, to make one shudder to the end of his days.

The house was on a slightly raised spot, the levee of a draining canal. The waters of this canal did not run; they crawled, and were full of big, ravening fish and alligators, that held it against all comers.

Such was the home of old Jean Marie Poquelin, once an opulent indigo planter, standing high in the esteem of his small, proud circle of exclusively male acquaintances in the old city; now a hermit, alike shunned by and shunning all who had ever known him. “The last of his line,” said the gossips. His father lies under the floor of the St. Louis Cathedral, with the wife of his youth on one side, and the wife of his old age on the other. Old Jean visits the spot daily. His half-brother–alas! there was a mystery; no one knew what had become of the gentle, young half-brother, more than thirty years his junior, whom once he seemed so fondly to love, but who, seven years ago, had disappeared suddenly, once for all, and left no clew of his fate.

They had seemed to live so happily in each other’s love. No father, mother, wife to either, no kindred upon earth. The elder a bold, frank, impetuous, chivalric adventurer; the younger a gentle, studious, book-loving recluse; they lived upon the ancestral estate like mated birds, one always on the wing, the other always in the nest.

There was no trait in Jean Marie Poquelin, said the old gossips, for which he was so well known among his few friends as his apparent fondness for his “little brother.” “Jacques said this,” and “Jacques said that;” he “would leave this or that, or any thing to Jacques,” for “Jacques was a scholar,” and “Jacques was good,” or “wise,” or “just,” or “far-sighted,” as the nature of the case required; and “he should ask Jacques as soon as he got home,” since Jacques was never elsewhere to be seen.

It was between the roving character of the one brother, and the bookishness of the other, that the estate fell into decay. Jean Marie, generous gentleman, gambled the slaves away one by one, until none was left, man or woman, but one old African mute.

The indigo-fields and vats of Louisiana had been generally abandoned as unremunerative. Certain enterprising men had substituted the culture of sugar; but Jean Poquelin saw larger, and, at time, equally respectable profits, first in smuggling, and later in the African slave-trade. What harm could he see in it? The whole people said it was vitally necessary, and to minister to a vital public necessity,–good enough, certainly, and so he laid up many a doubloon, that made him none the worse in the public regard.

One day old Jean Marie was about to start upon a voyage that was to be longer, much longer, than any that he had yet made. Jacques had begged him hard for many days not to go, but he laughed him off, and finally said, kissing him:

“Adieu, ‘tit frere.”

“No,” said Jacques, “I shall go with you.”

They left the old hulk of a house in the sole care of the African mute, and went away to the Guinea coast together.

Two years after, old Poquelin came home without his vessel. He must have arrived at his house by night. No one saw him come. No one saw “his little brother;” though rumor whispered that he, too, had returned, but he had never been seen again.

A dark suspicion fell upon the old slave-trader. “You know he has a quick and fearful temper;” and “why does he cover his loss with mystery?” “Grief would out with the truth.”

“But,” said the charitable few, “look at his face; see that expression of true humanity.” The many did look in his face, and, as he looked in theirs, he read the silent question: “Where is thy brother Abel?” The few were silenced, his former friends died off, and the name of Jean Marie Poquelin became a symbol of witchery, devilish crime, and hideous nursery fictions.

The man and his house were alike shunned. The snipe and duck hunters forsook the marsh, and the wood-cutters abandoned the canal. Sometimes the hardier boys who ventured out there snake-shooting heard a slow thumping of oar-locks on the canal. They would look at each other for a moment half in consternation, half in glee, then rush from their sport in wanton haste to assail with their gibes the unoffending, withered old man who, in rusty attire, sat in the stern of a skiff, rowed homeward by his white-headed African mute.

“O Jean-ah Poquelin! O Jean-ah! Jean-ah Poquelin!”

While they tumbled one over another in their needless haste to fly, he would rise carefully from his seat, while the aged mute, with downcast face, went on rowing, and rolling up his brown fist and extending it toward the urchins, would pour forth such an unholy broadside of French imprecation and invective as would all but craze them with delight.

Among both blacks and whites the house was the object of a thousand superstitions. Every midnight they affirmed, the feu follet came out of the marsh and ran in and out of the rooms, flashing from window to window. The story of some lads, whose words in ordinary statements were worthless, was generally credited, that the night they camped in the woods, rather than pass the place after dark, they saw, about sunset, every window blood-red, and on each of the four chimneys an owl sitting, which turned his head three times round, and moaned and laughed with a human voice. There was a

bottomless well, everybody professed to know, beneath the sill of the big front door under the rotten veranda; whoever set his foot upon that threshold disappeared forever in the depth below.

What wonder the marsh grew as wild as Africa! Take all the Faubourg Ste. Marie, and half the ancient city, you would not find one graceless dare-devil reckless enough to pass within a hundred yards of the house after nightfall.

The alien races pouring into old New Orleans began to find the few streets named for the Bourbon princes too confining. Fields became roads, roads streets. Everywhere the leveller was peering through his glass, rodsmen were whacking their way through willow-brakes and rose-hedges, and the sweating Irishmen tossed the blue clay up with their long-handled shovels.

“Ha! that is all very well,” quoth the Creole, “but wait till they come yonder to Jean Poquelin’s marsh; ha! ha! ha!” The supposed predicament so delighted them, that they laughed till the tears ran; for whether the street-makers mired in the marsh, or contrived to cut through old “Jean-ah’s” property, either event would be joyful. Meantime a line of tiny rods, with bits of white paper in their split tops, gradually extended its way straight through the haunted ground, and across the canal diagonally.

“We shall fill that ditch,” said the men in mud-boots, and brushed close along the chained and padlocked gate of the haunted mansion. Ah, Jean-ah Poquelin, these were not Creole boys, to be stampeded with a little harsh swearing.

He went to the Governor. That official scanned the odd figure with no slight interest. Jean Poquelin was of short, broad frame, with a bronzed leonine face. His brow was ample and deeply furrowed. His eye, large and black, was bold and open like that of a war-horse, and his jaws shut together with the firmness of iron. His shirt unbuttoned and thrown back from the throat and bosom, sailor-wise, showed a herculean breast; hard and grizzled. There was no fierceness or defiance in his look, but rather a peaceful and peaceable fearlessness. Across the whole face, not marked in one or another feature, but as it were laid softly upon the countenance like an almost imperceptible veil, was the imprint of some great grief. A careless eye might easily overlook it, but, once seen, there it hung– faint, but unmistakable.

The Governor bowed.

“Parlez-vous francais?” asked the figure.

“I would rather talk English, if you can do so,” said the Governor.

“My name, Jean Poquelin.”

“How can I serve you, Mr. Poquelin?”

“My ‘ouse is yond’; dans le marais la-bas.”

The Governor bowed.

“Dat marais billong to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“To me; Jean Poquelin; I hown ‘im meself.”

“Well, sir?”

“He don’t billong to you; I get him from me father.”

“That is perfectly true, Mr. Poquelin, as far as I am aware.”

“You want to make strit pass yond’?”

“I do not know, sir; it is quite probable; but the city will indemnify you for any loss you may suffer–you will get paid, you understand.”

“Strit can’t pass dare.”

“You will have to see the municipal authorities about that, Mr. Poquelin.”

A bitter smile came upon the old man’s face:

“Pardon, Monsieur, you is not le Gouverneur?“

“Yes.”

“Mais, yes. You har le Gouverneur–yes. Veh-well. I come to you. I tell you, strit can’t pass at me ‘ouse.”

“Have a chair, Mr. Poquelin;” but the old man did not stir. The Governor took a quill and wrote a line to a city official, introducing Mr. Poquelin, and asking from him every possible courtesy. He handed it to him, instructing him where to present it.

“Mr. Poquelin,” he said with a conciliatory smile, “tell me, is it your house that our Creole citizens tell such odd stories about?”

The old man glared sternly upon the speaker, and with immovable features said:

“You don’t see me trade some Guinea slave?”

“Oh, no.”

“You don’t see me make some smuggling”

“No, sir; not at all.”

“But, I am Jean Marie Poquelin. I mine me hown bizniss. Dat all right? Adieu.”

He put his hat on and withdrew. By and by he stood, letter in hand, before the person to whom it was addressed. This person employed an interpreter.

“He says,” said the interpreter to the officer, “he come to make you the fair warning how you muz not make the street pas’ at his ‘ouse.”

The officer remarked that “such impudence was refreshing;” but the experienced interpreter translated freely.

“He says: ‘What do you want?'” said the interpreter.

The old slave-trader answered at some length.

“He says,” said the interpreter, again turning to the officer, “the marass is a too unhealth’ for peopl’ to live.”

“But we expect to drain his old marsh; it’s not going to be a marsh.”

The old man answered tersely.

“He says the canal is a private,” said the interpreter.

“Oh! that old ditch; that’s to be filled up. Tell the old man we’re going to fix him up nicely.”

Translation being duly made, the man in power was amused to see a thunder-cloud gathering on the old man’s face.

“Tell him,” he added, “by the time we finish, there’ll not be a ghost left in his shanty.”

The interpreter began to translate, but–

“J’ comprends, J’ comprends,” said the old man, with an impatient gesture, and burst forth, pouring curses upon the United States, the President, the Territory of Orleans, Congress, the Governor and all his subordinates, striding out of the apartment as he cursed.

“Why, it will make his old place worth ten dollars to one,” said the official to the interpreter.

“‘Tis not for de worth of de property,” said the interpreter.

“I should guess not,” said the other,–“seems to me as if some of these old Creoles would rather live in a crawfish hole than to have a neighbor”

“You know what make old Jean Poquelin make like that? I will tell you. He said, in a solemn whisper:

“He is a witch.”

Some months passed and the street was opened. A canal was first dug through the marsh, the small one which passed so close to Jean Poquelin’s house was filled, and the street, or rather a sunny road, just touched a corner of the old mansion’s dooryard. The morass ran dry. Its venomous denizens slipped away through the bulrushes; the cattle roaming freely upon its hardened surface trampled the superabundant undergrowth. And one by one of the dead cypresses a giant creeper hung its green burden of foliage and lifted its scarlet trumpets. Sparrows and red-birds flitted through the bushes, and dewberries grew ripe beneath. Over all these came a sweet, dry smell of salubrity which the place had not known since the sediments of the Mississippi first lifted it from the sea.

Over the willow-brakes, and down the vista of the open street, bright new houses, some singly, some by ranks, were prying in upon the old man’s privacy. They even settled down toward his southern side. First a wood-cutter’s hut or two, then a market gardener’s shanty, then a painted cottage, and all at once the faubourg had flanked and half surrounded him and his dried-up marsh.

Ah! then the common people began to hate him. “The old tyrant!” What does he live in that unneighborly way for?” “The old pirate!” “The old kidnapper!”

“There he goes, with the boys after him! Ah! ha! ha! Jean-ah Poquelin! Ah! Jean-ah! Aha!” How merrily the swarming Americans echo the spirit of persecution! “The old fraud,” they say–“pretends to live in a haunted house, does he? We’ll tar and feather him some day. Guess we can fix him.”

He cannot be rowed home along the old canal now; he walks. He has broken sadly of late, and the street urchins are ever at his heels.

To the Creoles–to the incoming lower class of superstitious Germans, Irish, Sicilians, and others–he became an omen and embodiment of public and private ill-fortune. Upon him all the vagaries of their superstitions gathered and grew. If a house caught fire, it was imputed to his machinations. Did a woman go off in a fit, he had bewitched her. Did a child stray off for an hour, the mother shivered with the apprehension that Jean Poquelin had offered him to strange gods. The house was the subject of every bad boy’s invention. “As long as that house stands we shall have bad luck.” He keeps a fetich. He has conjured the whole Faubourg St. Marie.

A “Building and Improvement Company,” which had not yet got its charter, “but was going to,” and which had not, indeed, any tangible capital yet, but “was going to have some,” joined in the “Jean-ah Poquelin” war. The haunted property would be such a capital site for a market-house! They sent a deputation to the old mansion to ask its occupant to sell. The deputation never got beyond the chained gate and a very barren interview with the African mute.

One of the Board said: “Mr. President, this market-house project, as I take it, is not altogether a selfish one; the community is to be benefited by it. We may feel that we are working in the public interest [the Board smiled knowingly], if we employ all possible means to oust this old nuisance from among us. You may know that at the time the street was cut through, this old Poquelann did all he could to prevent it. It was owing to a certain connection which I had with that affair that I heard a ghost story, which, of course, I am not going to relate; but I may say that my profound conviction, arising from a prolonged study of that story, is, that this old villain, John Poquelann, has his brother locked up in that old house. Now, if this is so, and we can fix it on him, I merely suggest that we can make the matter highly useful. I don’t know,” he added, beginning to sit down, “but that it is an action we owe to the community–hem!”

“How do you propose to handle the subject?” asked the President.

“I was thinking,” said the speaker, “that, as a Board of Directors, it would be unadvisable for us to authorize any action involving trespass; but if you, for instance, Mr. President, should, as it were, for mere curiosity, request someone, as, for instance, our excellent Secretary, simply as a personal favor, to look into the matter–this is merely a suggestion.”

The Secretary smiled sufficiently to be understood that, while he certainly did not consider such preposterous service a part of his duties as secretary, he might, notwithstanding, accede to the President’s request; and the Board adjourned.

Little White, as the Secretary was called, was a mild, kind-hearted little man, who, nevertheless, had no fear of anything, unless it was the fear of being unkind.

“I tell you frankly,” he privately said to the President, “I go into this purely for reasons of my own.”

The next day, a little after nightfall, one might have descried this little man slipping along the rear fence of the Poquelin place, preparatory to vaulting over into the rank, grass-grown yard.

The picture presented to his eye was not calculated to enliven his mind. The old mansion stood out against the western sky, black and silent. One long, lurid pencil-stroke along a sky of slate was all that was left of daylight. No sign of life was apparent; no light in any window, no owls were on the chimneys, no dogs were in the yard.

He entered the place, and ventured up behind a small cabin which stood apart from the house.

Through one of its many crannies he easily detected the African mute crouched head on his knees, fast asleep.

He concluded to enter the mansion, and, with that view, stood and scanned it. The broad rear steps of the veranda would not serve him; he might meet someone midway. He was measuring, with his eye, the proportions of one of the pillars which supported it, and estimating the practicability of climbing it, when he heard a footstep. Someone dragged a chair out toward the railing, then seemed to change his mind and began to pace the veranda, his footfalls resounding on the dry boards with singular loudness. Little White drew a step backward and at once recognized the short, broad-shouldered form of old Jean Poquelin.

He sat down upon a billet of wood, and, to escape the stings of a whining cloud of mosquitoes, shrouded his face and neck in his handkerchief, leaving his eyes uncovered.

He had sat there but a moment when he noticed a strange, sickening odor, faint, as if coming from a distance, but loathsome and horrid.

Whence could it come? Not from the marsh, for it was as dry as powder. It was not in the air; it seemed to come from the ground.

Rising up, he noticed, for the first time, a few steps before him a narrow footpath leading toward the house. He glanced down it. Right there was someone coming–ghostly white!

Quick as thought, and as noiselessly, he lay down at full length it was bold strategy, and yet, there was no denying it, little White felt that he was frightened. “It is not a ghost,” he said to himself. “I know it cannot be a ghost;” but the perspiration burst out at every pore, and the air seemed to thicken with heat. “It is a living man,” he said in his thoughts. “I hear his footstep, and I hear old Poquelin’s footsteps, too, separately, over on the veranda. There is that odor again; what a smell of death! It is in the path again. He shuddered. “Now, if I dare venture, the mystery is solved.” He rose cautiously, and peered along the path.

The figure of a man, a presence if not a body–but whether clad in some white stuff or naked the darkness would not allow him to determine–had turned, and now, with a seeming painful gait, moved slowly from him. “Great Heaven! Can it be that the dead do walk?” He withdrew again the hands which had gone to his eyes. The dreadful object passed between two pillars and under the house. He listened. There was a faint sound as of feet upon a staircase; then all was still.

The little Secretary was about to retreat; but as he looked once more toward the haunted house a dim light appeared in the crack of a closed window, and presently old Jean Poquelin came, dragging his chair, and sat down close against the shining cranny. He spoke in a low, tender tone in the French tongue, making some inquiry. An answer came from within. Was it the voice of a human? So unnatural was it–so hollow, so discordant, so unearthly–that the stealthy listener shuddered again from head to foot, and when something stirred in some bushes near by–though it may have been

nothing more than a rat–and came scuttling through the grass, the little Secretary actually turned and fled. As he left the enclosure he moved with bolder leisure through the bushes; yet now and then he spoke aloud: “Oh, oh! I see, I understand!” and shut his eyes in his hands.

How strange that henceforth Little White was the champion of Jean Poquelin! In season and out of season–wherever a word was uttered against him–the Secretary, with a quiet, aggressive force that instantly arrested gossip, demanded upon what authority the statement or conjecture was made; but as he did not condescend to explain his own remarkable attitude, it was not long before the disrelish and suspicion which had followed Jean Poquelin so many years fell also upon him.

It was only the next evening but one after his adventure that he made himself a source of sullen amazement to one hundred and fifty boys, by ordering them to desist from their wanton hallooing. Old Jean Poquelin, standing and shaking his cane, rolling out his long-drawn maledictions, paused and stared, then gave the Secretary a courteous bow and started on. The boys, save one, from pure astonishment, ceased but a ruffianly little Irish lad, more daring than any had yet been, threw a big hurtling clod that struck old Poquelin between the shoulders and burst like a shell. The enraged old man wheeled with uplifted staff to give chase to the scampering vagabond; and–he may have tripped, or he may not, but he fell full length. Little White hastened to help him up, but he waved him off with a fierce imprecation and staggering to his feet resumed his way homeward. His lips were reddened with blood.

Little White was on his way to the meeting of the Board. He would have given all he dared spend to have stayed away, for he felt both too fierce and too tremulous to brook the criticisms that were likely to be made.

“I can’t help it, gentlemen; I can’t help you to make a case against the old man, and I’m not going to.”

“We did not expect this disappointment, Mr. White.”

“I can’t help that, sir. No, sir; you had better not appoint any more investigations. Somebody’ll investigate himself into trouble. No, sir; it isn’t a threat, it is only my advice, but I warn you that whoever takes the task in hand will rue it to his dying day–which may be hastened, too.”

The President expressed himself “surprised.”

“I don’t care a rush,” answered Little White, wildly and foolishly. “I don’t care a rush if you are, sir. No, my nerves are not disordered; my head’s as clear as a bell. No, I’m not excited.” A Director remarked that the Secretary looked as though he had waked from a nightmare.

“Well, sir, if you want to know the fact, I have; and if you choose to cultivate old Poquelin’s society you can have one, too.”

“White,” called a facetious member, but White did not notice. “White,” he called again.

“What?” demanded White, with a scowl.

“Did you see the ghost?”

“Yes, sir; I did,” cried White, hitting the table, and handing the President a paper which brought the Board to other business.

The story got among the gossips that somebody (they were afraid to say Little White) had been to the Poquelin mansion by night and beheld something appalling. The rumor was but a shadow of the truth, magnified and distorted as is the manner of shadows. He had seen skeletons walking, and had barely escaped the clutches of one by making the sign of the cross.

“If that old rascal lived in the country we come from,” said certain Americains, “he’d have been tarred and feathered before now, wouldn’t he, Sanders?”

“Well, now he just would.”

“And we’d have rid him on a rail, wouldn’t we?”

“That’s what I allow.”

“Why I’ll tell you what you could do.” They were talking to some rollicking Creoles who had assumed an absolute necessity for doing something. “What is it you call this thing where an old man marries a young girl, and you come out with horns and”–

“Charivari?” asked the Creoles.

“Yes, that’s it. Why don’t you shivaree him?” Felicitous suggestion.

Little White andhis wife beside him, was sitting on their doorstep, looking toward the sunset. They had moved into the lately-opened street. The view was not attractive on the score of beauty. The houses were small and scattered, and across the flat commons, spite of the lofty tangle of weeds and bushes, and spite of the thickets of acacia, they needs must see the dismal old Poquelin mansion, tilted awry and shutting out the declining sun. The moon, white and slender, was hanging the tip of its horn over one of the chimneys.

“And you say,” said the Secretary, “the old black man has been going by here alone? Patty, suppose old Poquelin should be concocting some mischief; he don’t like provocation; the way that clod hit him the other day was enough to have killed him. Why, Patty, he dropped as quick as that! No wonder you haven’t seen him.

“They say the boys are going to shivaree old Poquelin to-night. I’m going to try to stop it.”

“Why, White,” said his wife, “you’d better not. You’ll get hurt.”

“No, I’ll not.”

“Yes, you will.”

“I’m going to sit out here until they come along. They’re compelled to pass right by here.”

“Why, White, it may be midnight before they start; you’re not going to sit out here till then.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Well, you’re very foolish,” said Mrs. White in an undertone, looking anxious, and tapping one of the steps with her foot.

They sat a very long time talking over little family matters.

“Patty, suppose I walk out to the old house and see if I can find out anything.”

“Suppose,” said she, “you don’t do any such–listen!”

Down the street arose a great hubbub. Dogs and boys were howling and barking; men were laughing, shouting, groaning, and blowing horns, whooping, and clanking cow-bells, whinnying, and howling, and rattling pots and pans.

“They are coming this way,” said Little White. “You had better go into the house, Patty.”

“So had you.”

“No. I’m going to see if I can’t stop them.”

“Why, White!”

“I’ll be back in a minute,” said White, and went toward the noise.

In a few moments the little Secretary met the mob. Little White lifted his ineffectual voice. He faced the head of the disorderly column, and cast himself about as if he were made of wood and moved by the jerk of a string. He rushed to one who seemed, from the size and clatter of his tin pan, to be a leader. “Stop these fellows, Bienvenu, stop them just a minute, till I tell them something.” Bienvenu turned and brandished his instruments of discord in an imploring way to the crowd. The throng halted.

“Bienvenu,” said little White, “don’t shivaree old Poquelin to-night; he’s”–

“My fwang,” said the swaying Bienvenu, “who tail you I goin’ to chahivahi somebody, eh? Yon sink bickause I make a little playfool wiz zis tin pan zat I am dhonk?“

“Oh, no, Bienvenu, old fellow, you’re all right. I was afraid you might not know that old Poquelin was sick, you know, but you’re not going there, are you?”

“My fwang, I vay soy to tail you zat you ah dhonk as de dev’. I am shem of you. I ham ze servan’ of ze publique. Zese citoyens goin’ to wickwest Jean Poquelin to give to the Ursuline’ two hondred fifty dolla'”–

“He quoi!” cried a listener, “Cinq cent piastres, oui!”

“Oui!” said Bienvenu, “and if he wiffuse we make him some lit’ musique; ta-ra ta!” He hoisted a merry hand and foot, then frowning, added: “Old Poquelin got no bizniz dhink s’much w’isky.”

“But, gentlemen,” said Little White, around whom a circle had gathered, “the old man is very sick.”

“My faith!” cried a tiny Creole, “we did not make him to be sick. W’en we have say we going make le charivari, do you want that we hall tell a lie?”

“But you can shivaree somebody else,” said desperate little White.

“Oui” cried Bienvenu, “et chahivahi Jean-ah Poquelin tomo’w!”

“Let us go to Madame Schneider!” cried two or three, and amid huzzas and confused cries, among which was heard a stentorian Celtic call for drinks, the crowd again began to move.

“Cent piastres pour l’hopital de charite!”

“Hurrah!”

“One hongred dolla’ for Charity Hospital!”

“Hurrah!”

“Whang!” went a tin pan, the crowd yelled, and Pandemonium gaped again. They were off at a right angle.

Nodding, Mrs. White looked at the mantle-clock.

The hideous noise down street was passing beyond earshot. She raised a sash and listened. For a moment there was silence. Someone came to the door.

“Is that you, White?”

“Yes.” He entered. “I succeeded, Patty.”

“Did you?” said Patty, joyfully.

“Yes. They’ve gone down to shivaree the old Dutchwoman who married her step-daughter’s sweetheart. They say she has got to pay a hundred dollars to the hospital before they stop.”

The couple retired, and Mrs. White slumbered. She was awakened by her husband snapping the lid of his watch.

“What time?” she asked.

“Half-past three. Patty, I haven’t slept a wink. Those fellows are out yet. Don’t you hear them?”

“Why, White, they’re coming this way!”

“I know they are,” said White, sliding out of bed and drawing on his clothes, “and they’re coming fast. You’d better go away from that window, Patty. My! What a clatter!”

“Here they are,” said Mrs. White, but her husband was gone. Two or three hundred men and boys pass the place at a rapid walk straight down the broad, new street, toward the hated house of ghosts. The din was terrific. She saw Little White at the head of the rabble brandishing his arms and trying in vain to make himself heard; but they only shook their heads laughing and hooting the louder, and so passed, bearing him on before them.

Swiftly they pass out from among the houses, away from the dim oil lamps of the street, out into the broad starlit commons, and enter the willowy jungles of the haunted ground. Some hearts fail and their owners lag behind and turn back, suddenly remembering how near morning it is. But the most part push on, tearing the air with their clamor.

Down ahead of them in the long, thicket-darkened way there is–singularly enough–a faint, dancing light. It must be very near the old house; it is. It has stopped now. It is a lantern, and is under a well-known sapling which has grown up on the wayside since the canal was filled. Now it swings mysteriously to and fro. A goodly number of the more ghost-fearing give up the sport; but a full hundred move forward at a run, doubling their devilish howling and banging.

Yes; it is a lantern, and there are two persons under the tree. The crowd draws near–drops into a walk; one of the two is the old African mute; he lifts the lantern up so that it shines on the other; the crowd recoils; there is a hush of all clangor, and all at once, with a cry of mingled fright and horror from every throat, the whole throng rushes back, dropping everything, sweeping past Little White and

hurrying on, never stopping until the jungle is left behind, and then to find that not one in ten has seen the cause of the stampede, and not one of the tenth is certain what it was.

There is one huge fellow among them who looks capable of any villany. He finds something to mount on, and, in the Creole patois, calls a general halt. Bienvenu sinks down, and, vainly trying to recline gracefully, resigns the leadership. The herd gather round the speaker; he assures them that they have been outraged. Their right peaceably to traverse the public streets has been trampled upon. Shall such encroachments be endured? It is now daybreak. Let them go now by the open light of day and force a free passage of the public highway!

A scattering consent was the response, and the crowd, thinned now and drowsy, straggled quietly down toward the old house. Some drifted ahead, others sauntered behind, but every one, as he again neared the tree, came to a stand-still. Little White sat upon a bank of turf on the opposite side of the way looking very stern and sad. To each new-comer he put the same question:

“Did you come here to go to old Poquelin’s?”

“Yes.”

“He’s dead.” And if the shocked hearer started away he would say: “Don’t go away.”

“Why not?”

“I want you to go to the funeral presently.”

If some Louisianian, too loyal to dear France or Spain to understand English, looked bewildered, someone would interpret for him; and presently they went. Little White led the van, the crowd trooping after him down the middle of the way. The gate, that had never been seen before unchained, was open. Stern Little White stopped a short distance from it; the rabble stopped behind him. Something was moving out from under the veranda. The many whisperers stretched upward to see. The African mute came very slowly toward the gate, leading by a cord in the nose a small brown bull, which was harnessed to a rude cart. On the flat body of the cart, under a black cloth, were seen the outlines of a long box.

“Hats off, gentlemen,” said Little White, as the box came in view, and the crowd silently uncovered.

“Gentlemen,” said Little White, “here come the last remains of Jean Marie Poquelin, a better man, I’m afraid, with all his sins,–yes a better–a kinder man to his blood–a man of more self-forgetful goodness–than all of you put together will ever dare to be.”

There was a profound hush as the vehicle came creaking through the gate; but when it turned away from them toward the forest, those in front started suddenly. There was a backward rush, then all stood still again staring one way; for there, behind the bier, with eyes cast down and labored step,

walked the living remains–all that was left–of little Jacques Poquelin, the long-hidden brother–a leper, as white as snow.

Dumb with horror, the cringing crowd gazed upon the walking death. They watched, in silent awe, the slow cortege creep down the long, straight road and lessen on the view, until by and by it stopped where a wild, unfrequented path branched off into the undergrowth toward the rear of the ancient city.

“They are going to the Terre aux Lepreux,” said one in the crowd. The rest watched them in silence.

The little bull was set free; the mute, with the strength of an ape, lifted the long box to his shoulder. For a moment more the mute and the leper stood in sight, while the former adjusted his heavy burden; then, without one backward glance upon the unkind human world, turning their faces toward the ridge in the depths of the swamp known as the Leper’s Land, they stepped into the jungle, disappeared, and were never seen again.

[Applause] The end. Thank you for coming.

[Piano music plays] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening. [Piano music fades]