

Nous nous retrouvons enfin assis à une terrasse, à Saint-Germain des Prés, sirotant un café-crème: Alors un artiste d'occasion, un étudiant en détresse sans doute, vient contre quelques pièces, donner sa ritournelle. Pour une fois il ne commet pas d'anachronisme; il a choisi Léo Ferré. Comme nous, peut-être a-t-il le virus? Car les mots ne parviennent pas à chasser nos rêves...

"Paname, t'es belle, tu sais, sous tes lampions,

Des fois quand tu pars en saison

Dans les bras d'un accordéon.

Paname, quand tu t'habilles avec du bleu

Ça fait sortir les amoureux

Qui disent: 'A Paris tous les deux'..."

NICOLE

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"IF EVER I CEASE TO LOVE" or "WHEN IT'S MARDI GRAS DOWN SOUTH"

"If ever I cease to love,

If ever I cease to love,

May the fish get legs and the cow lay eggs,

If ever I cease to love!"

So sang the Russian Grand Duke Alexandrovich Romanov to his lady love, blonde actress Lydia Thompson, when he visited New Orleans during Carnival time, in 1872. Many Mardi Gras customs of the present day go back to that Carnival visit. From that year on, Mardi Gras was designated as an official holiday; carnival colours were chosen, purple green and gold; "If ever I cease to love" designated the official song; the parades with dukes mounted on horses; and kings in all their splendour.

However, Mardi Gras celebrations did not have their origins with the memorable visit of the Grand Duke. Story has it that the early French explorers while making their way through the Mississippi delta realized that on that day at home their countrymen would be celebrating "Fat Tuesday", so they put ashore and named the adjacent stretch of water Bayou Mardi Gras. Over the years, during the various French and Spanish eras, the celebrations developed and became well established. There were times when the festivities got a trifle out of hand, and, under the cover of masks, the gay blades of the day heaved coconuts, bags of flour, mud and even lime at one another, instead of roses and bonbons as was the custom heretofore. For some years after that, the celebrations diminished, later were reorganized and really developed after the arrival of our Grand Duke.

New Orleans has not got the monopoly on Mardi Gras but to most people New Orleans and Mardi Gras are one and the same. Strangely enough few people really know what Mardi Gras is, or stands for. For one who has been exposed to four Mardi Gras I am not sure that I know either. One could live a lifetime in New Orleans and still not have all the answers. However, I think that we can be safe in saying that Mardi Gras is two things: it is the day before the commencement of Lent, and it is also loosely applied to all the activities that take place on that day. Mardi Gras is not something that goes on and on for weeks and weeks. This is called Carnival Season, or just plain Carnival. In fact, it has been said, that there are just two seasons in New Orleans, Carnival, and after Carnival.

Christmas is barely over before Carnival season starts. Harlequin Ball usually starts the festivities which do not end until Mardi Gras night with Comus and Rex Balls, and if one were ever invited to every ball that took place during the interval between Harlequin and Rex, you would find yourself getting into formal clothes on fifty to sixty occasions.