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MY CREOLES:

A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

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Book II.

VOUDOUS AND VOUDOUISM.

I.

OLD DADA.

It was summer again and I thought of Valmont. This was the time of the long vacation, but alas! my school-days were now over and the term had no real meaning for me. It was not any more two months of wild, thoughtless recreation, to be followed by the harsh yet sweet seclusion of the class-room for the remainder of the year. Ah! no. This bright summer was a great wave to lapse and bear me into the ocean of life. My horizon was now unbounded. The world was open before me. What schoolboy has not felt the burden of this dread responsibility, if only for one moment? And this freedom, long sighed after, and now come at length, how has it appeared to many of us in the light of a vague, undefined danger!

Still to Valmont I must go. I was entitled to a few weeks of rest, and where could I so well enjoy them as at the old place? So I repaired thither as usual, and as usual I was received with open arms.

"I had feared you would not come, my dear," said Aunt Aurora, as she spread out a lunch for me. "That would have been too bad, after so many years."

"So it would. But this is my last vacation, all the same, aunty, and I may never be able to come again."

"Don't say so, Carey."

"Indeed, aunty, I have got to begin life now, and it will be rougher work than tumbling in the grass at Valmont or playing in the hay-field. But in the meantime I intend to amuse myself as well as I can."

"That is right, *mon cher*; think of nothing else while you are here."

I followed this good advice. For a fortnight I enjoyed myself amazingly, forgetful of all my troubles and my danger. And I should probably have continued my rounds of amusement for some weeks longer had I not been unexpectedly recalled to a sense of my situation.

At the end of the period just mentioned, one of my foster sisters came out to Valmont with her infant and old Dada, the nurse. Old Dada was a type of the domestic servant common enough twenty-five years ago, but now almost entirely gone. There was nothing æsthetic about slavery save this, that in its mildest forms and in certain privileged natures it developed a peculiar kind of love and fidelity impossible of growth in other social conditions. Dada was born on the family plantation, had grown there on the good things of the house, and always associated with the other children. She was not so much of a slave as a companion. The proof of this was that she was allowed to *tutou* us, a liberty not generally tolerated. What her family name was I do not know to this day. The highest and lowest of this world have one point of union—the Christian name. The English queen is called Victoria; the Creole slave was called Pelagie. But to the children of another generation that name was changed to Dada, one of those meaningless terms of endearment which children invent. She had assisted at our birth, had nursed us, had watched over us, had accompanied us in all our walks and recreations. In fact she had been a kind of second mother to the youngest of us. And we loved her accordingly. When we wanted anything, we applied to her; when we came home after an absence, among our first inquiries were after her. We were not ashamed to kiss that olive cheek. And how she fondled us! Even when we were grown she would still raise us to her knees, and caress us as in the days of childhood.

Dada was a mulatto, and had been handsome. At the time of which I write she had grown very corpulent, but spite of a defect in her left eye and certain traces of age, her good-humoured face was still pleasant to look at. Her loving nature had often been imposed upon, which was one of the devilish curses of slavery, but still she was a virtuous woman. Under that voluminous bosom beat a generous heart, and the brow shaded by its turban of red and white calico bore the stamp of a simple, honest purpose to do no deliberate wrong. Women of her condition were usually nothing more than human manuals, but she had finer sensibilities and much of that delicacy of feeling which is supposed to be the result only of cultivation.

The evening of her arrival at Valmont, seeing Dada sitting alone in the garden with the baby, I walked up to speak to her. On approaching I noticed that she hastily wiped her eyes with the edge of her apron and tried to compose herself.

"What's the matter, Dada?" said I, "you ain't crying?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Nothing, I mean, that you care about, Carey," she answered, in French, which she spoke rather better than most Creole negroes.

"You don't regret coming out to Valmont, do you?"

"Dear, no. I'm better away from home just now."

"Why, Dada?"

I persisted in my inquiry because I saw the tears standing in her eyes again.

"Poor Gaston gone, Hiacinte has no other but me to come to, and I can't bear to see her carry on so."

"Hiacinte, Gaston; what does that mean?"

"You haven't heard, of course. What do white folks care about us poor niggers? Gaston was my sister Hiacinte's only boy, and now they've gone and sold him."

"Sold him, Dada?"

"Yes, to that devil, Hobbes. You must know him, Carey. Keeps on Locust street. Big brass plate on his door. They say 'nigger trader' is marked on it. He's a little man with a big belly, and eyes deep down in his head. He's club-footed, too. Gaston's master comes to him, and says he, 'Want to buy a young nigger eighteen years old?' 'Let's see him,' says Hobbes. Gaston is brought down right away. Trader has him stripped naked and set on a stool. Then, with his hands in his pockets and a cigar in his mouth, walks around him slowly, looking cross-ways at him; next feels of his legs and his arms and thumps him on the chest. When he got through, says he, 'That'll do. Put your clothes on.' Then the master got up and he says, 'Sound, ain't he?' 'Sound,' says Hobbes, 'why, yes, he is sound. A regular young bullock. What do you ask for him?' The master, he looked at Gaston a minute, and he says, 'What will you give me?' Then the nigger-trader he looked at poor Gaston, too, a bit, and next down on the floor, where he was scratching something or other with that club foot of his. After a while he says, 'Wal, I'll give you eight hundred dollars for him. If I was buying for myself I'd give you a thousand, for he is worth it, but I'm buying a lot for another man just now, and he wants a close bargain. Eight hundred dollars, cash, is my price.' 'Take him,' said the master. Then the trader pulled out a big leather pocket-book and counted out eight hundred dollars in bills. Think of it, Carey. For a handful of dirty paper that poor boy was sold like an animal. And my poor sister! He was her only child. Oh my, oh my! why do we miserable negro women ever allow ourselves to have children? We ought to live and die like barren trees."

As she uttered these words, Dada burst out afresh into a storm of sorrow that was pitiful to witness.

I ventured a few words of comfort, but she stopped me with her hand on my arm, and mastering her grief, continued:

"That ain't all. Let me tell you the rest, Carey. When the master, after he got his money, went away, he said to the trader: 'Watch him well. He is a hard customer.' The trader, he bit hard into his cigar and said, giving a short laugh: 'Where he is going to, they have a way of curing bacon that he'll be apt to remember, if he don't mind. They'll break him, never you fear.' Then the trader took Gaston by the arm and ran him out into a big open yard behind his office, where there was a lot of niggers waiting to be shipped like himself. There they were all huddled up together—men, women and children—most of them half naked and half starved. There was some pretty girls among them. My God! to think what will become of them! There Gaston stayed the rest of the afternoon, and all he saw was another young boy whom the master had sent down with a bundle of clothes for him. He never saw his mother, nor me, nor any of his kin. He told all that had happened to this boy, who came and told it over to me. He sent a message to his mother and me, telling us that he was going forever and that we must try and forget him. Forget him, the poor boy! How could we ever? Oh, it is too bad, too bad!"

And she burst out again into a torrent of tears.

After a pause, I said to her gently:

"Yes, it is too bad, Dada. It is cruel, horrid. But what could Gaston have done?"

"Done, Carey, done? Why, he always was a good boy, though he is as black as night and hasn't a drop of white blood in his body. He was so honest and faithful that his master made him his body-servant. Done! I don't know. They said all of a sudden that he had betrayed his master, whatever that is."

"Betrayed his master?"

"Yes. Something or other about a letter that his master hadn't written. For that he was sold, and the same evening that I was telling you about, he and the rest of the sold negroes were stowed away in the hold of a steamboat like a parcel of swine, and sent off to Orleans."

I hardly heard the conclusion of Dada's sentence, my mind being seized with the idea of the letter to which she so vaguely referred. It could not be possible that I was going to find myself involved in the heartless sale of this negro boy. The bare suspicion was so overwhelming that I resolved immediately on seeking further information, though almost certain that I would find myself mistaken.

"Who was Gaston's master, Dada?"

"Why, don't you know? 'Twas Squire Pauley, of course; him that lives in the fine big house on Convent street."

There was no use resisting the evidence of this simple answer. I had not one word to say. I mused a brief moment, and then, without offering any observation, walked off, leaving old Dada to her tears.

II.

GASTON.

I reproached myself now with not calling on Mr. Pauley, as he had invited me to do. If I had been less thoughtless and less selfish in my enjoyment, I should have gone to him before setting out for Valmont. But the fact was that I had been only too anxious to forget my troubles, and put off further investigation till later.

The next morning, borrowing a horse from Uncle Louis, I rode into the city and went direct to the residence of Mr. Pauley. My first inquiry was about Gaston, and my host immediately confirmed Dada's story. Incidentally expressing his surprise that I had hitherto failed to visit him on the subject, he informed me that he had not been able to find a plausible clue to the authorship of the forged letter. His servant Gaston had confessed having brought a letter to the college, but he denied knowledge of its being attributed to his master. Everything was tried to wrench this important confession from him, but neither promises nor threats nor half a hundred stripes on his bare back could avail.

"All this was bad enough," continued Mr. Pauley, "but the matter would have rested there, at least for the present, had I not learned for a certainty that my slave Gaston was a Voudou. This at once explained his bearing a letter without my permission; this explained his stubborn reticence, and this, too, convinced me that there was something serious at the bottom of the affair. Whether it was I that they sought to compromise by the forged letter or whether you were the person directly attacked in it, I, of course, do not know and cannot even suspect. I had a partial remedy in my hands and that was to get rid of the boy. I did so. I am so far from regretting it that I think I have perhaps done you and others an important service."

I had naturally very little to reply to all this, and anything in the shape of remonstrance was, of course, out of the question. The cool, unconcerned manner in which Mr. Pauley narrated the circumstances of Gaston's sale contrasted painfully, I thought, with the reputation for sanctimony which Father Wye had given his friend, but I gathered this grain of comfort from it—which it was the principal object of my visit to ascertain—that I was in no way responsible for the iniquitous act. Gaston had deliberately made himself the bearer of a forged letter, and even if I had pleaded for him, I should have obtained no respite.

"You say that Gaston is a Voudou?"

"Yes, and as such I was bound to get rid of him."

"But do you not fear the vengeance of the rest of them?"

"That depends. If I am the victim aimed at by the letter, this will inflame their hatred against me still more. But if you are the victim, my young friend, then you had better take precautions."

This was uncomfortable. Perhaps when Mr. Pauley considered the trouble to which he was exposing me, he might have dispensed with the luxury of selling Gaston. And I ventured to hint as much to him.

"Impossible," was his reply. "These fellows are like the lepers of old. You must remove them far away from all contact with others. To do this effectually, the only way in my case was to sell Gaston and have him transported to Louisiana. Down there he can join the Voudous again, if he chooses, but at least neither you nor I will be exposed to his tricks."

We closed our interview with the mutual promise that whichever of us got further information respecting the letter, its author or its object, he should apprise the other of it. It was Mr. Pauley who made the proposition and I assented to it, but I had the conviction that I was the one aimed at, and I knew enough of Voudouism to be conscious that my position was now more critical than ever. I therefore felt the necessity of giving all my attention to the matter, and it was with this resolution that I returned to Valmont.

III.

TOINETTE.

When I got back to the farm-house I found it crowded. During the day a party—all more or less my relatives—had come out for a few days of rustication. With them my time was taken up till late in the evening, and when bed-time came I discovered that I had to make over my room to some of the girls. I did this with grace of gallantry, as was to be expected, but needing

rest all the same, I dragged a mattress to the end of the front gallery, and there established my quarters. It was a delightful summer night. A half-moon shone softly in the unclouded sky, and the air, unshaken by any zephyr, was still freshened by the neighbourhood of the great trees. I threw myself down upon the bed and was soon lost in a kind of reverie between waking and sleeping.

Presently I rather felt than saw a shadow creeping toward me, till all at once it stood between me and the moonlight, leaving my whole person in comparative darkness. Then two arms wound about my neck and a gentle kiss was impressed upon my forehead. I opened my eyes very wide. It was old Dada.

"Are you asleep, Carey?" said she.

"No; not now, Dada. What do you want?"

"Ah! my dear boy, you were in town to-day. I know what you went there for. It was just like you to go and see what you could do for poor Gaston. Tell me all about it."

I sat up and gave my old nurse a seat on the couch.

"You are right, Dada. I did go and inquire about Gaston, but I fear I have nothing agreeable to tell you about him."

"It was too late, eh, Carey?" and the tears stood in her eyes.

"Yes, it was too late; but that is not what I mean. The affair of the letter was a very ugly one, Dada. It will get somebody into trouble yet. Gaston acted very badly there."

"If the master is the one that is to get into trouble, I am glad of it. He deserves it for his cruelty."

"But it is not the master, Dada. It is some one whom you used to love and call your pet."

"What? You don't mean—! Who can it be?"

"Myself, Dada."

The dear old creature uttered a groan, and throwing her arms around my neck, drew me to her breast, rocking me to and fro and humming a low, wild melody that was full of anguish. It was some minutes before I could extricate myself from this hug, and when I did so the nurse's face was so shockingly altered that I shuddered to look at it.

I thought I was bound in conscience to slip in one word of comfort.

"Perhaps, Dada, he did not know what the letter contained, and in that case he is less to blame than the one who gave him the letter."

"Who was it?" quickly asked the poor woman.

"There is the mystery. I cannot tell, as yet."

"No matter. If you are certain Gaston worked against you, I give him up. But are you certain, Carey?"

"I am certain that he delivered the letter which was intended to ruin me."

"Then his master did right to sell him," she exclaimed passionately, with the sudden revulsion of feeling to which the impulsive negroes are, of all others, so subject.

"Don't say that, Dada. It is unnatural in your mouth. I should never forgive myself if I knew that Gaston had suffered on my account. But, no; Mr. Pauley had a graver reason for selling him."

"What? Gaston done worse than working against you?"

"Yes, Dada. Gaston is a Voudou."

"A what?" she shrieked, while her person was fairly convulsed with terror.

"A Voudou, Dada."

"O, horrible! Gaston that was baptized and reared a Christian, and made his first communion, like white folks! I know he was born out of marriage, but that was my poor sister's fault—not his, and she has been a good woman ever since, trying to make up for it. Gaston a Voudou! I don't believe it. Who told you so?"

"His master."

"His master lies. He made up that story to excuse himself."

Then lowering her voice and looking around to make sure that no one heard her, she continued:

"Voudous are devils, Carey. You know that. They kill all their enemies. Gaston was as gentle as a girl. He would not hurt a fly."

I knew I could confide unreservedly in my old nurse, and profiting by the turn which the conversation had taken, could safely unfold a portion of the suspicion which I entertained with regard to the author of the letter. Perhaps she could give me a clue.

"Do you know, Dada, what company Gaston kept?"

She coloured slightly and drooped her eyes.

"You mean what girl he went with?"

"Yes."

"Well, the boy had warm blood, I must say, and he was fond of running about. I won't answer for all the girls that he followed or that followed him; but, of late, I know that he hung around a wonderful sort of girl."

"What do you mean by a wonderful sort of a girl, Dada?" I asked, half amused. "Is she pretty?"

"She is pretty; too pretty, in fact. And she is a wild girl, all fire, Carey. One of those that will wind round a man like a snake, and make him do whatever she likes. I ought not, perhaps, to say those things before you, my love, for you are young yet; but such is life, and when you know as much as I do—"

I was not cynical enough to smile at this touch of pudency, but rather respected the recollections of her own frailties which I knew were then flitting through my nurse's mind.