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MY CREOLES:

A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

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Book V.
BEGINNING LIFE.

AN UNEXPECTED LETTER-CARRIER.

I never made the smallest journey without profiting by it in some way or other. I presume this is also the experience of most men. We all occupy a determined position in God's universe, but it is exceedingly limited, for the slightest displacement puts us in presence of something new.

The steamboat was crowded; I felt in no mood, however, to make acquaintances. I should have remained all alone in my state-room had it not been for the uproar of voices in the cabin. I sought the fore-castle but that was invaded by troops of smokers, mostly farmers and drovers. As a last refuge, I scaled the hurricane deck, where there were only two or three persons. I stood a moment, examining the fair landscape through which we were passing, then putting my arms behind my back, I walked for a long time along the outer guards. At length my attention was drawn to a singular figure, leaning against the pilot-house and engaged in whittling. At every turn of my promenade, as I went by, I noticed one or more of its peculiar traits. The countenance was very forbidding; the eyes were cold, grey, deep-set; the abdomen protruded; the legs small and one of the feet was deformed. The man wore a white wide-awake; his neck-tie was a voluminous blue satin, looped in a sailor's knot; his shirt-front was of fine linen, but soiled; he displayed a heavy gold watch, chain and seals; his clothes were of costly material, but ill-fitting; his trousers were baggy about the knees and the pockets yawned flappingly from frequent in-thrustings of the hands. The finger-nails were pared close and locked dirty. Gradually Dada's vivid picture of the negro-trader presented itself to my imagination, and after carefully comparing all its features with the figure which I had before me—a task I could accomplish at my leisure, as the stranger never once looked up at me—I came to the conclusion that they were identical. Being once satisfied of this, my curiosity impelled me to accost the man. This I did without any ceremony, trusting to the privilege generally accorded to travellers, and not caring particularly whether the fellow resented the familiarity or not.

"You are Mr. Hobbes, if I am not mistaken?" I said, as he moved a step or two from the pilot-house, out of a pool of tobacco-spittle which he had made around him.

He looked at me quickly and keenly, then deliberately stooped to pick up a slip of his shavings, which he put into his mouth.

"Yes, that's my name," he replied, eyeing me again.

"I never saw you myself before that I know of, but I was pretty sure of your name from a description I had of you some time ago."

The man looked at me from head to foot, with a pretty sour face. He was probably taking the measure of my impudence.

"Description of me? What do you mean?" he asked.

"Why—you are a negro-trader, are you not, Mr. Hobbes?"

Ten years later I should have been knocked down for asking such a question to any man in Missouri State. My present interlocutor never moved a muscle, but answered snappishly:

"I am that. Any objections to the trade?"
"None in the least," I replied, laughing.
"This is a free country, you know"—emphasizing the brutal play on the word—"and every man can do as he likes. But my description of you comes from a person who was more or less affected by your trade."

"Some nigger or other, I guess!" he remarked, more quietly and with some good humor.

"Yes, a negro. Do you remember buying a black boy by the name of Gaston some months ago?"

"Oh, I never remember niggers' names. Most of them are so damnably outlandish. When I buy niggers, it's always in lots, and I number 'em one, two, three. I sell 'em the same way. Keep no other record."

"But don't you recollect having bought a young negro from a certain Mr. Pauley of St. Louis?"

"Pauley? Pahaw, so many of these cattle pass through my hands, that I can't even keep run of their owners. Do you know whether it was a cash transaction?"

"Yes; you paid eight hundred dollars down."

"Then that accounts for it. Let me see. Eight hundred dollars, you say? Was he a likely nigger?"

"He was a strong, healthy, industrious boy."

"That must have been a bargain. Eight hundred dollars, in the present inflated condition of the nigger market, is not much of a price for a No. 1 boy."

I expressed my disappointment, and fully explained to Hobbes how fully I was interested in Gaston's fate. The fellow betrayed no emotion, either of sympathy or disdain, but when I concluded said, in an easy, business-like way:

"Wal, seeing as how you're so anxious about the imp, perhaps I might help you to find out something about him yet. When did you say I bought him?"

"In June last."

"Ah! in June last? Wal, this has been a big season with me. I've done more trade than in any of the five years before. I've had four lots this summer—one in April, one in June, one in August and one in October. I'm just going up to ship my last lot which is all ready for me in the pens. Your nigger boy was in the June lot. I can tell you where that went to, the hull of it. It was bought to the order of a big planter near Orleans, named Burpee. He gave me a fat commission on the consignment. My other cargoes were for Bayou Sara, Pointe Coupee, Baton Rouge and Red River, and they were all specs of my own."

Happy at having found this clue, I resolved to follow it up.

"Mr. Hobbes," said I, more politely now, "do you believe Mr. Burpee would allow Gaston to get a letter from me?"

"I don't know," he replied, with a rascally look of mistrust. "Planters don't like dealings of folks up North with their hands."

"But the letter will be strictly on family matters and for further precaution I could leave it unsealed."

"Yes, you'd better do that, for Burpee would be sure to open it if it wasn't."

The negro-trader rolled his quill in his cheek for several minutes, apparently lost in reflection. At length, he said:

"You are very anxious to send that letter?"

"I am very anxious, sir."

"Then I'll tell you what I can do for you. I'm going to winter in Orleans city myself and will have to see Burpee on business very often. If you like, I'll take charge of your letter and put in a word for you with Burpee."

I readily accepted the man's offer and inquired when he intended leaving for the South.

"To-morrow morning early. I'll pack my niggers in the boat to-night, and when that's done, we'll steam off at once."

As I would not have a chance to see Hobbes again after landing in St. Louis, I resolved on writing the letter immediately, and repaired to my state-room for the purpose.

What I wrote to Gaston was very simple. I spoke to him of his mother, of Dada, of Toinette. I told him who I was, and assured him of my full forgiveness. I exhorted him to be good, honest and obedient. I encouraged him to keep cheerful, and always hope for the best.

Of course I could not be more explicit. I could indulge in no open promises. I could not expose the plans I contemplated for his future liberation. I only trusted that he would understand my last sentence as I meant it. If the poor fellow regretted the home of his childhood, his relatives, and especially his sweetheart, he would see in the words the covert pledge of ultimate redemption.

VII.

A NOVEL VIEW OF ABOLITION.

I handed the letter to Hobbes with my sincere thanks. I found him more disposed to talk now, and we fell into conversation like old acquaintances. Though in my heart I regarded him as little less than a monster, I chose just then to look upon him merely as a social curiosity, and to draw him out, if possible.

"With regard to this slave trade, Mr. Hobbes," I asked, "are there not negroes enough in the South already, without your having to import them from the West?"

"No, they haven't half enough down there. Though the slave trade from the African coast is in full blast, spite of Yankee and British cruisers, the planters want more niggers yet. That's why they come up West. The more the sugar and the cotton business increases the more hands will be wanted. I calculate that for the next ten years the trade in niggers from the West will be a roaring good trade, and I mean to stick to it. There's plenty of money to be made if you know how to go about it. In that time Missouri, maybe Kentucky and even Tennessee, will be rid of their niggers. We'll have all of them cooped up in the extreme South. When that happens, then will be the chance of the North to have revenge on the South by emancipating the hull shoot of them."

"What! What is that?" I exclaimed, not sure whether I had understood the fellow.

"Why, yes," he continued, "slavery has got to be abolished some day, and the best time to abolish it will be when the North and Border States sell all their niggers to the South and get paid for them. That will be the way to make the South atone for the peculiar institution."

"You are an Abolitionist then, Mr. Hobbes," I said, bursting out into peals of laughter at the novelty of his expedient.

"Of course I am, sir. I'll let you know that I came from Stockbridge, Mass., the Banner State of this Union."

"And your way of abolishing slavery is by buying negroes here and selling them down South?"

"Jest so. Business is business, sir. I came out West imbued with abolition principles and the determination to make money. I looked around awhile; travelled about some, till I hit upon this negro-trading, which I found a first-rate paying business. I took it up at once, enlarged it, conducted it in a manner peculiar to myself and now, sir, I am proud to stand as the biggest nigger-trader in the Mississippi Valley."

"I make no doubt," I said, "that yours is a lucrative trade, but don't you think all this buying and selling is rather hard on the negroes themselves?"

"Oh! if you come to that, that's their look out and not ours. Slaves in Missouri or slaves in Louisiana. What's the difference! It is always slavery. The only thing is that by transferring them from one to the other we fill our pockets with money," said the fellow with a devilish leer.

"But, Mr. Hobbes, slavery is milder in Missouri than it is in Louisiana."

"Maybe it is some, but the prospect of emancipation is further off."

I confess I did not understand this distinction then, nor have I since, when I heard it from the lips of men to whom emancipation was only a political weapon and not a measure of social regeneration.

I might have contented myself with this specimen of my companion's original views, but I thought the opportunity an excellent one to obtain from one who had such multifarious and exceptional relations with negroes his opinion on the African character. I therefore put him a question to that effect. The answer was promptly and emphatically given:

"Niggers have no souls. Or if they have it is the soul of the fallen spirits. They may have feeling, but not sentiment. They have only a few ideas, and those of the vilest kind. They have no affinity with the white race. I don't see in what possible circumstances a white man can love a nigger. They do not belong to the same tree. Niggers are animals. I never scrupled to treat them as such. I have flogged them. I have chained them down hand and foot. I have put them to the torture. When they rebelled I have shot them dead. They were made for work, and nothing else. Hard work, at that. Men, women and children. They can learn nothing. They understand no language but threats and curses; they obey no guide but the whip."

The precision, the subtlety of this analysis, revolting as it was, surprised me as coming from such a coarse creature as Hobbes, but I have since discovered that it is one of the curiosities of human nature to present rare bits of philosophy associated with bad grammar and the lowest forms of slang.

After a moment's pause, I said:

"If such is your estimate of negroes, Mr. Hobbes, why do you want to emancipate them?"

He laughed a hollow laugh, sucking in his breath.

"Only to break up a monopoly and give a certain set of persons a chance of rolling up the whites of their eyes and having something to thank the Lord about. If they don't have that soon they will be awfully in want of subjects for pulpit prayer. I wish niggers to become public property, not to remain the exclusive property of a few hundred planters. Then we can all handle them as we like. They will not be the less niggers. They will not be the less slaves, but only under another name. Change the name. That's about all that most Abolitionists want. Then they, too, can have a finger in the pie. Don't you see?"

"But can't you make men of these negroes?" I asked.

"No. They are only mandrakes."

"Nor Christians?"

"No. Nothing above Voodoo."

"Ah! Voodooism. Do you believe in that, Mr. Hobbes?"

"You better believe I do. That has been my bugbear all along. I had constantly to fight it these five years. Most of the niggers I have shot down in their tracks were Voodoo. Several of them high-priests and queens. Talk of religion. That's a religion for you. They live up to it. They die for it. The horrors that they commit at their meetings would make your hair stand on end. The filth they swallow on such occasions is fit only for swine. I tell you what, young man, people up North think they know all about nigger nature, but they don't. Even Southern people don't know it. A man must have lived with them, mixed up with them as I have done for the last five years, to know them right. And what I know of them would not be believed if I told it all publicly."

"If things are so, would it not be a good ridance to transport them all back to Africa?"

"No; they are needed in the South. No others can stand the hot sun in the season of cotton-picking."

"But what if machinery were introduced, as it will some day, in the Southern harvest fields?"

"Even then niggers will be wanted. But woe to them if ever they are thrown out of work. They will then eat themselves out. That is, their own vices will eat them out. Work and hard work is the only thing that can keep the nigger out of vice. Let him be idle, let him be master of his time and he will ruin himself by self-indulgence."

Our conversation was cut short by the steamer coming in sight of the city, when all the passengers hurried to their state-rooms to make preparations for landing.

"I'll bet I have converted you to abolition," said Hobbes, laughing, on leaving me.

"I am an emancipationist already, and need no converting. But there is one thing you could not convert me to."

"What is that?"

"Negro-trading."

"Oh, you are one of the sentimental Abolitionists, I see. Wal, we won't quarrel now at parting, and I'll be sure to hand your letter to Burpee."

VIII.

EXCELSIOR.

We reached the city a few hours before sunset. I drove up at once to my mamma's house, where I was warmly received. After the first congratulations, my most pressing inquiry was after news from The Quarries. Mamma informed me that, from what she knew, everything was going on well there. Ory had called to see her several times, and she always appeared in her usual spirits, though it was evident that she felt my absence very much. When I mentioned M. Paladine's letter, my mother manifested much surprise.

"If anything has happened at The Quarries," she said, "I have not been told of it, and it must be of late occurrence, for Ory was here with Mimi only a week ago to-day, and I remember she was very cheerful at the prospect of your speedy return."

This intelligence increased my suspense and anxiety.

After dressing, I ran down to my office. Before I left, however, mamma asked me at what hour she should expect me for tea. I answered that I would be busy until nightfall and after that must go down to The Quarries.

"Very well, my son," she said. "I will sit up till you return, for I, too, am anxious about poor Ory."

I put my office through a rapid dusting, tore the cobwebs from the walls, opened the windows for fresh air and in a few touches gave my desk and table a business look. While thus employed, two or three persons who seemed to have been lying in wait for my return, came in for consultation. It was too late to attend to their cases then, so I put them off till the next morning at nine o'clock. My next duty was to go down to the Marigny Rooms on a brief visit of thanks to my patrons. There I found Uncle Pascal, for whom I had drawn a special chart of the lots just surveyed. The old man was highly gratified at the present, examined it critically, pronounced favourably on its neat workmanship, and promised me to have it suitably framed for his library.

"I'll remember this little attention, Carey," he said. "It will do you no harm to have thought of the old man. You'll not lack work this winter, as I see persons are inquiring for you every day. Your superiors, too, are much pleased with your ability, industry and general conduct. Martin was here yesterday expressly to thank Marigny for having recommended you to a place on his staff. So you will always be sure of employment there also. But I, too, have a particular destination for you. Our company intends to begin operations without delay. They will need a civil engineer to conduct all their works. I want you to be that engineer. There will be roads and tramways to build, machinery to set up, normal measurements to make, shafts to sink, dams and viaducts to construct. Martin assures me, through the reports of his deputy, that you are well up in mathematics, and as all these works will have to be erected and conducted on the most approved scientific principles, I want you to undertake them. You will have a couple of months before you, from this to the end of January, during which you can study out these various problems and make yourself generally at home in practical mechanics. You will have able assistants. The chief thing for you is to get the head-place, and I know you can hold it. This will be the making of you. Besides furnishing a handsome salary, it will give you a name and open the way to still higher callings. What do you say, Carey?"

Naturally I should have recoiled from such a task, for which I knew that I was not then competent. But this evening my spirits were strung, my imagination was excited. The approval of my superiors made me yield to the enticement of Uncle Pascal's splendid offer. A vague ambition seized me, and I felt that I ought to clutch, at all hazards, the bright destinies which fortune set before my eyes. Then, too, I had the secret confidence that by hard study I could fit myself for the new duties which were thus thrust upon me.

I therefore thanked Uncle Pascal with effusion, assuring him that I would do my best to fulfil the flattering expectations he had formed of me.