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# MY CREOLES:

## A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

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### Introlit.

#### I.

#### ON FOOT.

It was the last day of June when I set out on my yearly excursion to Valmont. I went on foot, the distance from St. Louis being nine miles. My luggage was to come after me, in charge of Josh, our negro coachman.

This was the fourth year that I went to Valmont to spend my long vacation. It was barely daylight when I started out, and the sunrise overtook me as I reached the outskirts of the city, clearing the last houses and getting a glimpse of the level fields. It was a glorious apparition. I took off my cap and adored the God.

Thenceforward I felt not the fatigues of the way. Gazing right and left, stopping at intervals, I enjoyed the varied scene as I should have done the successive cartoons of a panorama. Here was a cottage embowered in trees or festooned with vines; there a herd of red and white cows, knee-deep in the grass; further, a clump of woods vocal with birds; further still, stretches of prairie, rolling away to the infinite.

I had no set phrases to express my admiration; no scraps of poetry to tack on to the landscape, as motes in a theatre. I was still too young to be conventional. I saw and wondered and enjoyed. I neither spoke to myself nor shouted nor tossed my arms aloft. I walked on, perfectly happy. I was not even conscious of all my happiness at the time. It is only now, after many years, that I recall and understand it.

I kept no account of time. When one has the whole world before him and a long summer day at his disposal, what cares he for the hours? It was nine o'clock, therefore, and the sun poured down its hot rays, when I came up to Rock Bridge House without knowing it. I sat down on its front gallery to rest and watch the going and coming of customers. There were drovers with their long whips, broad-brimmed hats, check shirts and top-boots of raw leather. There were farmers with clean shaven faces, honest eyes, and clad from head to foot in cool, unbleached linen. They bustled in and out of the house, while their wives and daughters, seated under immense cotton umbrellas, in their wagons, kept patient watch over the hampers and baskets which they were carrying to market. There were three or four young swells from the neighbouring villas who spent most of their time at the inn, playing dominoes, drinking iced liquors and ogling the pretty women who passed.

Everybody seemed to know Rock Bridge House, and make it a point to stop there. The lazy oxen drawing immense hay loads, the capricious mules pulling ponderous wains, the frisky horses attached to light vehicles, all looked up on hearing the old familiar yell, and turned in from the road without waiting for the word of the driver.

And beyond all this noise and confusion, the fair fields stretched far away, softly resplendent in the sheen of the morning sun; a great calm woods on the right and left waved a silent invitation to their cool recesses, and the far hills stood like phantom sentinels watching off all hostile incursions from the peaceful valley.

I sat for a long time admiring the scene of quietude and beauty, till the hot rays crept from the ground to the steps, and from the steps to the gallery itself. The copious draught which I had taken at the well still produced a sensation of freshness, and, as the heat had not yet reached its highest point, I judged it prudent to continue my solitary tramp.

#### II.

#### IN THE HOLLOW.

From Rock Bridge House there was a steep hill leading to a ravine, which crossed the main road at an oblique angle. This ravine was a wild bit of scenery—rocky, overgrown with scrub oaks and hardy brambles, and in the spring flooded by torrents from the distant heights. At present it was quite dry, and its dark, green sides were besprinkled with dust. The heat in that hollow was intense.

When I reached the bottom of it my attention was drawn to the figure of a man seated on a large stone a few steps from the carriage-road. His head was bent on his knees and his arms were huddled under his chest. He presented the appearance of a scraggy bundle.

I should probably not have noticed him, but for the fiery heat that was then plunging into the gorge. If the man was sleeping, as I thought he was, and remained in his present position another half hour, he would inevitably be sun-struck.

I went up to him and pulled him by the sleeve. He did not move. I then took time to examine him more minutely and had no difficulty in making him out to be a soldier. The

unsightly shako, then worn in the American army, lay beside him, but the high, stiff sides were sadly bumped, the black gloss was effaced, and the white ball or tuft on the front top was nearly picked off. His haversack was on the ground, too, but it was battered and so flattened as to be apparently empty. There was no musket, no bayonet, no side-arm of any sort, no ammunition-box. The brass plates on the knapsack and above the brim of the shako, indicating the number of the regiment, were gone. On the latter, however, there was the reminiscence of a silver eagle in the shape of two claws clenching a bundle of arrows. The rest of the bird of freedom had flown.

The man himself was wretchedly dressed. He had on a greyish coat, ripped nearly the whole length of the back and revealing a problematic shirt. This last garment looked like faded calico. Its colour was nondescript. The trousers had been blue, but they were brownish now, and the regulation side-stripe was indistinct. The shoes were immense brogans, hardened and twisted like bark and slit in different directions.

The man remained immovable during this inspection. I did not hear him breathe. My imagination then began to work a little, and I made a rush upon him, shaking him more violently than before. The broad back gave a nervous shrug, the arms unfolded and stretched out slowly, and the sleeper raised his head. His eyes, as they encountered the glare of the sun, opened and closed several times, and the expression of the face was one of bewilderment. Otherwise it was a noble face—long, white, though beaten by the weather, and young. The eyes were a light blue, very tender. About his head a striped cotton handkerchief was wound in the shape of a turban.

At first the man seemed to take no notice of me. He was yet floating in the vagueness of hot dreams. He said in a voice that was half a mutter, half a growl,

"I was sleeping, I believe. Who woke me?"

"I did."

"What made you do it? Was I in your way any?"

There was less harshness in his voice as he said this; only a little reproach.

"The sun was beating on your head," I answered. "I feared a rush of blood."

The man passed his hand over the crown of his head, and said:

"Yes, it is very hot."

He then rose, stretched out his arms and whole body, now to the right, now to the left, yawned about two or three times, drew himself up to his full height and tightened the belt about his waist. Even in his rags, he looked every inch a soldier.

I made bold to address him again, inquiring whence he came and whither he was going.

"I come from Santa Fe," said he, resuming his seat on the stone, "and I am going to St. Louis, if I can ever get there after these weeks and weeks of weary travel."

"You have not come from Santa Fe on foot?" said I.

"On foot, nearly every mile of the way. On the plains there was no one to give me a lift, and in the settlements I was shunned where I was not ill-treated."

"Ill-treated?" I exclaimed; "who would ill-treat any of our soldiers?"

"In places I was driven from door to door; I was hoisted out of some villages; I was refused a night's lodging in many a house."

"Why, how could that be?"

"I was looked upon by some as a bush-whacker; by others as a deserter."

He then drew from his pocket an old wallet of green leather, which he opened with great care. There were several papers in it of different colors—white, blue, yellow and pink. Some of these were probably letters from friends—perhaps love notes. There were two or three small parcels done up with black ribbon—tokens and mementoes of the dead. Finally, after some search, he produced an oblong paper, worn and soiled with much fingering. It had the unmistakable look of an official document. Scattering the leaves a little, he handed it to me with an earnest glance.

It was his military discharge. It recited in full the services which the bearer had rendered his country. He was a Missourian—born near Carondelet, or, as it was then called, Vide Poche. He had enlisted in the first regiment of his native State for service in Mexico. His name was Gustave Dablon. He was one of the three thousand Missourians who had joined Gen. Kearney's United States dragoons at Fort Leavenworth in June, 1846, and set out for the conquest of New Mexico. He was at Santa Fe in August. In the autumn he formed part of Col. Doniphan's expedition against the Navajos. In December he returned to Santa Fe and joined the little army of occupation. It was thus that he shared in all the perils of that eventful winter, when a terrible revolution broke out, Gov. Bent was cruelly murdered, and every American

resident was in danger of his life. He took part in the bloody battle of January 21, 1847. He was with Burgwin at the storming of the Embudo Pass on the 29th of the same month. He assisted at the attack on Pueblo de Taos, an admirably fortified town, where the engagement lasted from nine in the morning till night. On the next day, the 5th of February, he was wounded in one of the streets of the town, just before the capitulation was determined upon. On the return march to Santa Fe, he had been detached with some others to scout after Indians, who hung upon the flanks of the army. He was captured by these, badly wounded in his efforts to escape, and finally scalped and left for dead on the prairie. This misfortune incapacitating him for future service, he was furloughed or discharged, as the event might prove, and recommended to the War Department with the highest eulogy on his fidelity, gallantry and uniform good conduct in the service. The paper was signed by Sterling Price, Colonel Commanding the Division of New Mexico, Santa Fe, April 12, 1847.

I shall ever remember how I was moved by the sight and handling of that document. The men who appeared so far away doing great things were now with me. Here was a man who had been in the romantic battles which the people talked so much about. He had fought side by side with Doniphan, who seemed to me a legendary hero. This was the handwriting of Sterling Price, the pride of all Missourians.

I folded the paper reverently and returned it to the soldier with every mark of respect. I was awed at his appearance and resolved to do my best to help him. The distance to the city was still seven full miles; the day was going to be extremely hot; the man was weak and evidently footsore. I must find some means of having him transported and properly protected during the rest of his journey.

Picking up his shako, knapsack and stick, I handed him these articles and pointed to the hill.

"Have you had breakfast?" said I.

He nodded affirmatively.

I then led the way up the ascent back to Rock Bridge House. He followed limping and dragging himself painfully. When I got in sight of the inn, I saw a farm boy making ready to mount his spring-wagon. After a brief parley I confided my charge to the youth, with instructions to take good care of him until he was safely deposited at the military office on Vine street. The soldier thanked me, making the military salute and muttering something which I did not catch. After the wagon had started he turned and waved his hand to me. I noticed that tears were in his eyes.

#### III.

#### THE BIG FORK.

I resumed my journey. Within a quarter of an hour I had reached the Forks. These were two creeks, one considerably larger than the other, which twisted about through the adjacent country and crossed the high road, along which I was travelling, at a very picturesque spot. There was the Big Fork and the Little Fork. The former, torrential at certain seasons, was spanned by a rough rustic bridge. This bridge was one of my landmarks. When I saw it I knew that my journey was drawing to a close. A turn in the road a little further on, a little piece of wood to traverse, and Valmont burst into view.

When I reached the bridge this morning, I stopped and leaned over the parapet. It was in the shadow of squat blackjacks, and I felt the cool breeze in my hair. I gazed into the water beneath. I saw the white flat stones over which I had often passed barefoot and with trousers rolled up to the knee; the little circular inlets where the cattle came down to drink and dream for hours; splinters of log green with mould; tufts of moss undulating with the current; patches of cress over which the ladybird fluttered. And while I gazed, I heard fainter and still fainter the buzz of noonday insects, the shivering of the tree tops and the low sing-song of the water. The bridge, the hillside, the white road, the trees, the creek seemed to be turning round and round in a circle of vapour. I was completely mastered by the influence of the time and place, and instead of continuing on my journey, remained bent over the parapet in a state of delicious somnolence.

Presently the water under me brightened like a silver mirror, and I thought I saw outlined in it the features of a human face—broad forehead, salient cheeks, amorous lips, rounded chin. The eyes were closed, and the face seemed to mount and mount buoyed by the water up to me. I watched it with such fascination that I stirred not a line from my position. When it came within reach of my hand and I was about stretching out my arm to touch it, the lips parted with a ravishing smile and the eyes opened. Those eyes! The magical pictures that we read of, so full of inexplicable surprises, could not have more effect than this, and the eyes were such as I had never seen before. I looked again. Come, what was this? Yes, once before, for one second, I had seen those eyes and those eyes had flashed on me. It was on Commencement Day, just a se'n-night ago, as I was coming down the platform with the silver medal of my class on my breast. I trampled the world under my feet that day. I walked in air. I heard nothing save the indistinct hum of friendly applause; I saw nothing save the indistinct mass of the multitude. I should probably have remembered

naught of the scene beyond my own triumph, had I not been suddenly restored to consciousness by the sight of two glorious brown eyes that gazed full upon me as I hurried by to regain my seat. I turned to meet them again, but they were gone; the head was probably averted and the divine glance directed elsewhere. After the exercises I resumed my search, but in vain.

Here, however, were those eyes once more, mirrored in the water. I looked at them, and they seemed to draw me down into their depths. I was sure of them now. I would remember them forever; I would recognize them anywhere.

Not many minutes elapsed in this contemplation. All at once the face of the water began to wrinkle, the beautiful countenance gradually dissolved, now one feature, then another mingling with the liquid till there remained only the eyes. A moment later, they too sank out of my sight. Simultaneously I heard a rumble on the bridge; the wooden frame shook, and turning rapidly I saw a carriage clear the further end, rolling at great speed. A young girl on the back seat turned round and waved her handkerchief to me.

I recognized Mimi.

#### IV.

#### VALMONT.

In less than ten minutes I am at the foot of the well-known slope. There is the hospitable roof, there is the broad gallery, there are the secular trees. I hear the noise of youthful voices, and a shout of welcome comes musically to my ears. They have seen me.

"Yes, here he is! here he is!" resounds on all sides.

I have scarcely reached the front of the house when I am surrounded by a bevy of children, girls and boys—some older, some younger than myself—first cousins, second cousins, third cousins, neighbours, for Valmont was the paradise of children during the summer vacation. I am received with all honors, being the big boy from town, the college boy, and the predestinated master of the revels.

Aunt Aurora comes to the head of the steps leading to the front gallery and there receives me in her own tender way. She is our favorite—Aunt Aurora—the favorite among so many aunts and grandaunts of an unusually large family. She loved all children, but I always thought she had a special fondness for me, probably because my poor mother had been her pet before me, and chiefly because I was an orphan and alone in the world.

"Here is my boy," she said, folding me in her arms and kissing me on both cheeks. "Come to Valmont to spend another summer with us, eh? But how tired we look; how dusty we are. Rest a little while, while I prepare a nice supper for you."

Dear old aunt! How she understood children. She would always have them eating. It was her first offer when they came; the last when they went away. She spent a large part of her time in preparing all manner of dainties for them, and she was a great cook. She herself would set the table; she waited on us, filled our plates, replenished our glasses, urged us by words and gesture to eat and drink.

After leaving Aunt Aurora, my first duty was to pay my respects to Uncle Louis. He was seated in his rush-bottomed easy chair, on the back gallery, his two hands resting on the head of his hickory stick. He had heard my voice and was waiting for me.

"Good day, Uncle Louis. Here I am again," said I, taking off my cap.

"Good day, Carey. Good day, my boy," was the old gentleman's reply, as he extended his large hand and squeezed mine in his hearty embrace.

"Just in, eh? What is the news?"

I understood that reminder. I fumbled in my breast pocket and drew forth the morning papers, which I handed him. This was a little attention which we never forgot whenever any of us went to Valmont. Uncle Louis was a great reader. When he sat in his arm-chair on the gallery, with his horn-rimmed spectacles on, his corn-cob pipe balanced between the first and second fingers of his right hand, the paper in his left hand, his big stick lying aslant between his knees and his favorite dog stretched lazily at his feet, he looked an ideal picture of happy old age which I can never recall without emotion.

Having thus delivered my passports, and feeling secure of the favor of my uncle, I set out to roam over the house. It had not altered a bit during the year. Every room was as I had left it; not a single piece of furniture had changed place. The same curtains hung around the bedsteads, and at the windows, clean, fresh, stiffly ironed. On the mantelpiece over the fire-place in the large sitting-room—used also as a dining-room—there was the row of nick-nacks which I had seen there from my infancy. First, a plaster cat, painted blue and green, with her nose knocked off and a hole behind her ear. The hole was a convenient receptacle for matches. Also, two apples of some conglomerate or other, exquisite imitations of the fruit. I could not tell how often, in days gone by, I had bitten into those apples, fancying they had been put there expressly for me. Also, a little work-box of stained birch-bark, encrusted with shells. Also a tiny brass cylinder, fretted and punctured and attached to a little wheel which had ceased to turn. This was the "innings" of a music-box long since come to grief. There