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An Introduction to Three Unfinished Novels by
Baron Ludwig von Reizenstein,
A novelist as an Eyewitness to New Orleans

Ludwig von Reizenstein (1826-1885) was the elder of two sons of Baron Alexander von Reitzenstein, Hartungs Linie (1797-1890), (besides at least ten daughters) and his first wife, Baroness Philippine von Branca (1800-1864). The Reitzensteins had been Imperial Barons in Franconia, whose status was altered by the abolition of the Holy Roman Empire by Napoleon in 1806. They then became Protestant nobles in an expanded, predominantly Catholic, Kingdom of Bavaria. Baron Alexander endeavored to reconstruct the holdings of the Reitzenstein clan from catastrophic losses sustained in the later eighteenth century. Baron Alexander held a position in the Bavarian customs service under King Ludwig I (ruled 1825-1848) and Ludwig II (ruled 1848-1886), retiring in 1863. He had all his children baptized as Catholics. In 1847-48, in the middle of the general upheavals in Germany, taking its special form in the scandals surrounding Lola Montez, whose relationship to the King would eventually issue in Ludwig’s abdication and the rise of “political Catholicism,” the palpably unstable young Baron Ludwig emigrated to America to take a position managing a plantation for a Bavarian planter in Louisiana. When his employer died on the boat going to New Orleans, Ludwig was reduced to eking his way as a hired laborer. He eventually contacted a “cousin,” the cartographer and future explorer Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Egloffstein, in St. Louis, where Ludwig was trained in surveying and cartography. Ludwig returned to New Orleans by 1853, and between 1853 and 1855 he published his most notable work, *Die Geheimnisse von New-Orleans*, in the *Louisiana Staats-Zeitung*. Protests against the scandalous nature of the book, particularly its portrayal of the seamy underside of New Orleans life, as well as its prediction of race-war over slavery, led to the withdrawal of the bound edition from the public, so that few copies survive.

But this did not end his career as an author. I undertook to translate three of his later newspaper novels, although none of them was completed. The obvious reason for discontinuance was that a serial novel did not win enough subscriptions for the newspaper to justify its publication, although it is possible that it offended the public or simply did not arouse adequate interest. Recall that there had been extensive protests in the *Tägliche Deutsche Zeitung*, the more “moderate” journal, against the *Geheimnisse* in the course of its publication.

The first novel after *Geheimnisse* was placed in the same “more radical” German-language New Orleans paper that had completed the *Mysteries*, the *Louisiana Staats-Zeitung*, playing on his recent publishing success and using his supposedly great financial profit from its publication as an element in the story. It began on 10 July 1855 and terminated suddenly in the middle of the evolving narrative on 9 August of the same year. It is the tale of a Bluebeard, a man who is said to marry and murder his wives one after another. He begins with an encounter with the stranger in a New Orleans restaurant, where he unravels the man’s secret. Then he goes on a long wander through the city, ending in a disreputable bar while he plots to track down the secret residence of his old obsession from the *Geheimnisse*, Prince Paul of Württemberg. The tale appears about to explode in some sort of major confrontation when the whole thing ends after a couple-dozen episodes without further explanation.

The second abortive novel, now published in the *Tägliche Deutsche Zeitung*, dealt directly with contemporary events, the siege of New Orleans that commenced in 1861 with the stationing of ships of the United States Navy to interrupt the flow of commerce into and out of the Mississippi preparatory to New Orleans’ actual capture in 1862. This was a much more
successful narrative based on *The Devil on Two Sticks*, derived from *Le diable boîteux* by Alain-René Lesage in 1707, itself adapting a 1641 Spanish novel (*El diablo cojuelo*) by Luis Velez de Guevara. The story’s running conceit is that a student has freed a devil from confinement, and in reward he is taken on adventures. Reizenstein’s adaptation is a well-written and actually very funny story that was called “How the Devil is in New Orleans, and how he lifts the roofs of houses.”

The adaptation begins with the display of souvenirs from the first major battle of the Civil War, the first battle of Bull Run or Manassas (21 July 1861). Among the crowd viewing the treasures in a shop-window on Canal Street is a colonel of Zouaves, who might actually be a Yankee! He has the face of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, the first martyr to the Union cause, but when his foot is extended, it looks more like a hoof. Reizenstein, representing himself once more in his own novel, immediately recognizes this being as the Devil, and he greets him as “Señor Diablo.” The Devil appreciates the attention, and he promises to take Reizenstein along on a rooftop meander on the telegraph lines, after he redeems his large black cape that he had left behind in wild retreat during the battle. He recovers the cape using gold-pieces, which had become a rarity after the start of hostilities. What follows is a series of adventures in New Orleans, stressing the intense and often comic hyper-patriotism of the day.

On the street near Union and Carondelet, the Devil and the narrator encounter a German preacher bearing a collection box and crucifix, seeking to gather money among Germans of the South to make amends to Southerners for the sins of their fellow Germans to the North. The precarious position of Germans in the South is underlined here, since Forty-Eighter propaganda had convinced everyone that all Germans in America were abolitionists and Unionists. This put every German in the South on probation if not in peril. The Devil terrifies the preacher, sending him fleeing with the message that the Germans needed not preachers but self-reliance, as they had shown when they bled and died in the revolutions of 1848. Following this scene, the Devil and his companion resort to a bar to drink waves of German beer. Then Signor Diavolo makes his mission clear: he is in New Orleans to lift the roofs from houses to reveal the scandals within.

In the last printed episode, the narrator encounters the Devil once more, this time at a German-language theater. His Excellency is dressed in the garb of a dandy, with a sulfur-colored vest. The stage is clearly being set for new adventures.

It is at this point that the tale is at an end. Why? There is no indication why, but in an era of political crisis, the fey playfulness and irresponsibility of Reizenstein probably hit too close to home to be tolerable. He would not return to fiction until the very end of the War, in April 1865, when he would publish *Bonseigneur* in New Orleans, which would also the object of protest and rewriting. After this, Reizenstein concentrated on writing about scientific subjects. He continued to make a living as a surveyor and placard-painter of property for sale.

Despite his abolitionist novel of 1854-55, Reizenstein himself felt that Germans had to participate in the defense of the South so that Germans would continue to have a place in it. He would serve in the medical corps of the Louisiana Militia in 1861-62, but after the conquest he made his peace with the Union and remained in the city. He presented a series of lectures on the insects of Louisiana, using his vast collection of specimens as a door prize to encourage attendance. He would endure until his death in 1885 as “the Baron,” an increasingly eccentric New Orleans character. Despite the fact that he had not published fiction for almost twenty years, the mourners at his funeral included the two leading lights of New Orleans literature, George Washington Cable and Lafcadio Hearn.
Before the end of February, Admiral Farragut had landed on Louisiana soil, and by May Day New Orleans would be a reluctant federal city again, under the command of General Benjamin Butler. Although the Southern identity of New Orleans will always be secure, its time as the greatest city of the Confederacy proved to be only a brief interlude.

The last of Reizenstein’s novels would be of dramatic size and scope, but it would also be ended before arriving within sight of completion. It began its publication in the final days of the Civil War, and it clearly was intended to have a dramatic scope reaching over decades. Like E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Die Elixiere des Teufels of 1815, his story is designed to coordinate narratives across many years and in many settings, toward a goal that remained hidden to its participants. The first section deals with the reality of New Orleans in 1862, but it then moves back at least forty years to other parts of the Creole Caribbean, particularly Guadeloupe. It all curls around the fates of members of the Bonseigneur family, and the central event appears to be the fates of two members of the family with the same name. Which person is buried on a plantation to the south of New Orleans while his namesake lives on Rampart Street?

These and other questions will not be resolved here, but along the way he begins with an intense series of events, starting with the election of November 1860, the secession of the South, and the events on both sides in the siege of New Orleans and its capture by the United States. Here Reizenstein is acting as a historian, and his narrative is a lost gem of serious (if unorthodox) history of a central event in the first year of the Civil War. It began publication on 9 April 1865, shortly before the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox, and it would cease publication on 26 November of the same year, at a dramatic break in a parallel story of Bonseigneurs caught in a Mardi Gras nightmare of black revenge against the world the Creoles had created.

We will deal critically in what we should call the historical account of the fall of New Orleans. It turns out that it is not only good narrative, it is perhaps even good history.