

"Balcony Stories"

By Grace King. The Century Co.

THE VERANDAHED South is the home of the open-air *trouvére* who gathers the listening group about him and tells, in tones low and thrilling, the stories of the *belle dame* or the gallant cavalier of times gone by. Not in verse: only the rhythm of the pulsing heart beats the story into cadence or canto; and the theme is some family experience "that happened to So-and-So, you know." Thus it is that the Virginia Springs, the Gulf watering-places, the sandy dunes of Florida overlooked by spacious galleries, or the far-in, land-locked Georgia islands have become small Olympias, whither the wandering guest or the nomad story-teller or the Creole Scheherazade bend their footsteps and settle down and open their treasures of memory or hearsay for the delectation of friends. The summer evenings are long and smiling; there is always a full or a half-moon or a troop of glittering planets to filter through the tracery of vines; the idle waters lap and lisp on the soaking sands; and the eager circle gathers about Colonel This or Major That, or some white-haired Madame, to hear rapt reminiscences of the olden time.

Such is the happy germ of Miss Grace King's "Balcony Stories"—a series of charming silhouettes, vague, tender, tragic, or humorous, played magic-lantern-like upon the canvas of a few pages each and projecting fitful illumination on old Creole life in New Orleans, long ago. The stories are often the merest sketches, but often very suggestive and profitable ones to think over. Their delicate art is unobtrusive—very faint, very faltering at times, like the floating perfume of that odorous herb called "Louisiana grass," so precious to the heart—and the linen of Louisiana belles, yet always leaving a definite impression behind. It is this unstudied effect which makes the stories so interesting. It is not a "Romeo and Juliet" balcony, passionate of love and death, from which these graceful tales sweep down on the hearer: it is a balcony of memories shut in by *jalousies* and presided over by tender sentiment and taste, a true knowledge of French Creole life, and a pure reserve. It is not often that so dainty a prose-poem as "The Story of a Day" or "The Miracle Chapel" is written, and "A Crippled Hope" is quite inimitable in its way. The art of some of the stories is injured by the abruptness of the conclusion, as in "The Little Convent Girl" and "Grandmother's Grandmother," but generally the author's purpose seems a fleeting one: she hovers, flutters, and is then off like a butterfly that one moment has crowned a flower with life, with irradiation, and is gone. The effect is not very durable, while it is yet momentarily perfect; but how much better the momentary radiance than the prolonged glare of wilful and tedious analysis! Not everybody can present a picture so vividly with such economy of words. It is Coppée-like.