

New Orleans native Francesca Dumas is a quadroon courted by moneyed white men. She leads a sheltered life of elegant gowns, lace, and lavish balls until a bullet shatters her dream world. Francesca's lover is shot dead by her side atop a levee on April 25, 1862. Rain-soaked and blood-stained Francesca vows revenge. Conundrums confront Francesca.

The Laced Chameleon

By Bob Rogers

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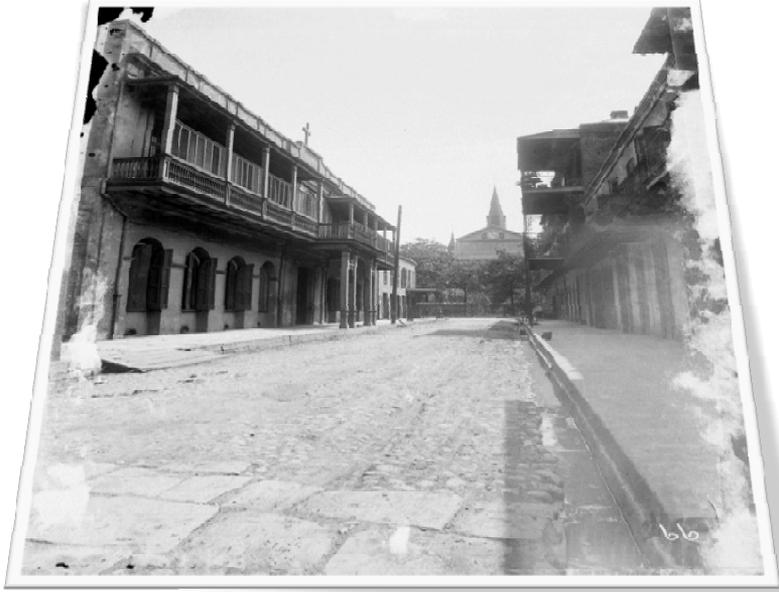
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An Old New Orleans Mystery Novel by

BOB ROGERS



*The Laced
Chameleon*



The Orleans Ballroom (above left) was built in 1817. *Plaçage* relationships routinely began at Quadroon Balls held here that connected young women of color with white men. (Photo: Courtesy of Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.) Major scenes in this novel occurred in the Orleans Ballroom. Since 1964, the building houses the Bourbon Orleans Hotel.

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Hardcover ISBN: 978-0-9912961-5-6

Paperback ISBN: 978-0-9912961-6-3

Second Edition

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Printed on acid-free paper.

This book is a work of fiction based on the deeds of real people while New Orleans was occupied by the Union Army in the summer of 1862. The Carpenter Plantation and names of fictional characters herein are my inventions. Separate lists of fictional and nonfictional characters are included at the end of this work. The historic men and women referenced, organizations, other plantations, places, churches, businesses, events, ships, geography, weapons, and the acts of war and kindness are real. See the bibliography at <https://bobrogers.biz>.

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2020

Accolades

Rogers' impressive nonfiction cast, [...] includes New Orleans political, military, and religious figures, various artists, and entrepreneurs of that era, are surrounded by a host of fictional characters. – **San Francisco Book Review**

But it's not just a historical novel, though its setting is firmly rooted in historical fact - it's a mystery, as well. It's rare to find a historical mystery so well-grounded in the flavors and atmosphere of the antebellum South, and one which so thoroughly injects New Orleans atmosphere into every chapter. – **Donovan's Bookshelf, an affiliate of the Midwest Book Review**

And while I know the author has many more historical stories to tell us, I am hoping that this would be the beginning of a Francesca mystery series. I recommend this book to readers of historical fiction who enjoy a mysterious unscrambling of history. – **B. Jackson**

I could not put [the book] down as often I should have. I cannot wait to discuss it in my Literary Club, and it would be fantastic to see a movie made of it. – **Dr. L. Fox**

The author brings history to life through his incorporation of actual events with the characters of his stories. He writes with strong descriptions. – **BJRJ**

Bob Rogers has penned a nail-biter murder mystery that builds in intensity as it takes the reader through the glitter of lavish ballroom affairs of wealthy white New Orleans society

and Francesca's double life as a secret agent employed in espionage against the Confederacy. – **B.H. Settles, Author of *Smoke for Breakfast***

The third dimension of this work is the tremendous detail and richness of the character development and scene descriptions created by the author. You can easily discern that this work has been carefully researched, and that, if one has ever been to New Orleans, the places are real and the experiences opulently described. – **J. Donahue**

Rogers does an excellent job with the historical setting, reminding the reader of Louisiana's role in the Civil War as well as its own unique customs i.e. quadroon balls and arranged relationships. He even included references to establishments that many a New Orleans visitor has frequented such as Antoine's, Jackson Square, and Cafe du Monde. – **A. Battiste**

This book did not disappoint! I like stories that are set during the Civil War and found it to be a very enjoyable read without being overpowered with war details. The most interesting aspect of reading this book was that I learned about plaçage, quadroons, and octoroons. Before reading this book, I did not know plaçage existed. I highly recommend [*The Laced Chameleon*]. – **M. Sues**

Also, by Bob Rogers

Hitting Life's Curveballs

Lieutenant Flipper's Trial – The Play

*First Dark: A Buffalo Soldier's Story – Sesquicentennial
Edition*

Sacrifice at Shiloh Church

My Blue Yonder (print & audio)

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Preface

In America, race matters. Within the artificial construct of race, color and class have mattered for centuries, and still matter today.

Sex between white men and African, Native American, and mixed-race women produced off-springs known as mulattos, quadroons, and octoroons. Mulattos are likely to have as few as one or two white grandparents and an African or Native American parent. Quadroons have three white grandparents, while octoroons have seven white great-grandparents.

While miscegenation existed all over the South, arranged unions between white men and women of color existed in antebellum New Orleans society by contract in a recognized extralegal system called *plaçage*. In *The Laced Chameleon*, Francesca Dumas was a quadroon. While in a *plaçage* arrangement, Francesca and her contemporaries were known as *placées*. Race and class matter in Francesca's story.

Though this is a work of fiction, the mores, economic and social options of women of color depicted in New Orleans, and historic events of 1862 are real. Lists of fictional and non-fictional people mentioned in this work are provided for your convenience.

Chapter 1: Murder on the Mississippi

Shots rang out from upriver. A single bullet fired from a .44 caliber Colt Walker revolver shattered Joachim's right temporal bone, scattering fragments in the lobe, then passing through the hypothalamus, wrecking his autonomic nervous system, and stopping his heart, before exiting through his left ear. Francesca heard Joachim make a gurgling sound. She turned toward him in time to see him sag and crumble, then fall into the mud on his back. Francesca screamed.

In an instant, she dropped her umbrella and was on her knees beside Joachim, cradling his head between her hands. She saw blood oozing from the hairline at his right temple. Francesca shrieked, "Oh, mon Dieu, non!"

Minutes before, at almost noon that Friday, the heavy downpour had become a steady light rain. Despite foul weather on the afternoon of April 25, 1862, a large crowd of New Orleans's citizens remained standing in the mud atop the levee on the east bank of the Mississippi River. Smiling broadly, Francesca and Emily had broken into song when the first of Union Flag Officer David Farragut's warships came into view, rounding Slaughterhouse Bend. Francesca had thought, *this is better than the Mardi Gras that Mayor Monroe restricted last month.* They had waved their umbrellas to and fro in time with the song. A half dozen or so onlookers had joined them. Emily's mellifluous mezzo-soprano voice soared above the crowd:

Yankee Doodle went to town
A-riding on a....

Now, Emily retrieved Francesca's umbrella and knelt beside her, and, using two umbrellas, shielded both of them and Joachim's face from the rain. Francesca wailed and sobbed, "Non, non, non, non!" Her shoulders shook as tears, mucus and raindrops streamed down her face.

With her bloody fingertips, Francesca closed Joachim's blue eyes. Her lower lip quivered as she again touched the bullet hole in his bleeding right temple. With his lips barely parted, Joachim's face still showed surprise. Francesca noticed that his blood felt sticky. She no longer heard the crowd moving about her as their screams had ebbed into a low buzz while others attended the wounded. Absent-mindedly, Francesca wiped her hands on the hem of the expensive ankle-length red hoop dress she had worn the previous evening to Joachim's party celebrating his twenty-fifth birthday. As onlookers murmured and gawked, she unfolded his bandana and covered his face and temple. She unbuckled Joachim's gun belt and felt her corset pinch her waist as she pulled the belt from underneath his body. Then, from his pockets, she removed his watch and purse.

Still on her knees, using the last hole, she strapped Joachim's belt about her small waist under her coat and felt it slip down. But for her hips, his belt and holstered four-shot Allen & Wheelock .31 Pepperbox pistol would have fallen into the mud. It was less than the length of her hand, weighed not as much as a pound, and had four fluted barrels that rotated. Each barrel was two and seven-eighths inches long.

Francesca cried, "Why? Why? Joachim, who took you away from me? Oh, Joachim, my love, my love, I swear I'm going to find out who did this to you. I promise you; the bastard will pay with his life."

She sniffed and her tears burst forth anew. Presently, Francesca brushed her wet cheeks with the back of her hands.

Then, for the first time since she knelt by his side, she looked up. Francesca's friend, Brooke, and Joachim's friend, Louie, held out their hands to help her and Emily stand. In her grief, Francesca appreciated the warmth in Emily's quivering empathetic smile.

Standing in the crowd on the levee beside the river opposite the beginning of Bienville Street and now holding Emily's hand, Francesca blinked back tears and whispered, "See the scum walking toward Front Street?"

Emily and Louie nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Find out if those bastards are the ones who did the shooting. Later, I'll need to find them."

Emily glanced at the men. And then, she protested in a pleading voice. "Fran, I know it's hard, but forget them. They ain't worth the trouble. I'll help you take care of Joachim and get home."

Louie and Brooke agreed. Louie said, "Yes, they're worthless. Of course, you know we could just turn the matter over to the law."

"That is if you can find a lawman who hasn't run off to Camp Moore with the soldiers," said Brooke.

Silence.

Francesca stared at her friends for almost a minute before noticing several in the crowd gazing at her. Resolutely, she set her jaw and shook her head. Her chestnut curls bounced and her bangs shifted to one side. "Y'all, that's very kind. I need what I asked you to find out. In the meantime, I'll get men here on the levee to help me move Joachim."

Her friends looked from one to the other. Emily said, "I heard you promise revenge. Now, why do you think you're fit and able to go traipsin' off 'hind gunmen? Don't you 'member, there's a war on? Anyways, what could *you* do if you caught up to them? They could just shoot you, and that would be that.

You know there ain't no mo' law to speak of here 'bouts." Emily glanced at the small pistol's bulge under Francesca's coat. "Besides, you know less about guns than I do, which ain't much."

Francesca sucked her teeth. "That's why the bastards ain't dead, yet."

Still holding Emily's hand, Francesca turned for another look at David Farragut's procession of United States Navy warships gliding upstream as more rounded Slaughterhouse Bend. She took a deep breath. Her voice was low, but firm, "Em, I've never been surer of anything in my life. I'll avenge Joachim's murder or die trying. Now, please go before they're out of sight."

Nodding and looking from Brooke to Louie, Emily hugged Francesca. "O-okay. W-we're going."

"Thank you, my dear friends."

The muddy hem of Francesca's dress covered Joachim's right knee and the top of his boot. She did not watch her friends depart. She remained close to Joachim's body and continued gazing, as if in a trance, at the warships and the stars and stripes they flew. Though grieving, Francesca wanted to remember the sight of the return of the grand old flag to New Orleans. She whispered to no one in particular, "Thank God, we're back in the Union."

A wet stubble-faced white man wearing a battered fedora, black coat, and wrinkled collarless white shirt stepped from the crowd and tapped Francesca's shoulder. "Er, Miss, I'm sorry to bother you heah in your time o' b'reavement, but I seed what happened. Some thugs just fired on anybody cheering dem Yankees. I'm sho' glad you didn't get hit. Damn shame, there ain't hardly any law ta speak of in these times."

Francesca turned her stern, tear-stained face and looked the short man level in the eye. "Yes? What do you want?"

The man snatched his hat off and fidgeted. He stammered, “W-Why, I-I-I’m sorry Miss. Er, I-I-I didn’t mean ta rattle on like that. What I meant ta say was me and my cousin, Jimmy,” he pointed, “over yonder, have a wagon at the bottom of the levee. We’ll deliver the body for you to the undertaker of your choice.”

The rain fell again in torrents. Francesca felt it had been a long time since she had smiled – not the ten minutes that had passed since she laughed together with Joachim, Emily, and others on the levee while waiting to welcome the arrival of Farragut and his ships. The ships were an even more formidable sight as they rode high on the river due to a recent freshet that caused the river to be nine feet higher than normal. Their big guns pointed down into the city’s streets.

Francesca forced a faint smile as the small man clutched his hat by the crown and held it to his chest. “Sir, I’m sorry that I was a bit gruff.”

He nodded. “Yes’m. It’s alright. I understand.”

“Thank you for your kindness. Please help me take my husband’s body to undertaker Peter Casanave up there on Bourbon Street. Tell him that my husband’s father is Edouard Buisson.”

The man smoothed back a wet blond and gray lock and donned his hat. “Yes’m, we can do that. Did you say, Pierre Casanave?”

“No, Peter, Monsieur Pierre’s son.”

“Now, where ’xactly on Bourbon is this heah Casanave undertaker?”

Francesca brushed damp hair from her face and tucked a tress behind her left ear. She pointed over the man’s shoulder to the intersection of Water and Bienville Streets. “Go straight up Bienville to Bourbon. Casanave’s is on the far corner on the right.”

Balancing her umbrella between her shoulder and jaw, Francesca stirred the contents of Joachim's purse and pulled out three Confederate paper notes. She groaned at the irony. The two New Orleans Bank Confederate one-dollar notes in her hand were printed by the American Bank Note Company of New York City, and in the top center, it bore the image of five enslaved black stevedores unloading a schooner. Francesca held out her hand with the two ones and a Central Bank of Alabama Confederate ten-dollar note printed in Philadelphia bearing separate images of George Washington and enslaved black cotton pickers. "Oh, I'm sorry to ask, but will you take these Confederate dollars as payment?"

Chapter 2: New Orleans Police

The pandemonium that began early on Thursday in brilliant sunshine had continued over a misty night and persisted unabated during the rain on Friday. It all started when word arrived that the Yankees had fought their way past Forts Jackson and St. Philip. All over the city on Thursday, church bells had sounded the alarm. On Friday, the smell of smoke still lingering from smoldering cotton bales, ships, and warehouses set ablaze by Confederates, made Francesca cough from time to time as she wandered upriver beside the levee on the cobblestones of Water Street. Even with the coat she wore, Francesca felt chilled and she clutched at its collar. Despite the umbrella, her hoop dress was wet well above its muddy hem. Because the dress stood out all around from her mid-calf length pantaloons, her undergarments remained mostly dry. Though tired and hungry from being afoot for hours, she trudged along in her soaked and muddy high-top shoes among the crowd watching the warships drop anchor on both sides of the river opposite the city's streets - Canal through Julia.

Francesca's mind drifted back to her first, and last, Christmas with Joachim, just four months ago to the day. Though Emily and her mother, Ada, had pooh-poohed her notion that Christmas Day was her wedding day, that's the way she remembered the signing of her plaçage contract with Joachim. The memory of that happy time before the parlor fireplace caused a lump in her throat. She let go of the coat collar and covered her mouth lest she sobbed aloud in a crowd of strangers. Francesca swallowed the sob as her tears flowed again. She felt her heartbreak afresh as the wonderful moments of their courtship in the summer of '61 flashed through her mind. Brooke had introduced Ada and Francesca to Joachim

last spring at the Orleans Ballroom on Orleans Street. It was here that well-to-do-white men went regularly to meet beautiful young octoroons and quadroons. She thought Joachim was handsome, dashing, and exciting to be within New Orleans's weekend party scenes and balls. She remembered the fun they had taking the new streetcar service from the stop beside their house to concerts and plays. At age twenty-four, Joachim was younger than her other suitors--and besides, he made her feel like a queen.

Francesca dabbed at her wet cheeks with her sleeves. She thought, *with the rain, maybe people won't notice*. Yet, another memory came to mind. Joachim's promise to send their children to school in New York or Boston was in their plaçage contract, thanks to Ada and Brooke. She continued crying, knowing that she would never bear Joachim's child, for her menses had ended on Thursday.

At Girod Street, Francesca glanced at the frantic movement of Confederate formations, commandeered mule-drawn wagons, and oxen or horses pulling two-wheeled carts loaded with supplies and plunder from hastily emptied warehouses. Yesterday, she was amused by the panic of the Confederates. Today, her emotions floated back and forth from the grief caused by the loss of Joachim to somewhat diminished joy that her city had been liberated. For Francesca, the Confederates were reduced to scenery.

Presently, Francesca looked into the throng of angry faces gazing at the warships. She found not one familiar face. Francesca was popular and seldom alone. Her thought of missing Emily and her friends was interrupted by a stabbing hunger pain. She made an audible sigh and heard her voice announce, "I will go home."

Hunger caused Francesca to remember that only a day's rations remained at the house she had shared with Joachim. She

had been surprised that Joachim's purse held only \$43.00 in Confederate dollars and two books of streetcar tickets worth about ten cents per ticket. She knew she would need a plan, and soon. Her future looked as bleak as the skies. Aloud, Francesca declared, "I'll survive." She was reminded of her hero from Alexandre Dumas' novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. "If Edmond Dantes survived, so can I."

Tears blurred her vision, causing her to miss her turn at Julia Street. She wiped her eyes and found herself at St. Joseph Street. She took a deep breath and turned northwest on St. Joseph toward her streetcar stop at Tivoli Circle, heading away from the river. Several blocks ahead she could see a column of wagons turning from Camp Street onto St. Joseph and making rapid progress toward the railhead of the New Orleans, Jackson, and Great Northern Railroad. Ragged formations of soldiers, some of whom were so inebriated that they staggered, followed the wagons. Francesca's smile at the sight of fleeing Confederates vanished and she stopped abruptly to ponder the thought, *Joachim's murderer could be escaping with the fucking Secesh, running like rats for the trains.*

* * *

Francesca sucked her teeth and began walking again, this time away from her streetcar stop and toward City Hall on St. Charles Avenue. Aloud, she said, "I don't know who he is or where he is. I don't know how, but I'll find the scum."

It had not occurred to her until now to seek help from the police, for Francesca had heard many stories about how ineffective and corrupt the New Orleans police force was. Besides, many policemen had volunteered to fill the regiments requested by Louisiana's Governor Moore and sent to fight for Confederate armies in Arkansas, Tennessee, and Virginia. On

wooden sidewalks, she remained close to buildings and out of the oncoming traffic moving with dispatch toward the railhead.

Four blocks later, she stood in front of New Orleans' magnificent nine-year-old City Hall. Here, she paused and considered retreat. Looking up three stories at the figure of a woman in the center of the pediment representing justice, Francesca thought, *what would Edmond Dantes do?* Francesca had long admired the resilience and resourcefulness of Dantes, the central character in Alexandre Dumas' novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

The City Hall's pediment was supported by six massive marble columns similar to those seen in paintings of the Acropolis in Athens. She took a deep breath and darted across the street to the building, weaving among cantering horses pulling carriages, wagons, and carts bearing soldiers and the rich.

Francesca stood inside the great hall, near the door, trying to control her nerves and breaths. Presently, she found the desk sergeant, an old man who she judged was born in the eighteenth century. He referred her to Detective Philippe Rousseau. She found herself wondering who was older, the man at the desk or Detective Rousseau. His white hair was thin, and he was bald and pink on the top of his head.

With one hand, Philippe Rousseau held papers at his side while he used the other to smooth the silver hair above his ear. Philippe looked at her from head to muddy dress hem. Flushing, Francesca said, "Sir, I'm sorry to barge in like this from out of nowhere. I must look a fright."

Philippe Rousseau smiled and the handles of his silver handlebar mustache moved upward at the corners of his mouth. He said, "Let's sit over here and be comfortable. Alright, now, tell me who you are and what brings you to our station."

As Francesca poured out her story in English and French, Philippe Rousseau made notes. From time to time, uncontrollable sobs interrupted her speaking. The effect of reliving her trauma surprised Francesca. She wished for better control, but could not muster it. Each time Francesca stopped, Philippe waited for her to begin again. He did not comfort her.

When she finished, Philippe said quietly, "I'm sorry, but I must ask you a few questions."

Francesca's eyebrows rose. Her voice was pleading. "Why must you interrogate me?"

Philippe waved his pencil back and forth. "Oh, no, Mlle. Dumas. My questions will wrap up our interview. This is not an interrogation. We interrogate suspects. You're not a suspect; that much is quite clear to me."

Francesca leaned back in her uncomfortable wooden chair. "Oh."

"Did you see who shot Monsieur Buisson?"

"No, sir."

"Was anyone near you hit?"

"I'm not sure, but I think so from the screams. I didn't see anyone on the ground."

"How many shots did you hear?"

"I don't know."

"A half dozen?"

"More."

"A dozen?"

"Less."

"How close was the sound of the shots?"

"I don't know."

"You told me where you stood. From which direction did the shots come?"

"I think from upriver."

"How many shooters?"

“I don’t know.”

“Did you hear rifle fire or pistols?”

“I don’t know.”

“Close your eyes. Did all the shots sound the same?”

Francesca tilted her head to the right and frowned. “They all sounded the same except for the last one.”

“In what way was the sound of the last shot different?”

“It was louder.”

“Was that the shot that struck Monsieur Buisson?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay. You can open your eyes. Mlle. Dumas, I’m going to be perfectly candid with you. Though your loved one was the son of a prominent banker, I’m afraid we have no resources left for a case like this. The body and witnesses are gone from the scene and you haven’t given me the first lead. Unless someone who knows the perpetrators walks in here and gives us something we can go on, there is nothing we can do. I could make promises, but I won’t.”

Philippe stood. “Besides, the way I hear it, the perpetrators may have been common Confederate sympathizers. We are at war. Mlle. Dumas, I’m very sorry about your loss.”

As Philippe walked away, Francesca sucked her teeth and clenched her fists on her lap. She remained seated and cried silent tears.

* * *

At St. Charles Avenue and Tivoli Circle, Francesca was greeted by an unusual sight. Downtown bound streetcars sat idle at Tivoli Circle with no mules to pull them, for they had been commandeered by absconding Confederate soldiers. With the thought of walking the twenty-three blocks home from Tivoli Circle, her breathing quickened. She trudged along Prytania Street past abandoned uptown bound streetcars toward

the sound of braying. Ahead, a queue of expensively dressed women was waiting, tickets in hand, to board the only streetcar insight with a mule hitched to it. She rummaged through Joachim's purse and pulled out a pasty, sticky, well-used shinplaster that reeked of rotting meat and offered it to the female conductor. Francesca tried to smile at the thought that this was her first memory of ever being happy to see a brown mule.

* * *

Francesca sneezed into a handkerchief edged with lace. She blinked the tears from her swollen eyes. With her left hand, Francesca unlatched the yard gate in front of the house at Conery and Prytania Streets. She passed under the sprawling limbs of a large live-oak and by the small Crepe Myrtle she had planted in March to reach Joachim's house, the place she had called home since December. The unbearable thought that Joachim would not join her caused new sobs. Yet, she was glad to be away from the too kind woman who was her streetcar seat-mate. The stranger had tried to comfort Francesca during their ride but had made matters worse.

She struggled to remove her wet shoes on the veranda before entering the house Joachim had provided for her. Suddenly, the front door opened. Startled, Francesca's eyes widened and she dropped a shoe. A plump, apron-clad dark-skinned woman of about thirty-five smiled at her from the doorway. Francesca sneezed again, then stammered, "Who're you?"

Beaming, the woman opened the door wider. "Why, I'm Edna Black, Missus Maria's house servant. You must be Francesca, Joachim's partner."

Francesca frowned. "H-how did y-you know...? Y-you don't know, do you?"

“How do I know who you are?”

“No. Y-you don’t know...” Francesca sneezed.

She saw Edna’s brow crease. In a scolding tone to match her frown, Edna said, “Com’on in the house outta this damp weather, Chile, ’fore you catch yo’ death.” Smiling and cheerful again, Edna continued. “Now, o’course, I don’t *really* know you. I just know nobody but a missus would take off her shoes on a veranda and not knock. Guess you wonder how cum I’m here? Well, Missus Maria done sent me over to tidy up for y’all.”

Francesca looked into the kind face and ached to talk with someone, anyone. If not Emily, maybe this pleasant woman would do. With a full-throated sob and new tears, Francesca seized Edna in a fierce embrace. She screamed, “You don’t know! You don’t know!”

Her forehead furrowed, Edna dropped her feather duster and hugged the distraught Francesca with both arms. Patting Francesca’s back, Edna softly asked, “Chile, what is this thing I don’t know?”

Francesca tried to catch her breath. She was gasping between sobs. Finally, she blurted, “Joachim’s dead! He’s gone. My Joachim’s gone! What am I gonna do? Oh, Mary, Mother of God, what can I do?”

Edna hugged tighter. “Oh, my Lawd, Chile. My, Lawd. I’m so sorry.” Edna rocked Francesca gently from side to side. “Honey, I’m so very sorry ’bout yo’ loss.”

Francesca’s teeth clattered.

Edna walked her upstairs to the bedroom, removing and dropping clothes as they went. “Let’s get you outta these wet things and into a hot bath.”

Edna left Francesca on the bed under two quilts and went to the kitchen to heat water.

While Edna prepared the bath, Francesca, prayed, “Mary, Mother of God, thank you for sending someone in my time of need.”

* * *

After Francesca’s bath in a zinc coated tub of about four feet long with lion paw feet, she told Edna the details of Joachim’s death. Francesca guessed that Joachim must be in his coffin by now, so she covered her sixty-four-inch, one-hundred-thirteen- pound frame in black mourning clothes. She let her bangs hang, but braided the rest of her chestnut hair, tying the two mid-back length braids around her head like a crown. As they talked, she rubbed oil on her bare white shoulders, resting her brown eyes on the small round birthmark at her left shoulder like it was the first time she had seen it. Edna helped her cover the mirrors and drape the front door according to mourning custom. They shared supper. They ate yams, bread, and dried beef. Edna made sassafras tea as the gloom outside brought an early onset of night.

Francesca asked, “Miss Edna, do you think the Buissons will let me stay in this house for a time?”

Edna dropped her head, paused, then she looked into Francesca’s brown eyes. “You can call me just plain Edna, but to answer your question, I don’t know.”

“What do you think?”

Edna hesitated. “Well, I don’t really know. But, since you insist on an answer, I think they will ask you to leave.”

Francesca sipped her tea and nodded thoughtfully. “Logical. Deep down, I suppose I knew that. What more can a black woman expect? But now, I’ll be prepared.”

Edna tilted her head in a quizzical gaze. “I know you’ve got African blood. But you look white.”

“I guess that’s because my ma is mulatto and my pa is French.”

“Are you free?”

Francesca saw a pained expression on Edna’s face that said she wished she had not asked. Francesca smiled. “Edna, it’s okay to ask. You’re my friend.” Her weak smile faded, and her face turned serious. “No, I’m not free. I’m just another enslaved quadroon. My pa owns me and Ma.”

Edna nodded, smiled, and stood. “Well, I need to get back. Wid dis bad weather and all, I think you oughta stay in tonight. Do you want me to give Missus Maria the bad news?”

Francesca leaned forward in her chair. “But you didn’t finish telling me about yourself, yet.”

“That’ll have to wait for another time.”

Now, Francesca realized she didn’t want Edna to leave, though she didn’t say so. She thought for a long moment and decided to take the easy way out. And then, she stood. “Yes, please tell Madame Buisson.”

Chapter 3: Class Climbing

“Son, by the grace of the Almighty, you’re back here in time to take charge of the family goal to own Belle Chasse. Me and yo’ ma are dependin’ on you to make it happen.” Sixty-one-year-old Paul Dodson could say no more. Red-faced, he rocked back and forth on his horse, reeling from a dry hacking cough.

Thirty-four-year-old Troy’s narrowed eyes and creased brow showed grave concern for his father who was near twice his age. “Pa, you know I’ll do my best. Don’t you think you oughta see Doc Peters about that cough? It’s been with you ever since I got back.”

Between coughs and spitting, Paul managed to say, “Don’t mention that ol’ quack to me again.” When his coughing ceased, he said, “I still believe ’twas a miracle that saved you on that battlefield and brought you back home to Belle Chasse.” The older man raised his sweat-stained wide-brimmed hat and smoothed his silver hair.

Troy’s horse raised her head from grazing and snorted. Father and son sat astride their horses on the track leading from the barns to the first cane field. They watched Matt, Troy’s younger brother; assign the day’s tasks to enslaved men and women preparing for work in the dim light of early morning that Thursday, April 10, 1862.

Troy laughed and said, “Have it your way, Pa. But, you know I still think it was ol’ Jean Pierre, at the risk of his own damn skin, who dragged me from harm’s way.”

“Never you mind, it’s that same Providence that will see us own this place and the means of production ’fore I pass on. Just you mark my words.”

Troy thought, *Yes, and someday it'll be mine.* To his father, he said, "Well, Pa, the morning's wearing on. I'd best be getting on to Slaughter House Point. I'm following your advice to get in and see that banker at a good hour, so, I'll need to catch an early ferry."

"Yeah, son. You run along and bring home a deal that'll make ol' Theodore salivate. Make me and your ma proud."

* * *

As he rode toward Algiers, Troy remembered his teenage years when Judah Benjamin owned Belle Chasse Plantation. Benjamin was young, about the age Troy was now. After Benjamin emerged from a flamboyant life and the dregs about Rampart Street to become a successful attorney, he married a beautiful young girl who was Troy's age back then. In no time, Benjamin owned a townhouse on Bourbon Street, bought Belle Chasse, and built one of the grandest Greek Revival houses anywhere near New Orleans. Troy still admired the whitewashed, two-storied structure supported by tall square columns with its wraparound verandas on both levels. *Oh, and the parties Benjamin held! Benjamin's still a worthy hero.* Troy smiled. *Now, that's what I want before I'm nearly as old as Pa.* Benjamin was the go-to fellow for planters far and wide seeking to duplicate his successful sugar cane planting and process methods. *I can see myself bringing those days back. And, by Jove, I will!*

The contacts I'm making by working for General Mansfield Lovell should help me and Pa gain respect in Plaquemines Parish, New Orleans, and beyond. Colonel Hebert's letter of introduction has already been a big help. With a little luck, I oughta be able to make General Lovell's close connections to Mayor Monroe and Governor Moore count. In due time, I'll make Mr. Benjamin remember me.

Troy's face turned grim when he remembered how his father had just missed taking advantage of Benjamin's misfortune. He thought how he had felt bad for his hero when Benjamin, now just three weeks into his new job in Richmond as Secretary of State for the Confederate States of America, was forced to sell Belle Chasse and its three-hundred acres, including about a hundred-fifty slaves, at a loss. Troy slapped his thigh. As he recalled, Benjamin had to sell in 1850 to pay off the debt of a friend who defaulted on a loan Benjamin had co-signed. He shook his head in awe at the memory that Benjamin didn't just recover, but went on to serve two terms in the United States Senate. Theodore J. Packwood, one of Benjamin's partners, had outbid his pa for the purchase of Belle Chasse and that was that. Troy's eyes brimmed with bitter tears as he recalled the derision of community people who scoffed at the notion that the overseer class, folks like him and his pa, had the temerity to even attempt to enter the planter class.

Aloud, Troy said into his horse's hearing, "Well now, we'll just see about that!" With a snarl on his lips, he spurred the animal, hard. "Com'on, git up there!"

His horse responded with a grunt and by vaulting from a canter to a gallop.

* * *

Troy disembarked from the Canal Street Steam Ferry and walked along Water and Custom House Streets to Citizens Bank at the intersection with Royale, arriving minutes before nine o'clock. In one of his new finely tailored suits, black string tie, and matching black boots, Troy felt the part of the gentleman planter and businessman he aspired to become. He threw his shoulders back and walked tall as a clerk showed him to the office of Edouard Buisson, who received him with grace.

After minutes of pleasantries, Monsieur Buisson said, “Mr. Dodson, a thousand pardons, but because an urgent government matter has thrust itself upon me just yesterday, I must spend unplanned time on getting it resolved. Of course, this is highly unusual, especially after my letter confirming our meeting. However, I have arranged for another officer to assist you. Please do forgive me.”

Troy’s ire went up. “So, my business is not important to you.”

“Oh, contraire, Mr. Dodson, we see the business you bring today reaching into a bright future for your Belle Chasse Plantation and our bank. We are well aware of Judah Benjamin’s success at Belle Chasse. We’d like to help you reach even greater success. Now, please come with me. Let me introduce you to one of our real estate stars. This officer is none other than my esteemed son.”

* * *

A seething Troy Dodson used his fork to pick at and rearrange the food on his plate in the City Hotel’s restaurant. From his portfolio, he withdrew paper and a pencil. In his two-hour meeting with Monsieur Joachim Buisson, they had agreed that the likely total sales price for Belle Chasse Plantation and its one hundred forty-seven slaves would be approximately one hundred and ten thousand nine hundred twenty dollars. Early in the meeting, Troy had offered ten percent down.

Too late, he realized the estimated purchase price would require the Dodsons to raise another forty-five hundred dollars. He wondered where the hell that would come from. He knew they had nothing they could sell that would raise the difference.

With his brow furrowed and sweating, Troy fought off the urge to tell Joachim that he needed more lenient terms and to explain what hard workers the Dodsons were. His pride won.

He did not ask. Worse, Joachim's final word was that Citizens Bank could not do a deal on Belle Chasse for less than twenty percent down. Aloud, he said, "Damn that little Yankee-loving bastard!"

Troy looked about to see if anyone had noticed his outburst. Seeing no one looking his way, he muttered, "Somehow, the sniveling little sonavabitch must know I can't raise twenty-three thousand dollars."

* * *

Troy sat in his room doing figures in his head until one o'clock the next morning. He slept fitfully and was out of sorts when he rose. He managed to collect himself at breakfast.

Troy presented his new proposal with fresh confidence to Joachim. "Monsieur Buisson, let's make eighteen of the slaves a part of the deal, added to my down payment with the mortgage and say that'll close the deal. That sum will easily reach the estimated sales price we made yesterday."

Joachim stood and paced behind his desk with one hand rubbing his chin. Troy watched as his newfound confidence eroded. His anxious mind wondered, *what now?*

At length, Joachim returned to his desk, opened a side drawer, and flipped through a large ledger. He began shaking his head. With a finger on a number to hold his place, he looked up at Troy. "I see a problem here with diminishing returns."

An annoyed Troy said, "Speak plainly, Monsieur Buisson."

"Alright. There are presently one hundred forty-seven slaves at Belle Chasse. Selling eighteen slaves will not close the gap for you."

"Why, that's more than fourteen thousand dollars I'm adding to my down payment! Of course, the deal closes."

Joachim shook his head and said, “I don’t think so. Eighteen would fetch perhaps a just bit more than ten thousand. But the real concern I have is will there be enough labor left to produce harvests required to make the mortgage payments?”

“I don’t agree with your slave prices.”

“Mr. Dodson, I think your assumptions are perhaps a bit optimistic, at best, more on the speculative side, given the falling prices of slaves auctioned right here in the city at Mr. Thomas Foster’s depot since the loss of Forts Henry and Donelson this year. Not factored in is the certain negative impact of catastrophic Confederate losses this week at the Battle of Shiloh. Nor, can we estimate the future influence of battlefield losses on markets.”

Troy leapt from his seat and hit Joachim’s desk with his fist. Tremendous pain in both temples and behind his left eye caused him to close his eyes and massage both temples. His caged thoughts were hot with fury, *what does a profiteering Unionist like him know about battles or the better than even chances of our armies to drive out the invaders?* He forced himself to take a deep breath. He had a blinding headache. After a moment, Troy turned and left Joachim’s office without a handshake or farewell.

On the street, Troy said several times, “Confounded! Hellfire! Damn his black soul!”

* * *

Back at Belle Chase Friday afternoon, Troy told his father and Packwood that the officers at Citizens Bank were considering his proposal and would reach a decision before the end of the month.

The next day he returned to work for General Lovell at the general’s headquarters on Camp Street across from Lafayette Square. He wore a collarless brown shirt and coarse butternut

trousers like the ones he had worn during his stint as an infantryman in the Confederate Army. His nearly sixteen-inch-long Colt Walker .44 six-shooter was strapped to his right thigh.

Within an hour of his return, General Lovell sent Troy off on a small steamer to check again the readiness of Forts Jackson and St. Philip to defend against an attack by the Union Navy.

As he had predicted to General Lovell, the Union fleet opened fire on the two forts the next week. He also forecasted the forts would hold off the Yankees. Saturday, April 19, the day after the Federal's siege began, Troy returned to Belle Chasse to collect clothing and his soldier's accouterments. While there, Packwood summoned him without his father and intimated that the day before he had received an unsolicited bid on his beloved Belle Chasse from a team of investors.

With a forced smile, Troy said, "Well now, that's very interesting. Can you tell me who these folks are?"

Packwood answered, "Of course, I can. The bidders are James E. Zunts, a part-owner of the City Hotel at Camp and Common Streets, and Joachim Buisson, an officer at Citizens Bank on Royale Street. Their bid is an even one hundred thirteen thousand. With you in mind, I'm delaying them. I told them I'd let them know my decision by Monday, the twenty-eighth instant."

* * *

Standing at the stern of a small Confederate steamer on another reconnaissance Wednesday morning, April 23, Troy raised his head from staring into the brown waters of the Mississippi River as a grim smirk changed his countenance. He had settled upon a new plan to acquire Belle Chasse.

Upon his return, he made his report to General Lovell: The forts may not hold after all unless we deploy our powerful ironclad, the *CSS Mississippi*, tonight and destroy the Yankee mortar schooners laying siege.

Using his influence as a Confederate agent, Troy had collected personal information and built a dossier on Joachim Buisson, James E. Zunts, and Sarpy Lille, an officer in the Union Bank of New Orleans. Putting his plan into action the same afternoon, he coerced Zunts to sign an agreement and join as his bid partner alongside Union Bank should the bid Zunts made with Buisson be turned down by Packwood or withdrawn.

By evening, Troy was in Lafayette Cemetery peering through his binoculars into the windows of Joachim Buisson's house across Prytania Street. He tried to ignore the sound from the Federals' six-day-old continuous bombardment of the forts. Troy scoffed as he remembered General Duncan's telegram from Fort Jackson to General Lovell at the end of the day; "We can hold them at bay. We can stand it if they can." He shook his head and said aloud, "Stay focused on Buisson. The fate of New Orleans is not my affair." Troy reassured himself. Again, he thought, *It is clear; the only path to success is to kill Buisson.* He smiled. *Then, of course, his bid is withdrawn. I must be patient and be present when the right moment presents itself to remove the haughty young Monsieur Joachim Buisson.* He repeated several times: *Discipline. I will wait and watch for a clear opportunity.* He fondled the grip of his powerful Colt Walker .44 pistol.

Before mid-morning on Thursday, New Orleans was sent into a panic when the ringing of a prearranged twelve-bell signal by the city's churches announced that the invading enemy had managed to pass the forts. Troy's immediate

thought was that his plan for the day was doomed. He slapped his holster and said, "Hellfire!"

Instead of stalking Joachim, Troy went to General Lovell for orders. With Troy and several staffers, Lovell decided to take his steamer downriver and assess the situation himself. Lovell ordered the captain to retreat to New Orleans when they were nearly captured by the *USS Varuna*. Before they escaped the Federal warship, Troy thought, *Hellfire, there goes Belle Chasse!*

Back in New Orleans, General Lovell instructed Troy and his staff to order troops to burn anything that could be used by the enemy and evacuate. For the rest of the day, Troy fought his way to and fro on a commandeered horse through the throngs of marching soldiers, and terrified women and children to oversee fires being set to tens of thousands of bales of cotton and warehouses. He encountered Negroes and poor whites with wheelbarrows and pails salvaging high priced staples that were being destroyed, including molasses and sugar. Toward evening, dark clouds rolled in from the south and west, but that did not deter the mayhem in the streets.

With his duty done and Lovell in lengthy meetings with Governor Moore, and Mayor Monroe explaining why his foot soldiers would not be able to defend the city against a fleet of warships, Troy took his leave. The last words he heard from Lovell to the governor and mayor were, "Dammit, I've told you several times that our *CSS Mississippi* is still under construction. There is no way we can have her engage the enemy."

A cold heavy mist fell as he retired to his room at the City Hotel where he discovered a birthday party in progress in honor of Joachim Buisson. Troy learned from the desk clerk that Joachim and his friends would be at the hotel until Saturday. He thought, *That's more than enough time to find an*

opportunity. Troy was confident but did not sleep well because, with the change in weather, the pain returned in his left thigh where he was struck by shrapnel during the Battle of Oak Hills.

At breakfast, dressed in a business suit and wide-brimmed white hat covering part of his face, Troy watched Joachim and his friends as they decided to go to the levee in the rain to await the arrival of the Union warships. He checked the load in his pistol, turned up his collar, and followed. Determined not to limp, Troy endured the pain in his thigh and walked as much as possible like a soldier marching.

Around noon, the heavy rain gave way to a farmer's shower. As the first of the Federal warships were sighted rounding Slaughterhouse Bend, sparse, but distinct cheers arose from Unionists in the crowd gathered on the levee. When some revelers broke into "Yankee Doodle," gunfire erupted to Troy's right, he thought, *my opportunity has arrived. Act. Dammit, be quick!* In a continuous fluid motion, Troy brushed aside his coattail, drew, cocked the .44, aimed, fired a single bullet into the side of Joachim Buisson's head from thirty-five feet, and holstered his revolver.

**Partial List of Nonfiction Characters Appearing in
*The Laced Chameleon***

- Benjamin, Judah P., US Senator; Confederate Secretary of State
- Browne, Thomas, Owner of the Singer Sewing Machine Agency
- Hildreth-Butler, Sarah, Actress, wife of General Butler
- Butler, Benjamin F., Major General, US Army
- Casanave, Pierre, Founder of Undertaking Service
- Casanave, Peter, Son of Pierre, Undertaking Service
- *Cocks, Arianna, Daughter of Annabelle
- *Cocks, Annabelle, Daughter of John G. Cocks
- Cocks, John G., New Orleans Judge
- *Cocks, Able, Son of Annabelle
- *Corlin, Martha, Confederate Sympathizer
- Delille, Henriette, Founder and Mother Superior, Sisters of Holy Family
- Dumas, Alexandre, Author of *The Count of Monte Cristo*
- Foster, Thomas, Owner of a New Orleans slave sales depot
- Heidiseck, Charles Camille, Owner of Heidiseck & Company Wines, Reims, France
- Jobert, Rev. J.B., Pastor, St. Augustine Catholic Church
- Kendall, George W, Surgeon, Confederate States Army
- Lille, Sarpy, Officer, Union Bank of New Orleans

Lovell, Mansfield, Major General, Confederate States Army

Mahan, John, General Butler's most trusted Spy

Nixon, James, Owner/Publisher, *New Orleans Daily Crescent*

Packwood, Theodore, Owner of Belle Chasse Plantation

Rusha, E.M., Owner of EM Rusha. Importer of Fine Wines &
Liquors

Stone, Doctor, Physician and Founder, Dr. Stone's Infirmary

Strong, George B., US Army, Major, General Butler's Chief of
Staff

**Tunnard, William H., Confederate Army Sergeant, 3rd
Louisiana Infantry Regiment

Zunts, James E., Investor and Co-owner of the City Hotel

*First names assigned by author. See bibliography at:
<https://bobrogers.biz>

**This character appears in the novel, *First Dark*.

Partial List of Fiction Characters appearing in *The Laced Chameleon*

*Black, Edna, Francesca's Friend and Servant in the Buisson Residence

Bouffard-Williams, Brooke, Francesca's Friend and Wife of Bernard Williams

Buisson, Edouard, Joachim's Father and Officer at Citizens Bank

Buisson, Joachim, Plaçage partner ("Husband") of Francesca, Son of Edouard

Buisson, Maria, Wife of Edouard, Stepmother of Joachim

Carpenter, David, Plantation owner, Brookhaven, Mississippi

Carpenter, Frances, Francesca's female alias

Carpenter, Frank, Francesca's male alias

Carpenter, Marcelle, Marcelle's alias

De Mortie, Ada, Francesca's Mother

Dodson, Matt, Brother of Troy

Dodson, Paul, Father of Troy and Matt

Dodson, Tory, Confederate soldier and spy

Donohue, Mark, Plantation owner and investor, Suitor of Francesca

*Dumas, Francesca, Plaçage partner of Joachim Buisson

Dumas, François, Father of Francesca, Restaurant Owner

Jenkins, Anthony, (Tony), Emily's father, Shoemaker

*Jenkins, Emily, Francesca's best friend

Jenkins, Laura, Francesca's mother, Seamstress

Johnston, Richard, Confederate spy

Lainez, Marcelle, Francesca's spy partner

Laveau, Louis, Joachim's friend

Lemoine, Alfonse, French naval officer, Suitor of Francesca

Marks, Joseph, Accountant at E.M. Rusha Importer of Wines
and Liquors

Morris, Albert, John Mahan's alias

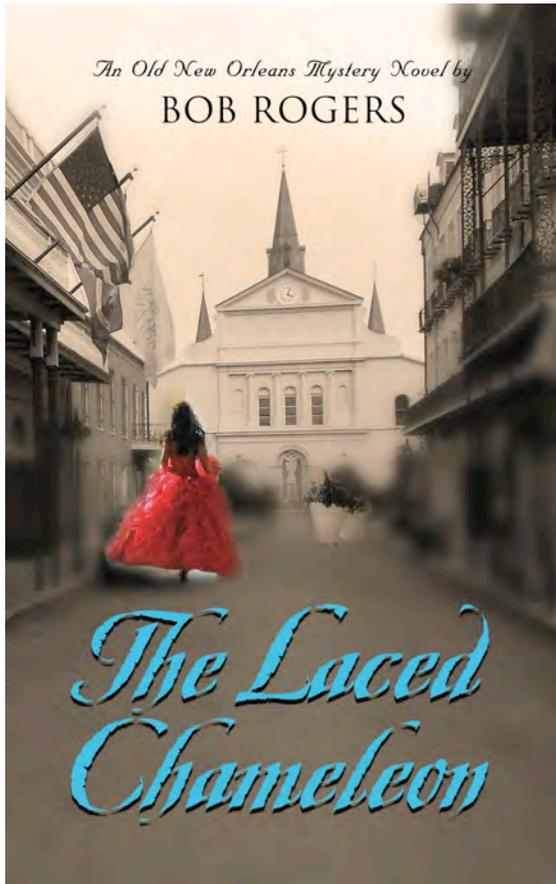
*Pierre, Jean, Confederate soldier, 3rd Louisiana Infantry
Regiment

Rousseau, Philipe, New Orleans Homicide Detective

Williams, Bernard, Brooke Bouffard's husband

See bibliography at: <https://bobrogers.biz>.

*These characters appear in the novel, *First Dark*.



New Orleans native Francesca Dumas is a quadron courted by moneyed white men. She leads a sheltered life of elegant gowns, lace, and lavish balls until a bullet shatters her dream world. Francesca's lover is shot dead by her side atop a levee on April 25, 1862. Rain-soaked and blood-stained Francesca vows revenge. Conundrums confront Francesca.

The Laced Chameleon

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