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# THE WET PARADE

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*by*

UPTON SINCLAIR

AUTHOR OF "OIL," "THE JUNGLE," ETC.

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LONDON

T. WERNER LAURIE LTD.

COBHAM HOUSE, 24 & 26 WATER LANE, E.C.4

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*For a short account of  
Upton Sinclair see  
the end of this  
volume*

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# CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. POINTE CHILCOTE . . . . .	7
II. THE "DEMON RUM" . . . . .	28
III. TARLETON HOUSE . . . . .	48
IV. MANHATTAN . . . . .	70
V. PROHIBITION . . . . .	95
VI. THE GOLDEN JAIL . . . . .	118
VII. THE LADDER OF SUCCESS . . . . .	142
VIII. THE BIG CHIEF . . . . .	169
IX. THE NEW MAN . . . . .	192
X. BROADHAVEN . . . . .	217
XI. SCANDAL . . . . .	239
XII. CRIME . . . . .	262
XIII. CORONER'S JURY . . . . .	288
XIV. WOWSER . . . . .	314
XV. FEDERAL SERVICE . . . . .	343
XVI. JAILBREAK . . . . .	367
XVII. UNDERWORLD . . . . .	395
XVIII. SACRIFICE . . . . .	420

# CONTENTS

1	I. POINTS OF VIEW
28	II. THE "DEMON ROOM"
48	III. THE "LITTLE HOUSE"
70	IV. THE "MAGNETIC"
95	V. THE "PROPHET"
118	VI. THE "GOLDEN HALL"
142	VII. THE "LADDER OF SUCCESS"
167	VIII. THE "BIG CHIEF"
192	IX. THE "NEW MAN"
217	X. THE "WARRIOR"
242	XI. THE "WARRIOR"
267	XII. THE "WARRIOR"
292	XIII. THE "WARRIOR"
317	XIV. THE "WARRIOR"
342	XV. THE "WARRIOR"
367	XVI. THE "WARRIOR"
392	XVII. THE "WARRIOR"
417	XVIII. THE "WARRIOR"
442	XIX. THE "WARRIOR"
467	XX. THE "WARRIOR"
492	XXI. THE "WARRIOR"
517	XXII. THE "WARRIOR"
542	XXIII. THE "WARRIOR"
567	XXIV. THE "WARRIOR"
592	XXV. THE "WARRIOR"
617	XXVI. THE "WARRIOR"
642	XXVII. THE "WARRIOR"
667	XXVIII. THE "WARRIOR"
692	XXIX. THE "WARRIOR"
717	XXX. THE "WARRIOR"

原书缺页

原书缺页

## CHAPTER I

### POINTE CHILCOTE

#### I

THE visitor from the North sat and fanned herself vigorously with a palm-leaf fan; she was not used to such temperatures, even in midsummer. But Mama did not mind it, having lived here all her forty-odd years; she was stout and placid, and sat and rocked slowly, with perspiration running in streams down her pink and white cheeks. She knew it was good for you to be bathed in perspiration, provided you bathed in water morning and evening, and used talcum powder meantime, and put on fresh linen. She explained this to the anxious stranger, and added apologetically: "We cannot open the doors just now, because there is a snake in the house."

The visitor started visibly. "A snake?"

"Yes," said Mama; "one gets in every now and then, you know."

"And what do you do about it?"

"Well, you see, he gets hidden; but sooner or later he has to come out, and then we kill him with a stick."

The strange lady cast uneasy glances around the drawing-room, and furtively began to gather up her skirts and tuck them tightly about her ankles—this being in the days before skirts got out of the reach of ankles and snakes. "Why don't you keep the doors open, and let him go out?" she quavered.

"But then we wouldn't know he was gone," explained Mama amiably. "We have to keep track of him."

"Are they poisonous, Mrs. Chilcote?"

"Unfortunately, yes—they're generally moccasins."

"Good gracious me!" said the lady from the North, and arose from her chair, saying that she just must hurry along,



as she had another engagement, and was already late. Mama detained her, in the Southern way of hospitality, but the lady from the North never stopped edging herself towards the front door, meanwhile gazing about at the floor of the drawing-room, which was kept in semi-darkness all day, and had antique rugs with snaky patterns, and carved mahogany furniture with snaky-looking legs.

Maggie May was over by one of the windows, on the other side of the curtains, supposed to be reading a story-book when this conversation took place. After the visiting lady had gone, she and Mama laughed over the hurriedness of the departure, and lack of social tact displayed. Northern people were always funny to Maggie May and her mother; they didn't understand about things, and asked such unexpected questions. How could anybody imagine that you could grow sugar without snakes? In the black ooze of the bottom-lands where thickets of tall cane grew, the roots made such a tangle, you might as well have thought of getting rid of mosquitoes as of reptiles. Maggie May was used to all such natural superfluities. Just as you always carried with you outdoors a little bundle of twigs with leaves to keep the mosquitoes off your ankles, and always knocked them from your night-dress before you crawled into bed under the "mosquito bar"—so also you had to turn your shoes upside down before you put your feet into them, and you never reached into a dark hole for anything.

The danger was reduced by the fact that outside the house Papa would not permit shrubbery or plants, only a smooth lawn upon which snakes were easy to see; he would then get his rifle and sit on the front gallery and shoot their heads off. Once a week he would send a Negro man under the house to look for nests, and one of the fascinations of Maggie May's childhood was holding in her hands and examining against the light certain round yellow objects, soft to pressure and leathery, shaped like the capsules which the doctor gave you when you developed chills and fever. You must not leave them to stand very long, or when you came back you might find a boxful of baby snakes, perhaps as deadly as their mothers and fathers. When Papa had the man build a fire of brush and set such a box in the middle of it, the little girl tried to look into the writhing mass of red and yellow flames, mingled with black and brown serpents, and had to turn her head away, because life was so awful—and yet so fascinating, one could not get away from it!

## II

It was the sugar-cane country of Louisiana, the "Bayou Teche." For no one could say how many thousands of years the Father of Waters had gathered the detritus of half a continent, and swept it down here, and spread it, black and slimy, to a depth beyond all digging. It lay under a blazing sun, watered by floods and rains, and a forest of green things sprang into life in it overnight, and men laboured all their lives, black men with their muscles and white men with their minds, to tame this growth and limit it to useful things.

Strange as it seemed when you said it, a considerable part of the land was water. The wild cane and marsh-grass were many feet high, and their roots made such a tangle that you would think you could walk on it. Only when you went to the edge of the road and looked directly down you would see the ooze and slime. It was half brackish from the gulf, but this did not keep it from breeding insects, which rose in clouds so thick that they would dim the sun. The roads had to be made with logs laid crossways, and then loads of dirt dumped on to them, and then perhaps a second layer of logs. It was all part of the cost of sugar.

Maggie May's family lived on what was known as "Pointe Chilcote." In far-off years it had been a real "pointe" thrust out into the gulf; but now the marsh had enveloped it, and it looked like the rest, except that it had "hills" here and there, not so many feet high, but solid enough to have live oaks and magnolias growing on them. "Pointe Chilcote" was eight miles long and three miles wide, domain enough for a family to spread itself upon. Like all other planters, Grandpa Chilcote had been ruined by the Civil War, but he had not had to lose his land and come down in the social scale, because there had been discovered a salt mine upon his place. So the estates were built up again, and the burned mansion replaced by an even more splendid one. Now there were four sons, and two married daughters, each with a home on a separate "hill," half a mile or so apart; as grandsons and daughters grew up, they moved to yet other "hills," or bought themselves homes in the towns, where they lived in winter.

When the visitor from the North descended from the train at the town of Acadia, he found a conveyance of the Chilcotes waiting, with a Negro in black livery, no matter

how hot the day. In Maggie May's early childhood this had been a barouche or victoria, with a pair of what were referred to as "spanking bays"; the families were conservative, distrustful of those newfangled things called "horseless carriages." But one day Uncle Daubney, the youngest son and the wildest, turned up in a terrifying contraption which he had driven from New Orleans, known as a "White Steamer." It was made by a man named White, and was painted white, and it ran by steam, leaving a long white trail behind. It made a powerful noise, and drove a score of the delta horses to leap into the marsh; finally, one ill-fated day, it exploded with a tremendous roar, and deposited Uncle Daubney in a clump of his own sugar-cane.

The horses took you through what appeared to be a Malayan jungle, and if you had never been in this country before, you might be anxious as to what sort of accommodation you would find. But suddenly the brakes and marshes would fade away; the land would begin to rise, and there would appear fine stretches of lawn, with peacocks and lyre-birds strutting about under the shade of trees older than anyone's memory. In the distance, down the gravelled driveway, you saw a mansion made of red brick, two stories high, with fluted white columns going to the second story, and a double "gallery," one on the ground floor and one on the second. There were eighteen of these columns along the front of the house, each so big that the biggest man could not put his arms around it. The Negro men who came for your bags wore white duck, and the maids who unpacked them wore black dresses with white aprons and caps; so you would realize that you had been transported, not in space to Malaya, but in time to the "Old South."

### III

In the daytime the Chilcote men wore khaki, with riding-boots and broad hats, and rode the plantations on horseback. But at six in the evening everybody disappeared, and an hour later appeared for dinner in tuxedos and evening gowns, as fashionable as you would see in New Orleans. There was a dining-room panelled in mahogany, with sideboards and highboys elaborately carved with roses and deer's heads, and the faces of Roman emperors and French duchesses. There was hand-cut crystal, and silver dishes, platters almost too heavy for one man, and coffee-urns and punch-bowls

shining like full moons in a midnight sky; an array of silver decanters with several kinds of liquor, and silver bowls for ice, and holders for wine-bottles. There was a special servant for these treasures, a grey-headed old Negro called the "steward," who had the keys to cabinets and sideboards, and served the liquors at meals.

You would want much cold drink, for not merely was the weather hot, but also the food; it was the land of peppers and tabasco. Not far from the Chilcotes was a neighbour who had become wealthy through the manufacture of a fiery hot sauce which was used all over the world. You would be served a rich soup, made of what the Negroes called "tarpin"; or perhaps, still richer, of the soft green turtle, whose shell was meat, cut up in little chunks; with that would come a decanter of sherry, and you would pour in all you wanted. Then would come a sherbet to cool your throat, and after it a "gumbo," or chowder, made of fish, or crabs, or shrimp, peppered so that if you were not used to it the tears would come into your eyes, and you would be glad when the "steward" came with a bottle of ice-cold claret. After you had recovered, you would be served a "crawfish bisk," or a platter of crabs with the big claws cracked for you. A messy business eating them with your fingers; the "Creole" families, the descendants of the old-time French and Spanish settlers, had special lavatories adjoining the dining-room, one for ladies and one for gentlemen, to which all retired after the crab-course, and washed their hands and cheeks before resuming the meal.

You were not considered really to have dined until you had venison, or perhaps bear-meat, or wild turkey; or half a dozen guinea-hens off the plantation, or ducks fed on pecans and stuffed with them. There would be a huge cold ham, carved in slices, even though nobody took any. There would be six or eight vegetables, smoking hot, with rich cream sauces, and cold champagne to cool your mouth, and then "ambrosia," made of orange and grated cocoanut, or "syllabub," a cream whip with sherry, poured over "angel cake"; then fruit, and coffee, with brandy which you burned on top.

That was the way they ate in the "Old South" or Slave days, and it was a form of glory to keep up the ritual, even to the twentieth century, when newspapers and magazines were full of the writings of "diet cranks." The elder Chilcotes took no stock in any sort of "cranks," but continued to live "like gentlemen," whether they had guests or

were alone. Not much was wasted, because there was a swarm of servants, and in the cabins on the edge of the clearing many dependents waiting hungrily.

While they ate, the Chilcotes talked decorously and gravely about the viands, their qualities and the methods of preparing them: the difference between Smithfield and other hams; between Lynnhaven Bay and Gulf oysters; between diamond-backed terrapin and those without markings; the vintage of wines and the advantages of dry or sweet; the superiority of Bourbon rye aged in the wood, and the impossibility of eliminating fusel oil by any other means. It would be said that the turkey had been shot by Tom's Joe; the angel cake had been made according to Sally's recipe, and how did it compare with Molly's?

They talked about the affairs of the family, where this one was visiting, and what that one was suffering, and what Dr. Aloysius had said about his progress. If there were guests present, the interests would be broadened; they would talk about mutual friends in New Orleans and Memphis society; where So-and-so's boy was going to college, and whom So-and-so's daughter was engaged to. The mention of an engagement might provide conversation for half an hour, because everyone would be interested to recall the connections of that family—the grandson of General Somebody, who had surrendered to Grant at Vicksburg, or had helped Jefferson Davis win the battle of Buena Vista. There would be the Virginia connections, and the Tennessee connections, and the fact that one son was studying art in Paris. Before you knew it, you would be talking about the depravity of French fashions; or perhaps about the French opera company which was expected in New Orleans in the fall.

Such was the method of education of Maggie May in her childhood. As soon as she was old enough to eat politely, she sat at meals with the grown-ups, a demure, silent little figure with big dark eyes that watched everything, and ears that missed no word. She learned the names of an army of persons, living and dead, their connections endlessly complicated, their occupations, their reputations, the names of towns or cities where they lived, and of the plantations or businesses that made them rich and important. When, now and then, one of these persons turned up as a guest in the home, it was as if Napoleon or Julius Cæsar had stepped out of a history-book and shaken hands with her.

## IV

The biggest house was that of Grandpa; it had the finest plate, and served the most elaborate banquets with the oldest wines. Colonel Chilcote was a Civil War veteran, in his seventies when Maggie May first remembered him. He was stout, but still insisted on riding his own plantations, and travelled to New Orleans and transacted his business, and was a favourite in all the clubs. He claimed to carry more good liquor than any other man he knew. He had been a widower for a number of years, and there was always some lively young widow or even a debutante in fashionable society "setting her cap" at him. "The Colonel," a rosy old gentleman with a keen sense of humour, had worked out a novel method of controlling his sons and daughters. Whatever it might be—whether one of the sons spent too much time away from home, or one of the daughters declared she could no longer put up with her hard-drinking husband—the Colonel would only have to say that he was feeling lonely in his old age, and was going to console himself with whatever charmer happened to be conspicuous in the family fears at that moment.

"Papa" was Roger Chilcote, the oldest of the sons, and Maggie May was the youngest of his children. Papa was in his forties when she was a little girl, and to her he was without a blemish, a creature wholly divine. He was blond, with golden hair which developed beautiful waves; he wore a soft, golden beard trimmed to a little point, which made him look romantic. He had a gentle voice, with tremolo stops which caused thrills to run up and down the child's spine; he would take her on his knees and tell her stories out of mythologies white or black. He was a highly sentimental person, tender-hearted, and unable to stand the sight of cruelty; for this reason he was ill-fitted to the world in which fate had placed him.

There had been a tragedy in the life of Roger Chilcote, of which Maggie May knew nothing until she was grown up. He had been engaged to a Creole beauty of Mobile, a dashing creature who rode wild horses and broke all hearts in her neighbourhood. She and Roger fell "madly in love," as people in that country liked to phrase it, and it was an ideal match, according to the world of the delta. But as fate willed it, a sister of this brilliant girl was married first, and in due course was delivered of an infant, and the horrified



whisper went the rounds of society—this infant was black! It is something which happens now and then in the far South, and to the victims it is a jest of Satan; the infant is turned over to a Negro servant, and a curse is laid upon that family to the end of time. The wealthy Creoles sold their possessions and took a steamer to France—and on the way Roger Chilcote's beloved stepped over the side of the vessel.

He never recovered from it; when he took another bride, it was to please his parents. Mama was their choice, and she went into the marriage knowing that she would have the affection and respect of her husband, but no more than that. Mama's duty had been to bear children for the Chilcotes, and this she had faithfully done. There were five of them alive; two more had succumbed to the dangers of the climate, and one had miscarried when a runaway saddle-horse had thrown the young wife over its head. Mama was gentle and placid, endlessly kind, a soft lap and a warm bosom. There were two kinds of mothers in that Old South—those who wore themselves to string and bones, managing households and saving the members from destruction; and those who gave up, and sat in armchairs and rocked, while things took their own painful course.

Maggie May was trained from earliest childhood to fear. Impossible to be trained any other way, in the midst of high-spirited horses which might kick you, and cows which might swing at you with their horns, and deadly snakes which might be lurking in the places where you played. There was a story they told of one of her brothers, a little fellow who had been overlooked by a careless servant, and had crawled under the house, and there amused himself poking his finger at a funny creature which poked back with long red needles; finally the child crawled out again, and told his mother about this fascinating play.

So many "don'ts" for a little girl! She must not go barefoot, because it would make her feet big; she must not climb trees, because it would make her hands big; she must not stay in the sun, because it would make her skin coarse. She must not talk at the dinner-table, unless to answer remarks of the grown-ups. She must not ask questions upon a list of topics forbidden to little girls. She must not talk

about the affairs of the family in the presence of any guest. She must not laugh aloud, nor shout, nor leave the table until she was excused, nor forget her piano practice, her singing, her French, her "hand painting." Anxiously and earnestly she strove to remember these many prohibitions and duties.

However, all these anxieties taken together were less than the one great sorrow which overhung Maggie May's life, and which little by little was revealed to her opening mind. She could not have told when she first began to sense it—any more than she could have told when first she knew that the sky was blue, or that water was wet. She was fully grown before she heard it put into plain words by her mother: the soul-sickening admission that Papa was "drinking."

To say that a man was "drinking" had a special meaning in Maggie May's world. It did not mean that he was having the glasses of claret and burgundy and champagne which the steward served at dinner, nor did it mean the cocktail which preceded the meal, nor sherry in the turtle soup and brandy in the coffee. It did not mean the mint-juleps which would be mixed two or three times in the course of a hot day, and served with glasses full of ice and sprigs of fresh mint. It did not mean the punch which was served at all dances, or the hot toddies on winter nights. All this was not "drinking"; this was hospitality, it was the life of the South. The ladies did it along with the gentlemen, and it was proper and elegant. You kept the usual kinds of liquor in your home, and perhaps some rare ones, and talked about the flavours, the "bouquets," the various brands and their ages, and where you could buy them.

It wasn't even "drinking" when the gentlemen sat in the dining-room after the ladies had left, and smoked their cigars, and talked business and politics, and consumed quantities of whisky and soda. It wasn't "drinking" when a man sat with his cronies in the billiard-room and played poker the whole night through, in a haze of cigar-smoke and a reek of alcohol. That too was the custom, expected of every man who was not a "mollycoddle." The boys were trained to it, having their little sips of mint-julep, their half glasses of wine at meals. When they went away to college, it was assumed that they would take a share in all manly pleasures, which included poker-parties, and whiskies and soda, and cocktails at dinner and punch at dances.

No; where "drinking" began was when a man took too much, and had to disappear suddenly from a dance, leaving



his friends to apologize to his partner; or when, after a poker-party, he was unable to "sleep it off" in the course of the next day; or when he took to having it in his room, by himself, without sociability; or when he had to go off somewhere, say to the home of his plantation manager, and stay for several days. That was the special meaning of "drinking"; and that was when terror began to creep into the souls of the women, and they would whisper together, and seek counsel from the elders, and plan gentle conspiracies, and drop anxious hints.

## VI

It was Maggie May's fate to live most of her days among beautiful men going to their doom on account of liquor; yet so rigid was the code which governed such matters, never until she was grown up did her eyes fall upon one of these men in a drunken state. Of course, when she went into town, it might happen that she would see a man staggering about; but that was some low-class person, who did not count in her thoughts. Such men were the unfortunate victims of all kinds of degradation, and there was nothing that a lady could do about it.

The poor whites in this country were referred to as "Cajuns"; the descendants of those French people of the land of Acadia, in Newfoundland, whose sad story is told in Longfellow's "Evangeline." In the middle of the eighteenth century they had been deported to this swamp country, and their great-great-grandchildren were trappers, living in one-room board shacks stuck out over the bayous on piles, and reached by rickety plank walks, nailed to saplings stuck in the marsh. They poled themselves about in boats, and caught fish, and bought themselves corn, with which they made illegal whisky, called "moonshine." From such wretched beings no good was to be expected, and the planting aristocracy left them alone, except when they committed the unpardonable offence of selling liquor to Negrbes.

Liquor was for sale to white persons, both by the jug and the glass, in every "general" store in the town of Acadia. Also it was sold in innumerable secret places; for the government tried to collect a tax on liquor licences, and few approved of this, or paid if they could evade. So there was a vast illegal traffic, with occasional raids and shooting of revenue officers. It was a problem for which no one knew any solution.