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MY CREOLES:

A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

By JOHN LESPERANCE,

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

Book III.

TWO BLACKS DO NOT MAKE ONE WHITE.

VI.

THE LADY IN BLACK.

We went along a by-path so thick-set with tall bushes that we could not be observed. When we reached the front door, Ory said:

"Go in quietly, without ringing. I will be with you in a moment. I must slip up to my room and change this dress, for the sight of blood might give poor papa a shock."

Here was another proof of female forecast. I had forgotten all about the blood-stained gown.

"Very well," I replied, "I will sit down on the step here till you come back."

Ory had scarcely disappeared up a side stair when the door of the hall opened and M. Paladine came forward.

"Ah!" said he, "I thought I had heard voices. How are you, Carey? No worse than this morning, I hope?" And looking about, he added:

"Where is Ory?"

"She has just run up to her room, sir. She will be with us in a few minutes."

"Come then into my study. She will meet us there. It is more comfortable than here."

The old gentleman presented me a large easy-chair. I sank down contentedly into its luxurious depths.

"Will you smoke, Carey?" said M. Paladine.

"Thank you, sir; yes. I have not smoked today."

"Not I."

"You have not been ill, I trust, sir?"

"No, Carey. It is one of the miseries of old men that they must always be brooding over something or other. Since of me, I have been moping all day, and I never even thought of smoking. Here is one of my best boxes. Help yourself, Carey."

After we had lighted, M. Paladine got up and pulled a bell. The door leading to the hall was immediately opened.

"Some refreshments, if you please," said my host.

My back was turned and I did not observe the person to whom he spoke.

"I hope you enjoyed yourselves to-day," said M. Paladine.

"We did, indeed, sir; I think Ory will have no reason to be displeased with her visit."

"Oh! I am sure she was well received. I know the lady to whom I sent her. There is not a nobler woman on this earth. And how did she take the tragic story of last night?"

"I confided all that to Ory, sir. She will give you a full report. I left the two together for an hour or so, and when I returned my mamma was quite calm, and even cheerful."

M. Paladine smoked on in silence, but I saw that his countenance expressed relief and satisfaction.

"And I am glad to be able to add," I continued, "that mamma approves me in wishing to have the whole matter hushed up."

"For your sake, Carey?"

"For the sake of all concerned."

"Ah! I will present her my personal thanks for that. And I must repeat them to you once more."

Observing that the old man's features betokened an anxiety which he was vainly striving to master, I said:

"Perhaps it is best to say no more about it, sir."

"Oh! but I must speak, my young friend. I have thought of nothing else the whole day. You are entitled to an explanation. Nay, more than that. It is necessary that you should know all. It is very painful for me. It is galling. But I will do my duty."

At this point the door from the hall opened and a person entered with a tray. She set it on a little table by our side. At first I did not notice her, my attention being engaged with the words which I had just heard, but as she turned to go, I looked up. The shock of surprise which I experienced was so violent that I dropped my cigar to the floor. It was the lady in black. She was dressed precisely as I had seen her in the cave. The only difference was that she now wore a white apron, and her glossy, raven hair was somewhat more negligently arranged. She was exceedingly pale. Her whole manner was nervous.

I rose and bowed profoundly. She answered with the most graceful and humble courtesy, and, timidly raising her eyes, cast me a sad, imploring glance. She then departed, closing the door after her.

I picked up my cigar, resumed my seat and looked at M. Paladine. He was looking at me.

"If you could get that young woman to tell her story, I would be spared the terrible necessity of speaking. Upon her depends the whole

mystery. But, of course, she cannot tell you, and I must. Ah! here comes Ory."

VII.

TODDY AND CIGARS.

"Good afternoon, papa," she said guiltily, walking up to her father and kissing him fervently on both cheeks. "I didn't come down as soon as I expected, but in Carey's good company you did not find the time long. I am sure. They tell me you have been quite well all day."

"I was a little lonely, my dear, not being used to have you away, but I knew you were in good hands and doing a good work, and that was a great comfort. Sit down, Ory."

"But what have we here?" she said, turning to me with a slight blush: "Carey smoking?"

"The mildest of cigars, Ory."

"Ho! ho! and one of my very best," interposed M. Paladine.

"And lunching on Burgundy and fruit-cake?"

"I have not touched either, as yet."

"Nor must you. Why, papa, if you only knew. For the cigar, let that pass, as it is indeed very mild and fragrant. Like all true Creole girls, Ory enjoyed the balm of good tobacco. But Carey is more fit to be put to bed on toast and tea,—we might, perhaps, allow a drop of Cognac in the tea—than to drink hot wines and eat heavy cake."

"Why, what is the matter with him?" asked M. Paladine.

"Oh! nothing, sir," I replied, laughing. "Ory thinks I got too excited over the splendid gait of your chestnut sorrel."

"Don't he move well for a pony?" said the old man, brightening up.

"That is not it; that is not it at all," broke in the girl, merrily. "The wound in his shoulder has broken out afresh, and is by no means looking well. I bandaged it for him on the road as well as I knew how, but I was very anxious to get home to have it dressed properly."

M. Paladine grew serious.

"Why did you not tell me so at once, my young friend?" said he. "Such things cannot be trifled with. Perhaps the wound is more grievous than we thought it was. Now that Ory has mentioned it, I see you are looking paler than you were."

"Believe me, sir, it is nothing. The wound looked so well this morning that I neglected to bandage it. The jolting of the carriage caused it to gape anew, and blood flowed, but thanks to Ory's skillful dressing, it is now tightly compressed, and I feel no inconvenience from it whatever."

"Please observe, Carey, that I am as much interested in this as you are," said M. Paladine.

"And I, too," murmured Ory sadly.

"Thank you, sir; thank you, Ory. I assure you that if I thought there was the least occasion for it, I should ask nothing better than to be ruled by you in this matter. But I am certain that the wound will give me no further trouble."

M. Paladine looked resigned and did not insist. Not so Ory. She appeared both grieved and anxious.

"Well, at least you will not refuse a light toddy?" she said.

"Not if you brew it," I replied with a smile.

"You will find the cognac and the sugar in the closet there," said M. Paladine.

In a few moments she had prepared the delicious beverage.

"Won't you take a companion tumbler, papa?"

"I don't mind if I do, dear. For Carey's sake, yes. It is only anticipating my night-cap by a few hours, that's all."

Ory sat between us—a little nearer to me, however—while we supped and chatted and smoked.

VIII.

FIFTY YEARS BEFORE.

Chatting is not the proper word. We had some little playful talk at first, it is true, but even that could hardly be called pleasant, because we all felt that it was only the prelude to more serious conversation, which we should have liked to avoid, if it had been possible. But as M. Paladine had decided that it was not possible, he himself, after many pauses and significant hints, brought the interview round to a point from which he could naturally enter upon his explanations.

When Ory perceived her father's design, she arose, as if about to take her leave. But he retained her.

"Stay with us, my daughter. You may hear what I have to say to Carey this evening. It is only the first part of my narrative. The rest I will tell you when Carey will be better than he is at present."

Ory removed her seat to a corner of the room where she was partially concealed by the shadow of the wall. In her new position she no longer faced me, but sat nearly in a line with me. Thus we could both listen to M. Paladine without being distracted by mutual glances. I must say, however, that, with true woman's tact, she had placed her chair a little in the rear of mine, so that she could, if she liked, watch the effect of the revelations upon me.

"You remember, Carey," said my aged friend, "that I once told you The Quarries were formerly the patrimony of your family."

"Yes, sir, I do, perfectly."

"And did you never inquire of your mamma or others how it was that it came into my possession?"

"Never. I was tempted once or twice to speak to my mamma about it, but each time the thought that I might pain her by the question deterred me. As to others, I believe not one of my family suspects that I know even the existence of The Quarries, so absolute is the silence that they have always kept and still keep about it."

"That is singular enough. If you were a morbidly imaginative youth, you might conclude from this silence that there is some awful tragedy, some tale of shame connected with the transfer of this property from yours to me. If, even, you expect any startling revelation in connection with the event, you will find yourself mistaken. It is simply a case of misunderstanding, of blindness, attended with many sorrowful circumstances which a little goodwill on one part and a little forgiveness on the other might have effectually prevented. Of all the original actors in the transaction, I am the only survivor. They died without any open sign of reconciliation on their part or mine. Many even of the second generation have fallen off—though how many I cannot tell, for I have long lost sight of them—and not one of those who still live is disposed to forgive me, unless, as I was delighted to hear to-day, it is your foster-mother. The work of reconciliation is reserved to the third generation."

As he pronounced these last words M. Paladine looked significantly at me and his daughter. I made no reply, but I observed that Ory hung down her head, as if painfully impressed by her father's discourse.

The old gentleman continued, after striking off the ashes of his cigar:

"Your maternal grandfather, Carey, was one of the earliest settlers of Missouri. He came to St. Louis very shortly after Laclede, Liguest and Pierre Chouteau had planted their cabins on the site of the present Old Market. Wonderful men, those ancient pioneers, and your grandfather was a prince among them. A lordly man every way."

"Such a man had not come to the wilds for nothing. He was not merely a *déraché*; he aimed to be a builder up. With him to wish was to do. He was indomitable. He discovered the three quarries from which this property derives its name. The white rock cropping out of the tufted grass tempted him. He opened the seams and the first blocks which he extracted were used to lay the foundation of his house. His keen common sense, which in him amounted to genius, guided him at once to fortune. Others had come to the Far West in search of gold and silver. Some had contented themselves with digging for iron and lead. Some penetrated further up the Missouri to trade in furs with the Indians. He let them go. To him the quarries were both mine and mint. He finished his house, which for years was the palace of the colony. The vast outlying prairie, for half a mile in circumference, was fenced in as his. He furnished rock and stone to the city. He gratuitously contributed the materials for and the erection of the first church and the first hospital in St. Louis."

"At length, when he had fairly won a foremost position, he went down to Kaskaskia, and there married the belle of the village. I perfectly remember his housewarming. I had then just returned from France, and the contrast between what I had seen in Paris and what I beheld here was such that I have never forgotten it. I had come up from New Orleans through the wilderness of the Mississippi in a flat-boat. I landed here in the heart of a mighty continent, amid a straggling population, speaking French, indeed, and preserving all their French characteristics; yet how different from their compatriots on the sunny banks of the Seine! In the long tedious voyage up the solitary river I had found something to feed my fancy—to entertain my taste for the romantic. The wraith of De Soto haunted me all the while. I watched the phantom canoes of La Salle for hours together, till I saw it dissolve in the gold and purple splendors of the setting sun. I counted the camp-fires of Marquette on island, bluff and sandy flat. I revelled in some of those emotions which Chateaubriand found distinctively connected with the Mississippi, and which he could not revive on the banks of the Jordan, the Scamander or the Ilissus. But when I reached the infant town of St. Louis, saw the ruins of its original stockades, the log cabins of its poorer inhabitants, the white-washed houses of its aristocracy, its grassy streets, which were only bride-paths to the river, the silence of the expanses on its outskirts, the awful solitude of the woods and prairies far around wherever the eye could reach, a terrible feeling of loneliness came over me. It was as if I had suddenly dropped down into another world. I felt that the beautiful country from which I

came was now so far that I could never return to it. I could never make my escape through a whole continent of forest, swamp and river. And yet I thought I should die if I remained here. I should be stifled by the contact of the elements that thus hemmed me in. It was in vain that I tried to take comfort from the presence of my father, my mother and my sisters and the pleasure of their company after so long an absence. I had scarcely been here a week when I fell ill from excess of fretting. You are smiling, Carey."

"Pardon me, sir. Your description of St. Louis half a century ago brings me back to a state of things so incredibly different from what we see now that, as you were speaking, I was asking myself how I should have felt in your place, and I laughed to think that I should have been more desperate even than you were."

"I hardly think so. I do not believe that through the force of imagination you could put yourself precisely in my place. It is true that our city to-day bears no trace of what it was fifty years back, but still, as you have been raised here, you have heard from your childhood minute accounts of our ancient days which have habituated you to the facts; besides, you have seen many changes since you were a little boy, and these have given you an idea of the greater changes undergone before you were born. Remember, too, that I was brought up in Louisiana, near New Orleans, which is an older city than ours, and which, through its contact with the outer world as a seaport, had almost entirely lost its character of frontier outpost. St. Louis was, therefore, for me the very antipodes of Paris."

"I wonder how Ory would have felt under the circumstances," I said, looking around at the girl.

She raised her head and answered in a low voice:

"I do not know that I should have thought differently from papa in the same circumstances, but this I know, that having listened to his narrative, word by word, I think I should have come to like the simple, happy life of those good old times."

"As I did, my dear," exclaimed M. Paladine.

IX.

THE APOTHEOSIS OF JEFFERSON.

This little interruption gave M. Paladine occasion to light another cigar. I was induced to do the same by the kind indulgence of Ory who herself presented the box, remarking in her quiet way that a second one leisurely smoked could not harm me much.

"As I did," repeated the old gentleman. "I was about to relate how the change came on when we broke off. A fortnight after my arrival your grandfather, Carey, gave his housewarming to which all our family were invited. 'Le Jeune Parisien,' as I was called, received a special and very gracious invitation. Of course I made it a point to go. I shall not enter into a description of the feast. Suffice it to say that on this first occasion which I had to meet the cream of Missouri society, I was astonished to find an array of beauty, a display of culture and a spirit of union and social amity which I had no idea could exist in so new and isolated a settlement. The host and hostess were the particular objects of my admiration. She was a bright little woman, full of vivacity, yet very modest in word and action; handsome and with only as much timid self-possession as showed that she relied for everything on her husband. He was loud-voiced, off-hand, jovial, with a word and a laugh for everyone. On looking at him you felt that he was master in his own house, and was likely to be master wherever he chose to assert his authority. Nothing could be more charming than the way in which he received me. He expressed his pleasure on making my acquaintance; hoped that the little festival would serve to render St. Louis agreeable to me; trusted that my stay in the colony, with the experiences I had acquired in Europe, would contribute to its social elevation. All this was said naturally, without ceremony or affectation of any kind, and was the more pleasant because I felt it to be sincere."

"From that day my friendship for your grandfather took its origin. He was several years my senior, and his knowledge of real life increased the difference between us still more, but we took to each other as equals. Our friendship ripened into intimacy somewhat later when I acquired a farm a little below his, half way between the city and Vide Poche. I soon lost all my French notions—at least, I understood the advantages of the free, hearty, unconventional life of the New World. I became a farmer in the largest and best sense of the word. My days were spent in the open air, superintending my field work, or laboring in the garden. My mornings and evenings were devoted to my dear books. Although quite a young man still, with all the passions of youth burning at my heart and all the fancies of youth teeming in my brain, I found abundant occupation for my activity and sufficient enjoyment for my desires. One of my favorite recreations was hunting. Every month or so your grandfather and I would camp out for a few days in the woods or on the prairies. There we almost invariably found splendid sport. There, too, I learned to appreciate the best qualities of my friend—his endurance, bravery, foresight, indefatigable energy, good humor and scrupulous honor. Ah! the game