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## MY CREOLES:

A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

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Book VI.

## REPARATION AND ABNEGATION.

XI.

## THE FAMILY COUNCIL.

The report of the pistol startled the whole house. There was a tremendous rush upon the stairs, rescuing amid screams of terror, and convulsive hands beat against the bolted door. Bonair threw it open. M. Paladine and Ory entered. Gaisso remained on the threshold. ToINETTE and other dusky faces appeared a little lower down. It is impossible to describe the scene of confusion which ensued, but Bonair, giving no one time to speak, set about immediately explaining. He looked sad and stern as he spoke:

"I am sorry to have frightened you, but it was necessary to speak my decision loudly to the world. This pistol which you see has been in my possession for a long time. I kept it about me to meet the danger with which I was threatened. I never expected to use it against any except my enemies. But to-day I was twenty times tempted to point it against myself. This has been one of the most dreadful days of my life. I took the pistol out of its holster this morning. I set it on the table before me. During my meditations before that table, my visions, my paroxysms, the eclipses of my mind and the raging tempests of my soul, it was a central object before my eyes. More than once I stretched my hand to it, more than once I took it up, more than once I cocked it. Once I raised it to the level of my temple. Great God! when I think of it! What prevented me from dropping the trigger was the voice of Carey Gilbert in the hall below. He had just come into the house. I sent for him. He came at once, with the diligence of true friendship. I then entered into a long argument with him. I unfolded to him all my troubles. I asked his advice, his sternest, fiercest counsel. He gave it like a man. He combated all my reasons. I resisted him inch by inch, panting, raving, exposing to his view all the prejudices, subtleties and meanderings of a man destitute of religious principle. He followed me without disgust or weariness. He took pity on me. He gave himself the trouble of reasoning away all my objections. It was a terrible struggle to have to give in, but when the last moment came, the darkness rolled away from my spirit, a certain calm succeeded in my heart, and for the first time in my life I felt that I was conquered. Carey Gilbert, accept my hand. You saved my life once before; you have saved it a second time, and with it my honour. Allow me to call you my best friend. While I live I shall never forget the service you have rendered me this day."

Bonair then embraced his father and his sister, imploring their pardon for all the sorrow he had occasioned them. M. Paladine, more deeply moved than I had yet seen him, spoke some very kind words to his son, while Ory testified her joy and gratitude by coming over to me and clinging yearningly to my arm.

Then looking to the door where Gaisso had remained crouching and weeping, Bonair exclaimed:

"Come, Gaisso, come to my side. This is your place now, and for all time. Look well at your benefactor. Oh, you owe me nothing. You owe all to him. I did all I could to cast you off. I invented reasons. I imagined impediments. I blackened you in my mind as much as I could. I tried to persuade myself that I did not love, could not love you. I calumniated you. I calumniated your dead mother. I railed against your race. I swore terrible oaths that I would have nothing to do with you. Carey Gilbert pleaded your cause, appealed to my sense, stirred up my remorse, pointed out my duty, rekindled the old love. Suddenly, yet calmly, and I hope irrevocably, my mind was made up. Pardon me all the past. There! I see it is done already. Go now. To-morrow morning we shall be married."

I will not vulgarize by describing what followed within the next half hour.

XII.

## BONAIR AND GAISSO ARE MARRIED.

In the enthusiasm of his altered mind, Bonair wished to give the utmost solemnity and publicity to his marriage. He desired, he said, that, as a reparation was required, it should be as striking as what people called his ill-conduct had been notorious. All the church bells must be rung as at the highest festivals. No less a dignitary than the bishop of the diocese must perform the ceremony. He would conduct his bride in an open carriage to the cathedral. He did not stop to inquire whether there could be any objection to this arrangement. But wiser counsels prevailed. The parish priest of the vicinity, who, to my surprise, was summoned to

the house that afternoon by M. Paladine himself with the view of preparing the young couple for this important act of religion, persuaded Bonair to proceed with more privacy. He even attempted to have the ceremony put off for a few days, but to this Bonair would not consent. "It must be to-morrow," he said, decisively. "If I delayed—who knows?"

So it was finally settled that the marriage should take place the next morning at break of day in the little parish church near The Quarries.

That night, before my departure, Gaisso craved a moment's interview with me. After pouring out her gratitude at my feet, she concluded by asking me a final favour. It was, according to the Creole expression, that I would stand to her in a father's stead at her marriage. I readily assented, of course.

More impressive nuptials it has never been given me to witness. I did not know which to admire most—the heroism of Bonair or the crowned fidelity of Gaisso. M. Paladine stood for his son. I gave away the bride. Ory assisted as a spectator. There were no others present except ToINETTE and Nain. The former had obtained the favor through earnest entreaty. The latter was there by the special order of Bonair.

"I want these Voudous to see with their own eyes what I have done," said he. "I never feared them. They will find that what they could not force from me by their threats of diabolical malice I have granted of my own free will."

The priest made a few remarks full of charity and Christian encouragement. I observed that M. Paladine was deeply moved, for to him the words must have recalled his own marriage, since which day, with the single exception of that of his wife's obsequies, he had not set foot in a church. What I particularly liked in the little sermon was a delicate allusion to the social inequalities of the parties and to the great fact that the Church regards only the souls of men and women, which in God's eyes are equal.

When Bonair, after the blessing, walked out of the church, with Gaisso on his arm, he could have boasted of one of the handsomest of wives. She was truly a splendid woman. The white robes of the bride, replacing her perpetual black dress, produced on her the effect of a transfiguration. Honestly, I should never have taken her for an octoroon.

I remained to breakfast with the family. It was there that M. Paladine, who had hitherto said very little, took occasion to speak his mind at length. He expressed his unbounded satisfaction at all that had happened. He regarded the marriage as a good omen for his family. He exhorted Gaisso to be always as dutiful to her husband as she had been to himself. He assured his son that he could nowhere have found a more devoted wife, and he advised him to treat her with all tenderness and gentility. He then made a proposition which astonished us all.

It was that Bonair and Gaisso should remain in St. Louis. If Bonair only wished it, it was not yet too late to cancel the agreement with the Fur Company. Bonair, however, lost no time to answer. He thanked his father for this mark of confidence, but persisted in his intention of going to the Mountains. He would take his wife with him and they would remain for at least five years. If his enterprise succeeded, he would continue to reside there after that time. If it did not succeed according to his wishes, he might then return. Gaisso entirely concurred in the views of her husband. She, too, was anxious to be away from the scenes of her trials and to begin a new life in an entirely new sphere. *Qui prend mari prend pays!* was a maxim which had no hardship for her.

XIII.

## THEIR DEPARTURE FOR THE MOUNTAINS.

Bonair altered his itinerary a little. Instead of going from St. Louis to Council Bluffs by land, as he had intended, he proposed to conduct his wife to the latter point by water, and leave her for a few weeks, while he made his purchases in the surrounding country. When the Mountain boat came up in May, they would both take passage in her for the mouth of the Yellowstone. Gaisso had only four days to prepare for the journey, but with the aid of Ory she found them quite ample enough. And, after all, what cared she for a wardrobe, now that she had a husband!

The steamer was announced to depart at eight o'clock on the Monday morning. Bonair and Gaisso had made me promise to be present. When I reached the levee, fully half an hour before the appointed time, I found them all arrived and their piles of luggage already embarked. M. Paladine and Bonair were earnestly conversing in the fore-castle. Ory and Gaisso were as earnestly engaged in the cabin. Going from one to the other I had a warm clasp of the hand and a good word from each. Gradually

the boat began to fill up. Passengers were crowding in. Freight in immense quantities was stowed on board. The first bell had already tolled; the second was just being rung. There remained only a quarter of an hour. Several of the members of the Fur Company hurried down to have a last word with their young partner. Among these came Djim with letters and documents for Bonair. Finally the confusion became extreme. Officers were shouting their orders; the boatmen were hurrying to and fro; the engines were letting off their steam with deafening noise. Then came a last pressure of hands, a parting embrace, a hasty retreat down the stairs. The third bell was sounding. Bonair had followed us to the edge of the boat. As I was leading Ory to the one remaining plank which connected us with the shore, he laid his hand upon my shoulders and muttered: "Good-bye, Carey. Take good care of father and of Ory."

His voice failed him and he could say no more.

An instant later the steamer had pushed out into mid-stream. Pausing there one moment, as if to collect her strength, she let off a reverberating whistle, then proudly struck against the current. As she glided away we stood in a group upon the bank.

"There they are!" suddenly exclaimed Ory.

Bonair and Gaisso were standing arm-in-arm, at the highest point of the upper deck and detached from the rest of the passengers. They were looking directly at us. They had seen us, and now they both waved their handkerchiefs. We returned signals of recognition and of farewell.

Gradually the steamer was less and less visible. It became a speck, and then mingled with the water line.

"Gone!" asked M. Paladine.

"Gone, sir," I repeated.

The old man drove his cane between a fissure of the boulders and hung down his head.

"It is a hard thing, Carey," he said, "but I am content."

Ory hung heavily on my arm, sobbing pitifully and unable to speak. I conducted them both to their carriage. M. Paladine entered with broken step and threw himself in the corner of the back seat. Setting Ory gently beside him, I was about to withdraw, when she seized my hand and murmured:

"Fetch me home, Carey. We cannot go there alone."

I took a place in front of them, and we drove silently to The Quarries.

XIV.

## ANOTHER STEP TO FORTUNE.

Not much more than a fortnight later, I too made my preparations for departure. The machinery constructed according to my plans and under my superintendence had already been sent forward. I was to follow and direct its erection. When these preliminary arrangements were completed, mining operations on a gigantic scale would be inaugurated.

"The eyes of the whole company are upon you," said Uncle Pascal, as he bade me good-bye. "Be sure and do your work to perfection. A day or two before the close, send me a private message and I will run down myself ahead of the directors to make an inspection."

All through that spring, summer and autumn I remained at Potosi without being able to leave even once for a flying visit to St. Louis. So soon as it was made clear to every one's satisfaction that the machinery worked well, I had a temptation to retire from the concern, as very advantageous offers from other quarters had been made me. But the directors would not hear of my withdrawal. They even went further and appointed me general superintendent of the works, with doubled salary and the promise of a bonus equal to twenty-five per cent. of the profits every year for two years. To secure my services still more fixedly, Uncle Pascal took ten shares of the stock in my name, on the understanding that I would pay him only with the yearly income of the shares and without interest on the capital. Such advantages were a little fortune to me, and it would have been madness to refuse them.

I therefore spent the two following years at these now celebrated lead mines. I gave my unremitting attention to my duties. The business prospered prodigiously, and I have the vanity here to record that the directors attributed much of their success to my zeal and industry. At the end of the term their most anxious desire was for my re-engagement, but after much reflection I was induced to decline, having found in the city, where I preferred staying, a more favorable opening for my ambition and activity. The proposition came unexpectedly from M. Paladine. The old man, perceiving that his habits of solitude and study were of late impairing both his health and spirits, and not unwilling, moreover, to mingle more freely with the world, resolved on trying some outdoor occupation which would give him bodily exercise and invigorating mental occupation. With this view, he purposed exploring anew his magnificent quarries, which had lain idle for many years, as well as open new ones and establish a series of lime-kilns on a large scale. As he would be unable to conduct such a business alone, and because he knew that my engineering knowledge could be made available in introducing all the improvements of modern experience in this branch of industry, he offered to take me into partnership. To give his pro-

posal the look of a strictly business transaction and not of a favor, he stipulated that I should join my little savings to the capital which he intended to invest in the undertaking and that we should share the profits. I should have undivided control of the whole business. He would only look on and help me as he could. I had no hesitation in accepting this splendid offer. There was no risk whatever. The city was rapidly progressing. Acre upon acre was being rapidly covered with houses. Public works of all kinds were actively prosecuted. Building material, in immense quantities, would be required for years to come.

I had higher motives besides to determine my choice. It seemed to me that I would be fulfilling a filial duty in continuing the works begun by my grandfather. It was this view which made my family, including Uncle Pascal, approve and encourage the change. Then, too— incentive more powerful than all the others—I would find myself living in the vicinity of The Quarries, within easy distance of Ory, and working under her eye.

A few weeks, therefore, after my return from Potosi, I entered upon this new field of labor.

XV.

## MY FOREMAN.

M. Paladine's object in opening new quarries, in addition to the three already excavated, went even beyond what I mentioned above. He wanted to try a humanitarian experiment. There were some twenty negro lads on his plantation, of all ages ranging from fifteen to thirty, whom he desired to take off his farm, where they were useless, and put to more regular and constant work. His plan was this: One quarry, at a distance from the rest, would be reserved exclusively to these negroes. They should have the same hours of labor as the other workmen, and should receive the same wages. These wages, every Saturday night, would be paid into their own hands, so that each might see and touch what he had won during the week. Then they would bring the money to their master who would deposit it in a common fund reserved for them, and destined later to be employed for their benefit. In a word, M. Paladine wished to test personally the difference between men working for themselves and working for others; between men animated with a hope and animated with sordid fear. I entered readily into his views. I promised to carry out the experiment fully and conscientiously. To do this better, I needed a foreman. My choice immediately fell on Nain, and I summoned him for the purpose. Treating him as an utter stranger, without making any allusion to the past or allowing him to make any, I explained to him what I wanted and told him he must undertake it. The intelligent fellow grasped my whole project at a glance. His face brightened and I saw that all his better nature was rising in him. I felt from that moment that I had chosen the right man. I closed the interview abruptly with these words:

"The whole responsibility of that quarry rests on you, and in all cases you shall be answerable directly to me."

"Trust me, sir," he replied in a tone of simple yet manly self-reliance, "I am completely at your service. You will see that nothing will be left undone to repay your generosity toward me."

And he kept his word. That negro quarry was a success. Financially it yielded what we expected of it. In a higher point of view it convinced us that negroes, when properly treated, think, feel and act like the rest of men. I do not pretend that they worked better than my white laborers. But they worked just as well. I do not pretend that they behaved better. But they behaved fully as well. They got drunk occasionally, but so did the others. They would fight sometimes, but more seldom and less bloodily than the others. Both parties had periodical fits of laziness, but I considered my blacks more excusable because they had no board or clothing to provide for their families.

Some years ago a wise man lecturing before the London Anthropological Society, on the "Negro's Place in Nature," laid down, among other propositions, that the negro is a different species from the European; that the analogies are far more numerous between the negro and the ape than between the European and the ape; that the negro is intellectually inferior to the European. Many good people, many intelligent people, entertain similar views, and I have been questioned in this sense over and over again by both Americans and Englishmen. My answer has invariably been the experience of this lime-stone quarry. Here I had a score of full-blooded negroes—there was not a mulatto among them—working side by side with common white laborers. I compared them, watched their differences closely and I repeat that in absolutely no particular did I find the latter inferior to the former. Not only did they readily learn the material work, of which they knew nothing before, but they understood instructions well, invented the usual expedients and devices for facilitating labor, and on the score of fidelity to the prescribed lines of conduct, proved the existence of that moral instinct which is only another name for right intelligence.

When learned ethnologists tell us that the negro mind is capable of as much development as the European, up to the age of fourteen, but that, after this period, it becomes torpid and almost incapable of learning; that memory is in-