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# MY CREOLES:

## A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

By JOHN LESPERANCE,

Author of "Rosalba," "The Bastonnais," &amp;c.

Book III.

## TWO BLACKS DO NOT MAKE ONE WHITE.

XI.

THE BANNS ARRESTED.

Ory departed on her errand, and we two remained seated in the gloom. My host then again took up his discourse:

"I have only a few words more to say, and I will hurry over them. I want to bring you to-night through this first part of my history."

"As you can easily imagine, our altercation was soon noised abroad. The proceedings of juries are supposed to be inviolate, but these were not, and in a small community as ours were they were repeated with all sorts of comments and additions. Of course, the whole blame fell upon me. It has been my fate through life to be a scapegoat in every controversy or quarrel. I always was the tainted wether of the flock. The disgraceful charge which your grandfather made was fastened on me, as with hooks of iron, and from that day to this, public opinion has connected me, in some mysterious manner, with the death of a common street-girl, who was murdered by her lover. I need not tell you, my son, that I was not only a stranger to the deed, but a total stranger to the woman."

"Years passed: years of bitterness and isolation. I withdrew to my farm and there lived all alone, nursing my resentment and schooling myself to misanthropy. My parents died; my two sisters married and removed from the State. I was left solitary, with not a true friend on the earth and a thousand enemies. At first I did not care. I was rich; I had all the comforts I desired; I had the ever-welcome society of my dear books, the true love of my beautiful flowers. I flattered my independence. But in the course of time a feeling of uneasiness and disgust took possession of me: I needed some distraction; I wanted the companionship of at least one faithful heart. I tried travelling, but you know the proverb, *calum non autumum*. I always returned unsatisfied, still seeking for what I could not find, still hankering for a phantom that ever fled before me."

"At length, in the course of my lonely rides through the country, I made the acquaintance of a simple and honorable family near Florissant. They were persons in humble circumstances, but they had a priceless treasure in the person of their only daughter. I was well received there from the first, and from the first, too, I found favor in the eyes of the girl. Our friendship grew; my visits became more frequent; I flattered myself that at last I had discovered the being who was predestined to cause my happiness, as I vowed that I should procure hers if ever she were mine. My intentions were soon understood; my proposals were met half-way. In a word, the girl and I were betrothed. Life seemed dawning with a new light before me. The Sunday of the banns was agreed upon, a dispensation was to have been obtained for the two later publications and we were to be married on the Monday following. The odor of the pine-woods comes to me as fresh and balsamic this evening, Carey, as it did when I rode home on that blessed Friday night, thirty years ago."

"On the Saturday evening I went back to Florissant with as light a heart. I anticipated a delightful interview, talking over those thousand little details, on the eve of marriage, when a youngster finds himself, for probably the first and only time in his life, milliner, house-keeper and general purveyor. As I approached the house, I found it was closed, but on hearing the sound of horse's hoofs, my father-in-law elect came to the door. It needed only a glance to show me that something was wrong with him, but I took heart, saluted and entered. He followed and we both took a seat. I inquired after the family. He replied that his wife and daughter were absent."

"Gone to the neighbors?" I said in a careless way which ill dissembled my anxiety and annoyance.

"No, sir, gone to town," said my host.

"In that case, they will soon be here," I murmured, somewhat reassured.

"No, sir; they are gone for the night," returned the former coldly.

"Why, this is singular," said I.

"It is singular, sir, and painful, but it had to be done and I did it," answered the other.

"Both the manner of the man and the strangeness of his statement roused me completely, and I somewhat peremptorily asked for an explanation. The farmer gave it in a calm, respectful, but firm voice."

"To-day, sir, I had occasion to go to town to market, and while there met, as usual, many of my friends. The marriage of my daughter was the first topic of conversation. A few congratulated me on the event; the majority kept

a mysterious silence; one, an old friend, a man to whom I owe much and who stands deservedly high in the eyes of all, whispered in my ears a few words of caution. I pressed him to be more explicit; he answered that if I had wit enough I ought to understand what he meant, and that if I wanted more particulars or better authority, I should apply to the curate. Indeed, he urged me as a matter of duty to go to the priest before returning home. I was very much put out by all this. I hesitated for a long time. But at length, for the sake of my dear daughter, who is my all on this earth, I decided upon following my friend's advice. I exposed the whole case to the priest, promising to abide by his decision. After a long pause and many evident signs of uneasiness, he finally told me enough to induce me to act decisively. I immediately rode home, informed my wife and daughter of what the priest had said, and—"

"What did the priest say?" I asked gloomily.

"These were his precise words: 'I will say nothing ill of Mr. Hector Paladine and I cannot say anything good.' You understand, sir, that, coming from a priest these words could bear only one interpretation."

"I understand," I muttered.

"Now," continued the farmer, "I told my wife and daughter that the marriage was broken off, and that to avoid the painful scene which would take place if you met them here to-night, they must go and remain a day or two in the city."

"I hardly heard what the man said. I was overwhelmed. It seemed as though the world were crumbling around me and that I was about to be buried under its ruins. But I remained immovable in my seat; no softness stole over me; no tears came to my eyes. I bore the whole weight of this terrible blow without the quiver of a muscle. But still I was annihilated. They say that if you but touch with your finger the rigid form of a person struck dead by lightning, it will crumble into ashes. So, too, a breath might have overthrown me now, a single tender emotion might have dissolved me into a deluge of tears. But I saw nothing before me except the humble and stern father, who indulged in no sentiment, uttered no sympathy for me, and who in his narrow-minded uprightness, sat staring there at only one thing—his duty."

"And your daughter?" I ventured to ask at last.

"My daughter, sir, cried till I thought her heart would break, but she obeyed my command, mounted with her mother and drove to town."

"She left me no message?" I asked again, after another pause.

"Not a word," replied the farmer, without flinching.

"I arose. The change of position broke my paralysis. The vindictive blood rushed through my veins and shot to my brain. Regret was drowned in rage. I could scarcely hold my hat in my hand, so violently did I shake."

"Sir," said I, "who was the particular friend who advised you so urgently to see the priest about this?"

"The farmer had risen, too, and was standing near, in a stolid, deferential attitude, in which there was not the slightest indication of fear. He answered:

"I don't know as I ought to give the name, sir."

"I have the right to know it. Who was he?" I insisted, boisterously.

"I think it best not to tell you," was the calm reply.

"I advanced a step, threateningly, but, by a superhuman effort, restrained myself in time."

"Excuse my violence, sir," I said: "I am hardly master of myself. I would not touch a hair of your head. Besides, I need press you no further, for I know the person in question."

"The farmer looked up, inquiringly."

"It is Robert Florival," I shouted.

"The man dropped his head and said nothing."

"I put on my hat, strode out of the house without looking right or left or saying a word, flung myself into the saddle and rode off. My horse turned to the road leading homeward, but I savagely jerked his head into the opposite direction and made for the deep woods that loomed darkling in the distance. All that night, Carey—and I shall never forget it while I live—I wandered along the narrow, devious, unbroken paths of the forest. I was more dead than alive. The legendary corpse of Duguesclin that was strapped to the saddle had as much volition as I. My limbs were rigid; my heart was drained of its blood. It had all rushed to my brain, and there it bubbled and seethed till my forehead almost burst. Oh! the horrid night. I dare not tell you the demoniacal thoughts, fancies and visions which flitted through my head on that solitary ride. Now and again I had a moment of respite as a puff

of wind stirred the branches above me, and when I heard the rush of the distant river or the cry of some animal that was startled from its lair. But my agony did not cease till I emerged from the wood and found myself on the brink of a highland at the junction of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. The sight of the meeting waters and the white cliffs, under which Alton now stands, resplendent with the bright beams of the rising sun, restored me to consciousness and calm. I dismounted and picked my way down to the bank. Stooping to the water I bathed my head copiously, till I felt thoroughly refreshed. My poor horse had followed me unbidden down the cliff, and he too sought restoration in long draughts. I was fully twenty miles from the city, but I did not hesitate to return at once. I galloped nearly all the way. On passing through the streets I heard the church bells ringing. This caused me such a pang that I gave up my design of stopping to breakfast at the inn, and continued my rapid ride to my farm."

"I never fully recovered from this blow, Carey. It has left its traces on my whole life and character. To it I attribute my execration of the clergy. I have never forgiven that priest, and my hatred has extended to the whole order. I had not believed in or practised conventional worship; I was, however, religious at heart, but the meanness, the cowardice, the injustice of which I became the victim on this occasion, forever blasted all devotional velocities within me. I would have horsewhipped that priest in presence of the whole town, but respect for the girl whom I loved deterred me. Indeed, it is on her account, more, even, than on my own, that this event has left such awful rancor and vengeance in my mind. For, my boy, within six months after the breaking off of the marriage, without my ever seeing her again, or hearing a word from her, she died of grief and despair. In her green grave, on the Florissant hills, she sleeps, the martyr of love and the victim of persecution. I have named my daughter Ory after her."

At these words, M. Paladine interrupted his discourse.

XII.

"GOING, GOING, GONE."

It was a great relief to me when I heard Ory's step in the hall, and immediately after saw her enter with candles and the tea things. Much as M. Paladine's narrative interested me, from the revelations which it made and the clue it was gradually giving me to the dread life mystery which I was so anxious to penetrate, yet his language and whole manner betrayed so much passion still unshed, and so little of the true spirit of Christian forgiveness, that I actually suffered as I listened to him. Ory must have noticed something of this in my countenance, for as she set the table she looked serious and sad. Observing that she placed only two covers, I asked her aloud if she did not intend to join us at supper. She interrupted me both with eye and gesture, and said in a low voice:

"I cannot take anything now. I'll go out on the gallery. When you want anything please call and I will come at once."

She then retired. Her father, occupied with his own thoughts, had not heeded our colloquy, but approached his chair to the table and invited me to do the same. As soon as I had done so, the old gentleman began:

"Eat heartily, Carey. By the time you get through your supper I shall be through with my story."

Though I knew that in his present mood ex-postulation was useless, I still mildly suggested that he should at least take a cup of tea and a bit of toast before he went on.

"Never mind me, Carey," said he, "I will eat all the better when I shall have done speaking, for then my mind will be easier."

"The popular enmity against me after this event, far from lessening, increased immeasurably. Would you believe it? Instead of pitying me in any way, my enemies laid the death of poor Ory to my charge. Your grandfather particularly distinguished himself in this renewed hostility. He publicly stated that he would not be satisfied till I had been driven out of the country. To avoid seeing me pass before his gate, he threw out the park, which still exists, between the front of his house and the road, and lined the fence with trees."

"And yet, on one occasion, I had the chance to do him a service, and promptly offered myself. He was always actively engaged in quarrying rock, and, though he kept an overseer, was fond of superintending the works himself. He came upon the ground, one day, just after the drills in an immense ledge had been charged and the fuses lighted. He seems not to have noticed the fact, nor did his men see him approach, as they retreated at proper distances to places of shelter. The consequence was that when the mines exploded he was buried under fragments of rock. His negroes, as is generally the case with them on such occasions, instead of rushing to the assistance of their master, ran up toward the house, uttering loud lamentations and making frantic gestures. I happened to be passing by at the time. Suspecting a catastrophe, I leaped from my horse and hurried down to the quarry. I there saw your grandfather trying to raise his head and chest from the mass of stone piled around and upon him. He had partially succeeded, but I noticed at a glance that he was held pinned to the earth by a huge block which rested on his thighs and

legs. I stooped to extricate him. As soon as he saw me, his pale face turned almost black, and he motioned to me to stand off. As I persisted in my good work, he cried in a faint voice: 'Begone from here, I tell you.' 'Let me remove this stone, and then I will go at once,' I replied, full of pity for the perversity of the man. But he shouted again, now louder and more angrily than before: 'Let me alone. I would rather die than have my life at your hands!' I stood off in blank astonishment. Fortunately, just then two of his negroes had returned, and were gazing at us from the top of the quarry. I cried to them to run down at once, and save their master. I then walked a little out of the way till I saw them push off the stone, and take up your grandfather, who, besides many internal and external bruises, had a compound fracture of the right leg. He was confined to the house for nearly a year."

"You can imagine, my young friend, how terribly I was impressed by this event. I had never sought a reconciliation with Florival, or indeed with any of my enemies, but from this time I became convinced that even a truce to our hostility was for ever impossible. New fuel was now added to my flame of vengeance, and in the next few years the least provocation would have been jubilantly seized by me to take my enemy's life."

"The day of revenge came at length, though not such as I expected. I thank heaven now that it was a bloodless retribution."

"It is exactly twenty years ago this July that your grandfather died. His death was awfully sudden. It startled everybody. He had barely time to communicate his last wishes to his family and the clergyman. I was told that he had forgiven all his enemies. But his eldest son—your Uncle James, who died a year after—seemed to have inherited his father's antipathies, at least against me. He invited the whole Creole community to the funeral—and it was a grand funeral. I alone was not invited. Soon after, I had another proof of his ill-will."

"To everybody's surprise, your grandfather's estate was found hopelessly involved and it had to be sold. I was the nearest neighbour, having gradually extended my farm by buying up all the land between the Florival grounds and mine. At the time that the sale was announced, I had no intention of appearing in the market, but it came to my ears that your Uncle James meant to force me from it, even if I appeared as a purchaser. He asserted that some time before his death, his father, on revealing to him his bankruptcy, had expressed his fear that I would take a malicious joy in inheriting his homestead, and that to prevent such a disgrace, he should have his friends and relatives club together so as to outbid me to the bitter end. When I heard of this, I at once determined to buy the property. This was to be my revenge. Even if I lost me my whole fortune, even if I had to pay ten times its value, I resolved that the estate should be mine."

"The day of sale came at length. There was an immense crowd. I was one of the last to make my appearance, and when I dismounted I can ominous hum and stir greeted me. I took my stand quietly on the outer edge of the great circle. Your Uncle James and others of the family stood inside the ring, directly under the shelter of a description of the property was given, the terms of the sale were announced, and the bidding commenced. At first the competition was very languid. A few timid thousands were offered. The auctioneer kept bobbing his head and rolling his eyes in every direction, and saying the provoking ritornel, 'going, going.' At length I cried out in a loud voice:

"Ten thousand dollars!"

"It was as if a bomb had burst in that vast crowd. There were murmurs and laughter; hundreds of eyes turned round to look at me. Your Uncle James, seeing that now the battle had begun, went about bustling among his friends, laying his hand on their shoulders, whispering in their ears, nodding his head."

"The auctioneer gave me a graceful 'Thank you, sir,' and repeated in a vibrating, triumphant tone:

"Ten thousand dollars!"

"His voice was immediately covered by another bid, then another and another and another. It was like the crackling of a bunch of boy's petards, or a rolling fire over a soldier's grave. The crowd got excited; it swayed to and fro. There were significant winks, shrugs, nudges and nods. The populace always enjoys a wicked and perilous game. I remained in my original position, quite cool, though serious and terribly determined."

"At length the figure rose to forty thousand dollars. It was my bid. The auctioneer rolled it over and over with that sardonic grin peculiar to auctioneers when they are toying with high stakes. No one seemed disposed to break in on the next decade of thousands. Then the auctioneer began see-sawing with his arm, reducing the motion every time with 'I'm only offered' and 'going, going,' till the movement dwindled down to the wrist and hand, preparatory to the last stroke which is figuratively called the stroke of the hammer. He had opened his mouth to pronounce the fatal word 'gone,' when your Uncle James, in a fit of despair, cried out:

"Stop the sale! I withdraw the property!"

"A loud cheer greeted this declaration. The auctioneer bowed blandly and said with a smile:

"You forget, sir, that this is a sheriff's sale, and only the law can stop it. Besides, bona fide bids have been given and the property is bound to go to the highest and last call."