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MY CREOLES:

A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

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Book V.

BEGINNING LIFE.

IX.

BONAIR RECIDIVUS.

A moment's conversation with M. Paladine revealed the situation in the house during my absence and the cause of Ory's mortal illness. Bonair had raised a storm. His father, after letting him have his own way for full six weeks, indulging his every whim and anticipating all his desires, had at length ventured to broach the subject of his relations with Gaisso. He had two reasons for raising the subject at that particular time. The first was the intelligence he received that Gaisso was already being annoyed by the Voudous and urged to come to some determination. The second was that Bonair had proposed to his father a trip of some two months to New York for the purpose of coming to an understanding with forwarders of that city in regard to the fur trade which he intended opening in the Blackfoot country. In his interview with Bonair, M. Paladine did not require him to give a decision one way or the other, but contented himself with exposing the full state of the case, and requesting his son to give it calm and mature consideration. Without allowing his father time to conclude his statement, Bonair broke out into a violent passion, denounced his whole family as leagued with his enemies against him, declared that he would allow no one, absolutely no one, to interfere in this matter which was purely personal to himself, and that he intended to act just as he pleased. Gaisso was his whenever he wanted her. He could use her as he liked, and he meant to use her as he liked. She was old enough to be mistress of her own person; he was old enough to be master of his own actions. As to any danger with which he was threatened by the Voudous, he roared and ranted in a way that was terrible to hear. He protested that he laughed any such menaces to scorn. He who had met the barbarous Mexican in corral and ravine, who had faced the savage Indian on mountain and plain, was not to be intimidated by skulking negroes who shrank from the glance of a sharp eye and trembled at the whistle of a lash. If any negro on the plantation or elsewhere even looked askance at him, he would plunge a dirk into his belly. He had been hounded and badgered long enough. He determined to be ruled by nobody hereafter.

The old man's blood was roused by this insolent outburst. All the patience which he had been practising for months was forgotten in a moment, and he fiercely set before his son the alternative—either to do justice to Gaisso or leave the house.

"I don't require you to marry the girl," said M. Paladine, "but the least you must do is to acknowledge to her and her friends that you have abused her confidence, that you regret having done so, and that you are willing to offer any reparation short of marriage. I believe I will be able to bring sufficient influence to bear upon your enemies to make them accept these conditions. And, indeed, these conditions are just. They ought to be accepted without either persuasion or compulsion."

These words of M. Paladine only added to the fury of the hot-headed youth. He lost control of himself completely. He used most insulting language to his father. He even went so far as to threaten him with resistance if he attempted to enforce his intentions.

"And now as you want to drive me," he shouted, "I will show you that I will not be driven. As soon as I arrived from the mountains, you spirited Gaisso away, just as if I were an unclean animal, bearer of the plague. I said nothing. But the injury has rankled. I know not where you have hidden her. But I will find out. I will go at once in search of her. When I find her I will draw her forth and show you what I can do. Ah! You pretend that she is good; that she is virtuous; that she regrets the past; that the fault and the ignominy are all on my side. Well, I will prove to you that Gaisso is mine to turn and twist as I like; that she is my slave, has no will but to yield to mine. If you had let me alone I might have let her alone, but now I will parade her as my mistress before the world, and while I will enjoy all the pleasure, I will let those who regard it as a scandal and a disgrace, bear the whole burden of shame."

With these words Bonair seized his hat and rushed out of the house. His father called him back in wrathful tones that made the whole house tremble, but the desperate youth heeded them not and pursued his way.

The counter-stroke of this altercation fell on Ory. Her brother had scarcely disappeared through the park when she dropped on the floor of her room in a state bordering on death. Brain fever then set in. For a whole week she held to life by the merest thread. The physicians had

had scarcely hope of her recovery till the preceding evening.

That same day, on seeing the danger of his daughter, M. Paladine sent a pressing letter to Gaisso summoning her to The Quarries by the next boat. In that way he snatched the poor girl herself from the clutches of Bonair, at the same time that he procured the best possible nurse for Ory.

Gaisso arrived on the third day of Ory's illness, and had not left her bedside, night or day, since then.

Meantime, where was Bonair? M. Paladine could not tell. He had caused the most diligent search to be made after him throughout the city, but in vain. It was a special hardship for the old man that the boy should know nothing of his sister's sickness, for, spite of his faults, he always had a particular tenderness for her.

Not the least part of my surprise was that M. Paladine should thus confide to me all the secrets of his family. The long histories which he related to me on former occasions had a personal relation to myself, as episodes of a mystery in which I found myself involved, but in the last incident I was nowise concerned, unless, perhaps, it were that M. Paladine, like Ory, desired me to assist in finding Bonair's whereabouts and inducing him to return to The Quarries. But if M. Paladine had any such intention, he did not hint it to me. No. In this revelation he evidently had no afterthought. He made it naturally, as if I were one of the family and had a right to know it. Ory had indeed told me more than once that I exerted a singular influence on her father; that since he had made my acquaintance he was no longer the same man, his sternness having yielded to a gentle patience and his implacable taciturnity to a freer intercourse with all his household. I had full proof of this esteem on the present occasion.

In expressing my heartfelt sympathy I inquired of M. Paladine whether Bonair had not some friend in whom he could confide and who could give him good advice.

"No," was the reply. "he never had the blessing of a true friend. He is as isolated as I am. He had in old times plenty of young sponges who rioted with him and helped him to waste his money, but they are all dispersed since he went to the army. I know of but one who could have any influence on him, and that is yourself, Carey. He has spoken to me several times of you with the fullest respect, and the fact that he owes you his life might go a great way. But I would not ask you to look after him. Now, that his sister is out of danger, I am just as well pleased to have him at a distance for awhile. It will, perhaps, be all the better to let him return of his own accord. He had on his person considerable money, the fruit of his own gains. With that he will doubtless run a course of dissipation somewhere. When he is out of pocket he will come back to me. He has been negotiating an arrangement with the American Fur Company for next spring, and I have already promised him the necessary funds."

I made no offer of service to M. Paladine, but with Ory's request in my mind I departed, fully resolved to try my prentice hand on the prodigal.

X.

A MOTHER'S WARNING.

I never really knew till that evening that I loved Ory. I had never even analyzed the feeling which had drawn me to her from the day when I first saw her standing on the platform of the quarry. But now, in my long walk, hastening over the frozen ground, I was not more exhilarated by the sharp air which blew upon my brow, than by the sense of love which palpitated in my heart.

My mind was as clear as the starlit sky above me. I could leap to conclusions with a swift, sure intuition. I therefore examined myself. And the examination itself was a delight. What was the one thing in Ory, which, predominating and absorbing all others, thus commanded my love? Was it her beauty? No; not precisely. I had seen others as beautiful, with the exception, always, of her eyes, which were simply incomparable.

Her eyes!—that pride of Creole daughters—keen, large, round, brown, lustrous and serene. So deep they mirrored all her virgin soul. So sharp they pierced into your very brain. And yet so meek, so fully 'neath control. That even their vividness could inflict no pain.

Was it her accomplishments? No. They were in perfect keeping with her station in life, but otherwise, there was nothing particularly salient in them. Was it her character? Yes. Her character was genuinely feminine and there were a firmness, a consciousness in it which I had not at first suspected. But beyond all this, there was a negative charm in that character which grew out of her peculiar position. It was precisely this negative charm which formed for me

the centre of attraction. Ory needed some one to lean on, some one into whose heart she could pour out her own. I had never so fully realized this as to-night at her bedside. She required a protector and a confidant, some one less paternal than a father, more fraternal than a brother. She needed a lover.

I flattered myself—and how delicious was the belief—that circumstances, a wonderful series of circumstances, had marked me out for that rôle. Further, I had the certitude that Ory expected me to assume it. In other words, she loved me.

When I reached home I found my mamma waiting for me, as she had promised. The intelligence of Ory's illness both surprised and pained her. She even felt hurt at not having been apprised of it, but with her usual magnanimity announced her intention of visiting her god-child the next morning. This she did, along with one of my sisters, and, as I learned from herself immediately on her return, her visit produced the best results. She found M. Paladine charming. In a long private interview which she had with him, he never once alluded to past differences, but thanked her for the gracious reception she had given Ory, for her continued friendship to his daughter, and for her amiability in calling upon him in the hour of his distress. He alluded feelingly to his domestic troubles, to the solitude which shrouded his old age, and excused himself for not having informed her of Ory's illness from a morbid fear of that neglect and alienation with which the whole world had always treated him. He was cured of that now, in her case at least, and he would be happy to continue the kind relations which this visit had inaugurated. Whatever M. Paladine may have been accused of in past times, my mamma added, he was certainly a perfect gentleman, and there was something very pathetic about the silent courage with which he bore his sorrows.

There is no need to speak of the delight which the visit afforded Ory. As my mother remarked, it is during illness that we can judge best of a person's character, and judging her god-child by this test, her good opinion was heightened to unbounded admiration. I had seldom seen my mamma so warm, so expansive as she was that day in repeating the praises of Ory. For a full hour she did not deviate from the theme. I shared her enthusiasm, of course, and could have listened to her for another hour, but she closed the conversation at last, and in a way which I least expected. Assuming a grave countenance, she wound up by saying:

"But, Carey, after recounting all my impressions, there is one last point I must refer to, and which I regard as most grave and most important."

I was not a little surprised, and immediately asked:

"What is that, mamma?"

"Don't you suspect what I mean?" she continued, with the same gravity.

"I do not, really." And the reply was sincere, for I had no idea of what was to follow.

"It is this, my dear—Ory loves you."

I smiled and blushed. Then, for lack of something better to say, I inquired foolishly:

"Did she tell you so, mamma?"

"She had no need to tell me. Her beaming eye, her flushed cheek, her dimpled smile whenever your name was mentioned, and, I must say, she mentioned it oftener herself, were witnesses eloquent enough."

I remained silent.

My mother continued:

"Were you not aware of this love, Carey?"

"Not till last night, mamma. Before that, I never gave the matter a serious thought."

"But now you are certain of it?"

"I think I may answer yes, mamma."

"And what do you say to it, my dear?"

"Ah! what else can I say than that I reciprocate it with all the powers of my soul?"

My mother now looked not only grave, but concerned. A shade of sadness even gathered on her countenance. Astonished at this I asked in a trembling voice:

"You are silent, dear mamma. Does the knowledge of our love give you pain?"

"Pain? No, Carey; not to me. If I alone were interested, it would give me the keenest delight, for no one is worthier of your love than Ory. But there are others, Carey."

"Others? Who is there besides yourself whom I need care to please in this matter?"

"Oh! that is not my meaning. I refer to another young heart that loves you."

"To whom can you refer?"

"I thought you were sharper sighted, Carey. Have you forgotten Mimi Raymond?"

"Mimi?" I exclaimed. "She is my amiable cousin, to whom I am indebted for much kindness, for many favours, and whom I highly esteem—but she is nothing more."

"Nothing more, Carey? What? Do you not know that Mimi loves you even to blindness, that her whole existence is wrapped up in you? Has she not given you sufficient proof of this? She has unbosomed herself to me, my son, in floods of tears. She told me of the happy Valmont days, of her accident at Big Fork, of her reluctance to go to Europe because that would separate her from you. Is it possible that you did not understand the meaning of that prompt attendance—of that unwearied kindness of hers during your illness? Ah! Carey. Your memory is short. Remember the words you spoke to her at Valmont Spring, the other words you spoke after her rescue from drowning, the letters you wrote her during her absence in Europe, and all the hopes you gave rise to in

that loving, trusting bosom. I do not upbraid you, my son. I do not even wish to interfere. All I ask you is to be prudent. Be careful, before engaging yourself too far, not to do an injustice to Mimi. Are you certain that you have not been unjust and neglectful already?"

"I do not believe that I have," was my timid reply.

"You received letters from her when you were at Potosi?"

"Yes, mamma, several."

"And did you answer them faithfully?"

"Every one of them, I think."

"Since your return have you gone to see her?"

"Not yet. I have not had the time."

"Tell me honestly. Did you intend going to see her?"

"I did, indeed."

"When?"

"This very afternoon."

"Ah! That is right. Do so. Reflect on what I have told you and bear yourself accordingly. I seek your good, my son, and it is because of this solicitude that I repeat—do no injustice to sweet Mimi Raymond."

XI.

DOUBTS AND INQUIRIES.

Here was a predicament. One short hour ago, my life's path opened clear before me, flooded with sunshine. Now a dark shadow fell over it, which, alas, might prove the harbinger of a storm. Who would have thought that my wild words, spoken erewhile in a blind outburst of boyish passion, would thus bring an unexpected retribution? *Nescit vox missa reverti*. It was too late to withdraw those words. I could not recall them if I wished. They had borne their fruit in silence and sorrow long after I had forgotten them and while I was building other hopes elsewhere.

Poor Mimi! Was it strictly true that I had been wholly ignorant of her love; that I had not rightly interpreted the tone of her tender letters, and the spirit of that nursing care with which she enveloped me during my illness? Ah! there are moments in life, and especially there are blinding crises of love, when it is the almost impossible thing to be literally, sternly truthful. Dissimulation is such a fascinating chameleon, and it is sometimes so like a benediction to be deceived. I tried hard to convince myself that Mimi could not love me so much as my mamma had stated, and particularly that I had given her no valid grounds for that love, or its requital on my part. But it was useless. The past came back to me in sharpest outline and with clearest, brightest colours. Yes. It was plain. Love's arrow had sped from the bow and the stricken heart lay bleeding.

My intention had been, as I told my foster-mother, to call on Mimi that very day. I owed her an early visit after my return and I knew she would be expecting me. But now, after this revelation, what should I do? Ought I to go or not? And if I went should I act as if nothing had happened, or should I frankly ask and give explanations? The problem was hard to solve, and I puzzled over it for a long time. At length, however, I decided on taking the most straightforward course; to go to Mimi as usual, do and say nothing to bring the conversation on that dangerous ground, but if in any way it drifted thitherward—as I more than suspected it would—then meet it like a man.

Had I consulted my own taste, I should have paid the visit at once, but I had to put it off till later in the afternoon, for there were several business hours before me yet, and I must go down to my office. There I found some new clients waiting for me, with whom I worked for a considerable time. Then I was called upon by a few friends, who, having heard of my arrival, dropped in to congratulate me. The last of those who came was Djim. Making himself at home, he helped himself to a cigar out of my box, made a slow and critical inventory of my scant professional furniture and then sat down at the window to read a paper until all the guests were gone. When we were alone, one of my first inquiries was whether he had seen or heard anything of Bonair Paladine. His answer was a hearty laugh.

"Bonair Paladine!" he exclaimed. "Why, yes; the last time I saw him was about a week ago, and such a sight as he was. He came down to the office with a couple of black eyes, a swollen face, a torn coat and shirt and an old silk handkerchief tied around his head. I didn't know him at first. Of course I understood what it all meant. He had been on one of those rousing old frolics—'busters' they call them—in which all our mountain men indulge when they come down to St. Louis. He had been drinking, gambling, fighting, and the rest. Probably, too, he had been robbed, for generally it is only when these wild men have had their pockets completely cleaned out that they take refuge at our office to tell us their dismal story. We then wash them, clothe them anew, and advance them a little money, with which they manage to behave themselves during the remainder of their stay. Paladine, however, wanted neither ablutions, clothes nor money. His request was a most singular one, and I'll bet you could not guess it if I gave you from this till to-morrow. Just imagine! He wanted me to get him a wig."

"Ah, yes," I remarked quickly, "he is somewhat bald."

"Bald! I should think he was. Why the fellow is scalped. When he took off his hand-