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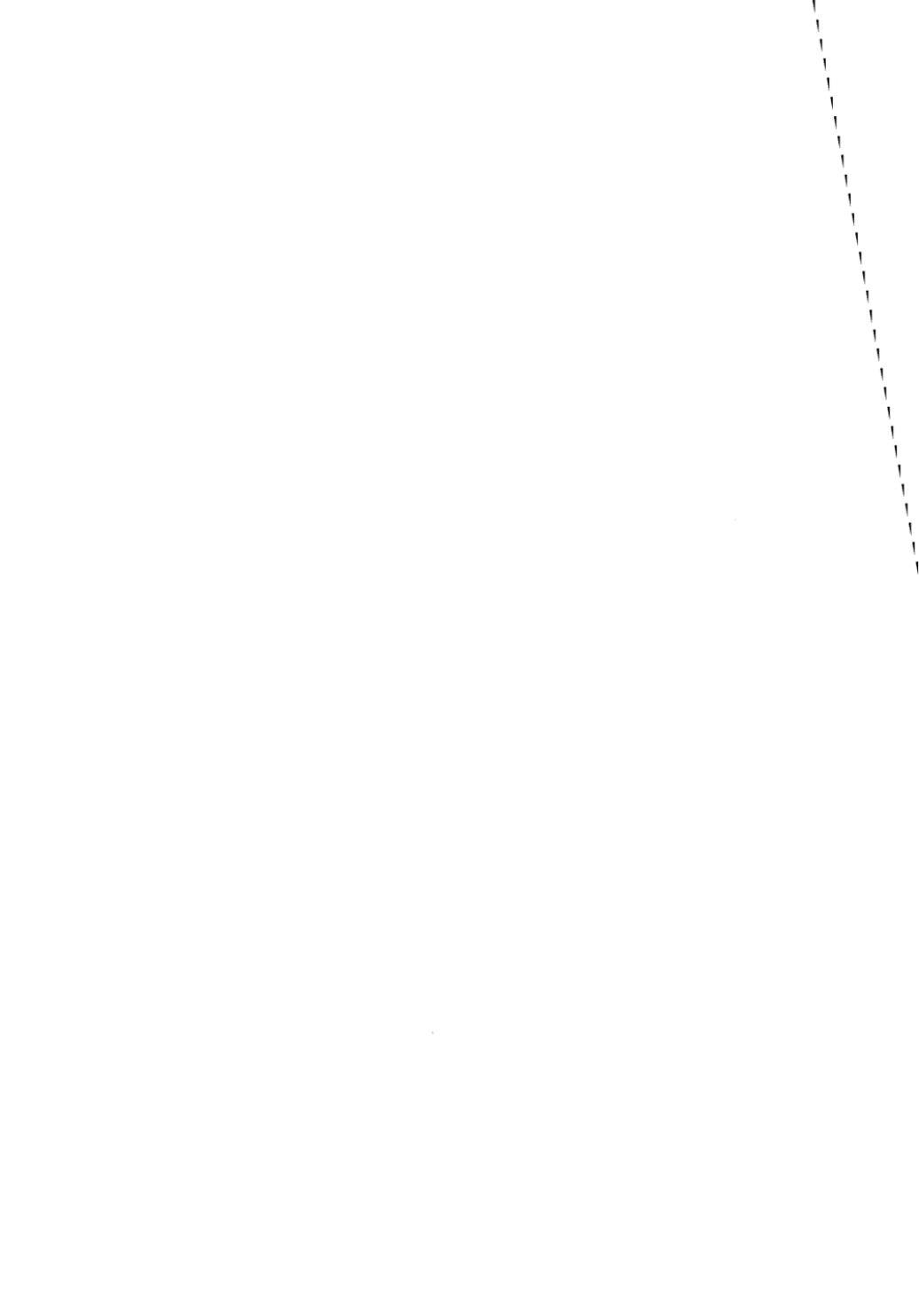
HEARN FROM LEUCADIA TO MARTINIQUE

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ABSTRACT

The heart-rending story of an orphan with parents, and the many crooked and cruel twists of fate he suffers in the first forty years of life as he goes from a privileged childhood to a poverty-stricken manhood. From Greece, the story moves to Ireland, France and England, thence to Cincinnati where our hero becomes a sensationalist newspaperman and marries a black woman; thence to New Orleans for a decade of literary editing and finally to Martinique, that promised tropical land, where he finds it much easier to make love than work.

CHAPTER II - Section 3

HEARN FROM LEUCADIA TO MARTINIQUE

Self-consciousness makes the difference. Unlike the others, he knows how to place his days in a context of words, can admit to those peculiarities of belief and behavior that set him apart from contemporaries. Real life is something I spend my whole existence in trying to get away from he says, and we think of his childhood and nod in understanding. The wish to become is reasonable . . . while the wish to have is . . . foolish he explains, and we are tempted to take this as a way of interpreting the curve of his days. Supporting evidence is not difficult to find. Those many sharp breaks with friends and editors; the sudden abandonment of good jobs; the moves to new locales where he is unknown; the stories of ghosts and spectral lovers; the cloudy, quasi-philosophic speculations that blend Herbert Spencer and Buddhism--all this can seem part of a flight from materialism and towards a world of the spirit.

But wait. Best not accept the too easy explanation. The man who claims to turn a back on reality makes more than one successful career by doing so; the man so concerned with becoming also needs to have. Hearn is a paradox, a case study in how the word can at once obscure and illuminate. Not that his writings alone are the major problem. To his sixteen published volumes, scores of articles, and hundreds of letters must be added all those other interpretations: the eight biographies and critical studies, the reminiscences of friends and

family members, the dozens of pieces in academic journals. Read them all and you will be reminded of how far removed we are from what the flesh once knew and the heart once felt. Hearn would agree. Elusive, hidden, ultimately inexplicable to himself, he devotes a lifetime to seeking words for what can never be said.

Blame imperialism.

The meeting is unlikely; the marriage unlikelier still. He is thirty; Anglo-Irish; a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin; third-generation army; a surgeon; a nominal Anglican. She is twenty-five; Greek, with the blood of Ionian nobility; uneducated; untraveled; devoutly Orthodox. Neither is political, but revolution brings them together. It is 1848 and Europe is in turmoil--barricades in Paris; republics declared in Naples, Florence, Turin; a parliament in Frankfurt; Prince Metternich driven from Vienna; stirrings in Prague, Brussels, Geneva. Far-off in Cephalonia, that wind-swept mass off the West Coast of Greece, a local rebellion is followed by an assembly resolution that the Ionian Islands should no longer be an English protectorate. The response is predictable: British troops fan out through the archipelago. In April, a small detachment sails from Corfu for Cerigo, the most southern, isolated, and barren of the group. Physician for the unit is Charles Bush Hearn.

We do not know exactly where or when Hearn meets Rosa Cassimati, or what language they speak together (though passion needs few words),

or how they are discovered, or if it is true--as Hearn family story will later have it--that her brother attempts to avenge his sister's disgrace by waylaying the surgeon and stabbing him. We do know this: in June, 1849, when Charles is transferred to the island of Leucadia, Rosa goes with him; on July 24 she gives birth to a son; on November 25 the couple are married in a Greek Orthodox ceremony; and in February, 1850, he sails for England on the way to a new military assignment. Four months later, the wife left behind gives birth to another son, named Patrick Lafcadio in recognition of his mixed heritage. Joy is soon tempered by tragedy. At the end of August, the first-born dies of some unrecorded affliction.

We do not know (but can easily guess) why Charles conceals his marriage from the War Office until he is fully two years into a West Indian tour of duty; or why (more difficult) he finally admits to having a wife and child; or why (almost impossible) he has Rosa and Patrick Lafcadio brought to his mother's home in Dublin in August 1852. We do know that when he arrives there in October, 1853, it is all over. Whatever Rosa's charms in Greece, they do not transfer well to Ireland. An intercultural war is in progress and given the battlefield, the outcome can hardly be in doubt. Moodiness, hysterics, bouts of insanity--all kinds of unstable actions are attributed to Rosa by family members. More than half a century later Lafcadio's early biographers are ready with explanations: Rosa, you see, is dark of hue and distinctly Mediterranean (some suggest Oriental). To an early

twentieth century Anglo-American biographer, that fact alone has great explanatory power.

The details of the next five years are far less important than the devastating pain, never directly expressed, that they must cause the child. Certainly we can do without the names of aunts, cousins, and summer estates, without the scenes that take place between Charles and Rosa during his few months in Dublin both before and after duty in the Crimean War. Easy it is in mid-nineteenth century Great Britain to divorce a foreign wife whose illiteracy has kept her from properly signing a marriage document. By late 1857 the young boy has become an odd kind of orphan--his parents are alive, but he will never again see them. Charles is off in India with a new wife, a proper woman from his own set; Rosa is back in Cerigo, wed to an islander who refuses to raise another man's children; and Patrick Lafcadio is residing with Sarah Brenane, a great-aunt sixty years his senior, a devout Catholic and childless widow who expects to make him heir to her considerable fortune.

The absence of parents, the promise of wealth; the conjunction of deep insecurity and wild dreams--these emotional legacies of early years will never be shaken. Some friends will later insist he was born overly sensitive; others that his delicate, morbid streak goes right back to that Eastern background. Patrick Lafcadio will, in a way, agree. As an adult he will disdain his north European heritage (there goes his first name) and call himself Greek, or identify with Latins; always he will detest cold climates and yearn for warmth and sun as if

for home. Of one thing he is certain: whatever happened between mother and father, Charles is to blame for his loneliness. At the age of forty, Lafcadio will remember seeing his father on only four or five occasions; will recall fear in the presence of a taciturn man with a rigid, grim face; will confess to never having felt any love for Charles Bush Hearn.

Mother is quite the opposite--a lovable victim, impulsive and full of warmth. Any anger, any early feelings of abandonment, are by adulthood rationalized away: her situation in Ireland was cruel; she spoke no English, had no means of support, was first isolated and then betrayed. But loving, oh so loving, that Lafcadio's earliest memories seem to belong to a magic time when the sun and moon were especially large and bright, when the sea was alive and the touch of the wind could make him cry with joy for he was in the care of one who thought only of ways to make me happy. Whatever he later finds good in himself--a sense of justice, a sensitivity to beauty, a capacity for faith--will be attributed to Rosa. All through life he will see the female as creator: It is the mother who makes us,--makes at least all that makes the nobler man: not his strength of powers of calculation, but his heart and power to love.

The next fifteen years could be out of Dickens. How one would like to see him handle the characters: fussy, meticulous Aunt Sarah, dressed always in black, equally passionate about cleanliness and salvation; Cousin Jane, who looks like an angel and luxuriates in talk about the pains of burning in hell; the tutor who with a pen cross-

hatches bathing drawers and shirts onto the pictures of nymphs, graces, and goddesses in a book on Greek civilization; the various maids, cooks, butlers, and footmen who take the place of young companions; and Henry Molyneux, the smooth, distant relation who wins Sarah Brenane's confidence, moves from managing her money to having himself declared her principal heir, and is instrumental in having Lafcadio sent away to schools, the farther from Dublin the better.

No doubt the novelist could well do the locations, too: that tall, gloomy house in the suburb of Rathmines; the shadowy ceilings, long staircases, and dusty attics; the chilly, narrow room with its cold fireplace where Lafcadio is locked every night; the country manors where, in the bright weeks of summer, the youngster learns the joys of seaside and field, of tidepools and flowers; the Institution Ecclésiastique, near Rouen, which a student named Guy de Maupassant describes as smelling of prayers the way a fish-market smells of fish; and the stone pile and green playing fields of St. Cuthbert's, near Durham, England, where Hearn briefly takes the name Paddy, specializes in pranks, denounces religion, and shocks a confessor by expressing a strong desire to yield quickly and completely to any and all fleshly temptations the Devil might care to send his way.

Such overt rebellion is hardly characteristic. The real world of this frail lad is inner. His pleasures are mostly solitary; his imagination so vivid that sometimes he cannot distinguish between daydreams and nightmares. Swimming is his sport; reading his joy. Prizes for composition come to him at school, but for personal pleasure

he writes poetry full of vague adolescent longings. Chances that he will emerge from a cocoon of introversion are crushed at the age of sixteen when he is struck in the left eye with a rope during a playground game. Doctors in London cannot save his sight, and Lafcadio is permanently disfigured: white tissue scars the surface of his cornea just as something less visible scars his psyche. The lad who returns to school is quiet, subdued and withdrawn. Cause or excuse--ever after he will feel self-conscious with new people, uneasy with all males save for a few close friends, and distinctly unattractive--repulsive really--to women.

Keep the handkerchiefs handy--another cruel twist of fate is on the way. One year after the accident, Henry Molyneux's investments fail and Aunt Sarah, seventy-five and feeble, must economize and move in with his family. Does Molyneux twist his moustache as he makes plans for the young man he has supplanted? Hearn will later think so. No wonder. Late in October, 1867, the youngster is yanked from school and sent to live with Mrs. Brenane's former maid, a woman now married to a dockworker in London. What Lafcadio will do in the city, nobody much knows or cares. For more than a year he vanishes from history, disappears into the fog and roaring streets of the British capital. Decades later he will drop hints about running away, wandering the city's ugliest regions, sharing the hunger and misery of the poor, enduring a session in a London workhouse. One result will be a lifelong distaste for great cities. Never for him will they mean

glamour, excitement, or culture, but only inhumanity, oppression, the death of feeling and of hope.

Childhood, adolescence, innocence--whatever remains of these blessed states ends abruptly in 1869. Now wholly in control of a declining Sarah Brenane, Molyneux sends Hearn passage money to America and instructions to head for Cincinnati and seek out a distant relative who will, supposedly, help him get established. Of the Atlantic crossing in the spring, he will never pen a word. But more than thirty-five years later he will vividly recall the tall, grey-eyed, Norwegian peasant girl, bright hair in braids, who faces him on the first day of the train ride from New York to Cincinnati. Lafcadio wants to die for her. Only once do they exchange words, but the sound of her accent never fades, and the shadow, the golden shadow of her always stays with him. Near death he will recall this brief encounter as My First Romance. Long will it outlast most of the later ones.

Cincinnati in 1869, four years past the Civil War. Call it Boomtown, that oldest and newest of American stories. Give it a subtitle: How to Convert Natural Beauty into Wealth. Great Bluffs above the Ohio River; Kentucky's hills shimmering in the distance; and close at hand the stench and blight of pork-packing houses, soapworks, tanneries; slums sprawled along the waterfront; green heights and valleys scarred with shanties and new suburbs. Lots of life here, lots of hustle; big dreams of trade, industry and quick wealth. Two hundred

thousand people call the city home, and that number is on a rapid rise. A good minority of them speak German; larger numbers carry the lilt of the Irish countryside; thousands of newcomers talk in the lively tones of the emancipated, their voices full of the black and blue language of hope and wariness, joy and disbelief.

Never will Hearn report how the city looks to eyes fresh from London. Maybe the shock is too great for him ever to remember. Put yourself in his place. You are nineteen; five feet three; slight of body; blind and scarred in one eye, and near-sighted in the other; painfully shy; decently enough educated but wholly unprepared for any practical pursuit. At the initial meeting with Molyneux's relative, it becomes clear that he will be of no real help. So suddenly you are on your own, facing that most elemental question: how to live. The answer is never clearly recorded. You write no letters, keep no diary. Only three decades later do you refer to the activities and feelings of those first weeks and months alone, and then in metaphors more suggestive than any details. You recall being dropped into the enormous machinery of life I knew nothing about; you remember experiencing the wolf's side of life, the ravening side, the apish side; the ugly facets of the monkey puzzle.

Work is the first issue. Anything will do. You try hawking, canvassing for politicians, writing advertisements; you attempt to become an accountant, sign on as a messenger boy for the telegraph office. Maybe the jobs do not pay enough or maybe lack of skill gets you fired. Whatever the reason, none of them last very long. Too

often you are short of cash, on the run. More than once your bags are seized when are tossed out of a boarding house. You know what it is to sleep in a doorway or a stable, to dine on stolen food, to be bullied by the police. Only as a servant do you find a resting place. For a year and a half you light fires, shovel coal, and do handy work in a boardinghouse in exchange for food and the privilege of sleeping on the floor of the smoking room.

All this is part of a writer's education, one may be tempted to say. But that is the safe, sweet voice of historical hindsight, while yours are the fearful moments of wondering not about the next meal but the next decade, and the ones after that. This is not an existence you want to continue. As if a question has been posed, you begin to haunt the public library at Sixth and Vine, to sample its fifty-thousand volumes. Do you find the answer there? Is it in the pages of Baudelaire, de Nerval, Flaubert, Mallarme--all those French writers who raise and cater to your taste for the exquisite? Or in those tales of the supernatural, the folklore and mythologies from Africa, India, Oceania, or in the books on the way of the Buddha, or in the poetry and tales of Poe, the single American author whose life and works seem congenial, whose interest in the bizarres matches your own?

Hearn the writer is born in the library. His work will always carry the scent of dusty bookshelves, hints of tales written in foreign languages, queer notions lifted from distant epochs and remote cultures and rendered into gauzy English prose. The earliest stories, published in cheap Weekly papers and lost to history, bring no payment or

recognition. Not until November, 1872, does he receive money for a piece of writing. Fifteen months and some eighty free-lance articles later, he joins the staff of the daily Enquirer at a salary of twenty-five dollars a week. Already he has something of a reputation as a journalist, but one that has little to do with those staples of the newspaper game--politics, industrial progress, financial scandal, petty crime. Hearn is a feature writer, his choice of subjects always personal. Journalism for him partakes of a serious quest--an exploration of both the outside world and of the self, and an examination of the relationship between the two.

Spiritualists, prostitutes, ex-slaves, failed suicides, kosher butchers, grave-diggers, pickpockets, roustabouts, rag pickers, policemen, pawn-brokers, artists, and murderers--these are the kind of characters that Lafcadio likes to share with readers. He tracks them to their natural habitats, locales normally shunned by middle class folk--to courtrooms, cemeteries, city dumps, slaughter-houses, wharves, and midnight missions, to the gin-mills, opium dens, dance halls, and cribs of Bucktown's Rat Row and Sausage Row, where quick pleasure turns to quicker violence. In pursuit of a good story, he allows himself to be hauled by a steeple-jack to the top of the highest church spire in Cincinnati; dons a dress and bonnet to attend a lecture restricted to females (and suffers momentary panic when another man, similarly attired, is discovered, roughed-up, and tossed from the auditorium); drinks fresh cow's blood--good for the health he is told--in an abattoir; sneaks into a studio to view the most voluptuous of local

models lying undraped before a roomful of painters; and attends a seance where--to his great surprise--the spirit of his father, speaking through a medium, begs forgiveness for the wrong of abandoning Lafcadio.

Such people, places, and adventures are rendered in vivid prose that is alternately graphic, skeptical, humorous, ironic. Hearn does not merely celebrate city life--he also plays the critic, exposes fraudulent fortune tellers, abortionists, dishonest missionaries, corrupt government officials, YMCA leaders who own slum property. Scholar is another role he fancies. Lafcadio can turn a piece on the arrest of a streetwalker into a learned disquisition on the honorable role of hetaera in classical Greece, or the story of a poisoning into an essay on similar murders in ancient Rome, Arabia, and Renaissance Italy. As he discovers the power of words to create reality, Lafcadio moves towards a new kind of journalism. He likes to describe himself as a ghoul, someone who revels in thrusting a reeking mixture of bones, blood, and hair under people's noses at breakfast time. The epitome of such Sensationalism comes in late 1874 when a tanyard worker is stabbed with a pitchfork and stuffed while still alive into a furnace. His reconstruction of the victim's agony--the struggles, the burning, the shrieks and writhings--and the descriptions of the remains--a hideous adhesion of half-molten flesh, boiled brains, and jellied blood . . . crisped and still warm to the touch--do more than ruin a few appetites. They make Hearn well-known in the community and, through reprints, capture the attention of a national audience.

How far to come in just five years. The once-penniless immigrant now enjoys a steady income, an address listed in the city directory, and a circle of friends--journalists, artists, poets, printers, and free thinkers, members of what might be called a local Bohemia, but without the self-consciousness that the label usually implies. He also has a woman--Mattie Foley, the cook at a house where he boards. Eighteen, illiterate and the mother of an illegitimate four-year-old boy, she is a healthy, well-built country girl who in soft, melodious tones tells fascinating stories of childhood on a plantation. Mattie may be no darker than the olive-skinned Hearn, but she was born in Kentucky as a slave.

It figures. As does the next step. Call it a repetition of Charles Bush Hearn and Rosa Cassimati. See it as another way of thumbing one's nose at middle class conventions. Term it self-destructive, an unconscious identification with the oppressed and scarred of the earth. Marriage between Black and White has been illegal in Ohio since 1861, the first year of the war to save the Union. But somehow Hearn gets a license, persuades a Black Episcopalian minister to perform the ceremony in June, 1874. Almost immediately, the pressures of living together drive them apart. Details are virtually non-existent, but the problem is temperament as much as culture. He is too sober and serious; she too playful and irresponsible. Soon Mattie is out on the streets, in trouble with the police, and he is back in a world of male friends, full of guilt over being unable to save her from ruin: I love her,--more I fancy than I

will ever love any woman; and somehow the lower she falls, the fonder I feel of her. I think I have been unjust to her--unjust in marrying her at all--lifting her up only to let her fall lower than ever.

Not that the marriage does much for him. Saying good riddance to narrow-minded friends who turn their backs is one thing; losing a job, distinctly another. The axe falls in the summer of 1875 when some local politicians, annoyed at Hearn's criticisms, carry rumors of the scandal to his editor. The same day, Lafcadio is out on the street, so full of despair that later reports of a suicide attempt cannot wholly be discounted. Or is it only show, the kind of gesture that one good friend will recall as not uncommon: He would have liked to kill himself spectacularly if he could have written the story for his newspaper. Whatever the truth, his dark mood cannot last for long. Six days after his final article in the Enquirer, Hearn is writing for the Cincinnati Commercial.

Success. Surely that is what it means to be picked up so quickly by a rival newspaper. The chance to reject an offer to return to the Enquirer a few weeks later only underscores what has to be a sense of personal triumph. But Hearn, at the age of twenty-five, knows the difference between the public image and the inner life . . . which no other eye can see. Increasingly, the cost of journalistic success seems too high. Work has become a grind--the hours too long (often noon to three a.m.), the scope for creativity small. In 1876 repetition plagues his articles in the Commercial--bums, convicts, and hustlers have become so familiar that it is difficult to make their

stories interesting. Now he tries to set aside hours for more serious work, like making translations from the French of Théophile Gautier's elegant stories. Partly these are exercises, a way of sharpening his literary sensibility; partly they are escape. Daily he may have to stumble through the streets of Cincinnati, mingle with the victims and victimizers of Rat Row, and gaze at the murky Ohio River, but Gautier takes him to far-off times and places, lets him lie on a silken bed with Cleopatra, stride the streets of Thebes, gaze at the Nile on perfumed nights.

Such work must have an effect, for suddenly, one day its all too much. Or way too little. Weary of the daily struggle in an ugly city, weary of the American disposition to work people to death, and the American delight in getting worked to death, he longs for a brighter, warmer world; for a slower pace; for the color of the tropics, for the dimly remembered passion of Mediterranean life. It is time for a fellow to get out of Cincinnati when they begin to call it the Paris of America--he will later say. The city may boast libraries, theaters, concert halls, and gardens, but its soul--if that be the word--lies in the smoky factories and stony bank buildings of a commercial civilization. No such place can fill his desires and fantasies. Abruptly and without warning, Lafcadio quits his job and leaves for New Orleans in October, 1877. He may imagine that he is only going South, but in reality Hearn is taking a first unconscious step on a path away from Western civilization.

Beginning again. The world newly-born; the faces fresh; the pleasure of not being known. Reality still undefined. Anything possible. Likely. Or so it can seem when you float in on that great brown river, past the cane fields and the cottonwoods drooping with Spanish moss. The eye stretches; the soul expands. Here is a harbor of ships from ports out of dreams--Constantinople, Smyrna, Marseilles, Hong Kong. Here are miles of levee, warehouses bursting with sacks of cotton and sugar. Behind them lies a city of verandas, porches, and balconies, of gardens, statues, fountains, and flowers. Quickly you come to know that curious, crooked French quarter, its houses tinted yellow, green, and blue; the great Cathedral in Jackson Square; the open air markets with heaps of tropical fruit; the rich, smell of oriental coffee wafting from cafés; the faces from Italy, Greece, Cuba, and Brazil; the soft tones of Spanish, French, and the sweetest of all dialects, the Creole of the Antilles.

Love for the city proves stronger than hunger during seven months that Hearn cannot find work. His savings vanish. He sells off all his books, roams the streets in ragged clothes, comes down to living on a five-cent meal once in two days. His twenty-eighth birthday passes in an agony of dread and self-doubt. Ahead lies nothing but starvation, sickness, (and) artificial wants, which I shall never be wealthy enough to even partially gratify. Heredity is the culprit. In a country where to be a success you need gigantic shoulders, he is one of the small people; in the land of the practical, a dreamer who will never

have the leisure to develop his talents or create something decently meritorious. The desire for independence has been thwarted. By late spring, 1878, he feels like a most damnable failure.

This harsh judgment is characteristic. So is the unwillingness to give excuses, or to recognize the larger social factors in his predicament. New Orleans has not yet recovered from the Civil War and the occupation by Union troops. Its economy is sluggish, almost stagnant. The bright side of this, that living is cheap, becomes most apparent only after June 15, when he lands a job on The Item, a four-page daily with a future as uncertain as his own. A starting salary of ten dollars a week allows Lafcadio to live in a decent room, eat well, purchase books, and soon save a hundred dollars to invest in a restaurant named, appropriately enough, The Hard Times. One month into the venture, in early 1879, his partner scoops up the profits and flees from the city. Hearn can afford to chalk it up to experience. Once more he is on the road to success.

Newspaper work may pay the bills, but journalism is hardly the most important part of Hearn's life in New Orleans. Unlike the demanding Cincinnati papers, The Item takes very little of his time. Three hours every morning are quite enough to fulfill all his duties--to rattle off leaders on literary or European matters, put together a few articles based on telegraphic reports, cut and paste a column of news from the rural Louisiana press, and take notes from the New York papers for the next day's editorials. By midday he is free. Ahead stretches the long, golden afternoon, with its perfume and its

laziness. How fine a prospect; what a sweet existence this could be for someone without ambition or hope of better things.

That person is not Hearn. His aim is high; his journalism practice for something more serious. Call it literature. All his hours point in that direction. New Orleans fascinates him with its touch of the tropics, polyglot population, and multicultural heritage. He becomes an amateur anthropologist, folklorist, linguist. From Blacks he collects samples of the street dialect called gumbo; from Creoles who pride themselves on the purity of their Latin blood, he takes recipes, proverbs, tales that closely blend legend and history; from street vendors of potatoes and herbs, he learns musical cries and patois blending English, Spanish, French, and African tongues. All this is the stuff of feature articles, and not just for the local press. In the pages of Harper's Weekly, Hearn begins to share the city, its people, customs, and languages, with a national audience.

A growing reputation lets him leave The Item late in 1881 to become Literary Editor of the more substantial Times-Democrat. The man who glories at living in a Latin city has little taste for the sentimentalities of most current American literature, so his Sunday pages become a forum for fashionable authors--largely French--from the continent. With sympathy and understanding he reviews books and attempts to explain current movements like the Naturalism of Emile Zola or the Impressionism of Pierre Loti. With delicacy, circumspection and self-censorship, he translates stories, or chapters, his pen always confined within limits of what a genteel audience will tolerate.

Through Hearn, New Orleans readers sample Gerard de Nerval, Alphonse Daudet, Gustave Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, Joseph le Maitre and Anatole France. His first book, published in New York in 1882 (with a one-hundred-fifty dollar subsidy by the author), is a collection of tales by Gautier--One of Cleopatra's Nights and Other Fantastic Romances.

Shadowy and elusive, and certainly not a social creature, Lafcadio in the early eighties becomes something of a figure in New Orleans. George Washington Cable, the novelist and local literary lion, is one good friend who shares meals, strolls through the Vieux Carfé, and the problems of literary composition. Joel Chandler Harris, creator of Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit, visits from Atlanta, then returns home to devote an entire column in The Constitution to Hearn as a man of letters who has already made his mark. Nationally-known authors like Charles Dudley Warner, Joaquin Miller, and Samuel Clemens meet the diminutive writer on swings through the region and carry back to Northern editors word of Lafcadio as a writer to be watched.

All this is very nice. But hardly enough to satisfy his growing ambitions. Hearn is not content with recognition that comes from turning the writing of others into English prose; he longs to be known for original work. Art--most definitely spelled with a capital--is his reason for being, his true religion. No sacrifice is too great to attain the kind of grace that creativity brings: Could I create something I felt to be sublime, I should feel also that the Unknowable had selected me for a mouthpiece, for a medium of utterance, in the

holy cycling of his purpose; and I should know the pride of a prophet that had seen God face-to-face. This kind of faith and hope keep him at the writing desk for more hours than are good for his health, keep him there until his sighted eye grows painful and begins to bulge in a most unsightly manner. Hearn now must read with the paper just a few inches from his face; write with his head bent almost to the desk. When he walks through town, the world is a blur. Only by using a small pocket telescope can he make things come into focus.

A similar fuzziness marks his art. That lusty side of the man, the one who enjoys good food and pleasures of the flesh, appears only in letters to friends. His public prose emerges from wispy, disembodied realms of fog and ghosts, where passion lives as an idea in the mind rather than a scream in the throat. Ask his chief fantasy and you get this answer: I would give anything to be a literary Columbus,--to discover a Romantic America in some West Indian or North African or Oriental region,--to describe the life that is only fully treated of in universal geographies of ethnological researches. Such kinds of work call for travel that he cannot afford, so he must be content to seek the Orient at home. Personal desire and practical self-interest blend together in his aims: A man must devote himself to one thing in order to succeed: so I have pledged me to the worship of the Odd, the Queer, the Strange, the Exotic, the Monstrous. It quite suits my temperament.

The original stories Hearn begins to produce in the eighties are-- by his own admission--not quite stories nor wholly original: I have no

creative talent, no constructive ability for the manufacture of fiction. Those frequent feature-page efforts that he calls Fantastics are mere sketches--impressions of a landscape, a garden, a cemetery, a hotel room; recollections of dreams, of women seen or imagined; evocations of love, fear, decay, and death. More structured are tales taken from distant traditions--Finnish sagas, Hindu folklore, Talmudic commentaries, East Asian chronicles. No simple act of translation is involved here. Lafcadio does not hesitate to change points of view, delete characters, add or subtract moral statements until the tale is more than half his own. Two collections issued by Boston publishers--Stray Leaves From Strange Literature and Some Chinese Ghosts--encourage him towards something more contemporary. The result is Chita, a novella about a girl who is the sole survivor of a hurricane on the Louisiana Coast. Like everything he writes, it is short on plot, characters, and moral dilemma, and very long on setting and mood, all rendered in a poetical prose distantly derived from Baudelaire.

How typical. Perhaps, in fact, the key to understanding Hearn. He is a divided soul, one who wants to write fiction, knows fiction to be an expression of real life, and cannot stop himself from shunning just such life. Far more to his taste are contemplation and reflection, viewing things from afar and meeting people in books. Encounters with flesh and blood human beings are difficult, problematic, and his desires for intimacy are usually overbalanced by fear. No doubt this is a legacy from childhood, from being abandoned too many times. Now Lafcadio rejects people before they have a chance

to desert him. He terminates virtually every close relationship by picking a quarrel over some imagined slight, and then making a sharp, irrevocable break.

A similar swing characterizes his attitude towards New Orleans. By the middle of the eighties, he is weary of the city and quite ready to fulfill repeated threats of sailing away to the tropics. Later he will produce reasons enough for this break--annoyance at the editor of the Times-Democrat for judging his work scandalous and editing it too much; distaste for the great number of shitasses whom I was obliged to say "Goodday" to in N.O.; realization that even in this relaxed city, he is not free to voice beliefs about the equality of races or to express his real feelings about the importance of sexuality in human affairs. The decision to leave comes in May, 1877, shortly after Harper's accepts Chita for publication. While getting ready to move, Lafcadio never acknowledges that to abandon New Orleans is to repeat Cincinnati, to flee from the familiar and comfortable towards the risky and the unknown. Some may see this as a search for the self; others, for a home. With Hearn there is no need to choose between the two. For him, both quests are ultimately the same.

Martinique. The tropics at last. The kind of island he has dreamed of all his life. Turquoise sky, great cocoa palms, volcanic hills, an azure sea tilting to the horizon, beautiful brown women. No hustle, no deadlines, no puritan heritage. A community where people

are honest, good-natured, easy-going, and courteous, where the only vices--if that's the word--are erotic: No one thinks it scandalous even if your housekeeper be young and pretty, and have a baby suspiciously like you. Just the place to grow fat and lazy, to shed all ambition, to learn those two important lessons--how much rum to drink, and how much love to make. No wonder it seems simply heaven on earth.

That's the initial reaction, voiced when he visits the island on a Caribbean cruise in the summer of 1887, repeated when he returns in October for a stay that may last months, years, or--as he tells some friends--forever. It continues as the public view, remains implicit in later articles for Cosmopolitan and Harper's and the chapters of his first really successful book, Two Years in the French West Indies. Never quite denied, this bright picture grows shadowy as the months pass. The loveliness of Martinique and power of the tropics present a challenge at once psychic and professional: if you have been raised in purgatory, how do you learn to live in Paradise?

Not easily; not over the long run; not if you have--what shall we call it?--a conscience, a soul, a something struggling to express not you but itself. The easy part is falling in love with the vivid colors of the landscape, the soft winds, the graceful movements of the natives, the languid daily round--strong, aromatic coffee brought by a servant before dawn; an hour swim at sunrise; mornings at the desk above the white curve of St. Pierre's harbor; your first meal at noon: fruit, vegetables, tiny fish fresh from the bay. By two-thirty, the

crushing heat makes it impossible to work: If you try to write, your head feels as if a heated feather pillow had been stuffed into your skull. So you change to pajamas, sleep through the afternoon, and wake for a tremendous sunset--the blaze of a whole world on fire. Then supper, a stroll along the quai, and bed by nine o'clock.

Seductive is the word for this existence. Dangerous, too. It can erode the patterns of a lifetime: Slowly, you begin to lose all affection for the great Northern nurse that taught you to think, to work, to aspire. Then, after a while, this nude, warm, savage, amorous Southern Nature succeeds in persuading you that labor and effort and purpose are foolish things,--that life is very sweet without them;--and you actually find yourself ready to confess that the aspirations and inspirations born of the struggle for life in the North are all madness . . .

Perhaps. But its your sort of madness and not so easily shed. Maybe you can give up ideas of success and hopes of fame, but it is difficult to abandon intellectual life. Admit it: writing is a problem here, serious conversation a great effort, reading almost impossible. You can believe Heaven and Sea make so mighty a poem that all human poets seem dullards, all novelists stupid beyond endurance, and not see how this refers to you. At least you can until the editor of Harper's finds few of your sketches interesting and then returns a novella that took four months to write. Reveries now must give way to reality, to despair, hopelessness, and fears that something in this land has deranged you: I am not sure of myself now at all,--maybe mentally out of gear without knowing it.

Six months after landing, Hearn is in crisis. Something is definitely wrong with his writing, something that bewilders him. Once the future seemed so easy: get out of journalism, find a lovely island, write a book about native life, some short stories, a novel of the tropics. Now he must reckon the cost of living where beauty is exactly what prevents one from work and that glorious climate is precisely what does not allow you to think or study. Feelings of exile, once buried beneath picture postcard images, begin to surface: You get tired of the eternal palms against the light, tired of the colors, tired of the shrieking tongue (that Creole he once considered the sweetest of dialects) . . . tired of hearing by night the mandibles of great tropical insects furiously devouring the few English books upon the table.

Enough. The problem is clear--abandon writing or the island. Enough. The choice cannot be in doubt. Yet for fifteen months he lingers, letting an old fantasy slowly leak away. More than nostalgia, more than an unwillingness to give up paradise keeps him here. Never forget his more practical side. The really good writing will come later--that's his hope. This is the time to gather material on native life, to tour the island, walk through cane fields, climb Mount Pelee; to play with children, listen to the songs and stories of fishermen, female porters, laundresses, East Indian storekeepers; to take notes on flowers, spiders, birds, and snakes, real and legendary; to attend Carnival, dance and drink with the passionate knowledge that something is about to end.

Like tearing my heart out. Those are the words for that day in May, 1889, when the ship steams away from the port of St. Pierre. He is sailing towards New York, a frightful cyclone of electricity and machinery, a city whose stone and iron terrors will make him say Civilization is a hideous thing. Blessed is savagery! He is sailing towards six months in Philadelphia turning Martinique into one book of sketches and another of short stories; towards fears that he may have to return once more to daily journalism, towards hope that he can still find a far-off, exotic spot where the climate does not blur the memory or sap the will to write. He is sailing towards these words in a letter: My friends advise me to try the Orient next time; and I think I shall.