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# MY CREOLES:

A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

By JOHN LESPERANCE,

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

Book IV.

THE DREAD ALTERNATIVE.

VII.

WHAT A SCALPED MAN LOOKS LIKE.

M. Paladine and I went into the garden, while Ory remained in the house. We had gone through two or three alleys and were stopped before a superb lot of tuberose, the merits of which my host was enthusiastically describing, apparently forgetful of all else beside, when my attention was distracted by a light foot-fall on the sand. My heart told me it was Ory, and when I looked up I saw that she was accompanied by an elegantly-dressed young man.

"Ah!" said M. Paladine, turning. "Here is my son."

And forthwith Ory introduced me to her brother.

As our hands joined, we looked at each other very keenly. Young Paladine was the first to speak.

"If I am not mistaken," said he, "I saw Mr. Gilbert yesterday at the boat."

Ory and her father looked surprised.

"Yes," I replied, smiling. "I now recognize you."

I then related to M. Paladine and Ory what had occurred on the levee the day before, and expressed my pleasure on finding that the identity of the stranger and Bonair was now established.

The matter then dropped and we continued our round of the garden. Between occasional scraps of conversation with the new-comer, some listless answers to the botanical observations of the old gentleman and a few delicious whisperings with Ory, I managed to get through the promenade pleasantly enough, though I rejoiced when it was over.

On returning to the study we found a little table spread with glasses, a bottle and a plate of crackers. M. Paladine looked at his watch, and on a sign of approbation from Ory, said:

"It is just a quarter to dinner. The traditional time for a *cerv. d'appetit*."

And saying this, he placed the four wine-glasses in a row, filled them with golden-colored brandy, took a lighted taper from Ory's hand and ignited the liquid. Blue and yellow flames flickered for a moment over the brim of each glass, filling the room with perfume.

"Now, let us drink. We can do so with safe consciences. This is real cognac," exclaimed M. Paladine, raising his glass.

With mutual bows and good wishes we drank to each other. Ory took her glass in hand, clinked with me, but merely put her lips to it and set it down. It was either that the brandy was so good or that my love was heated by it, but I would have given much to sip from her glass where her lips had touched it.

The dinner passed without any notable incident. There was no boisterous enjoyment but I amused myself very much, and I think the others did the same. Although Ory—bless her dear little soul—tried her best to distribute her favors impartially, I yet had the vanity to imagine that she contrived to get more of my company than of her father's or brother's. In consequence of this, M. Paladine and his son had long intervals of conversation together. Often, however, in spite of our occupation, Bonair and I glanced furtively and inquisitorially at each other.

The same thought was doubtless running through our heads—had we not met before, and if so, when and where? On my part there were no salient traces to go by. Bonair's face was an ordinary one, with no striking feature except perhaps the mouth, which was somewhat hard and firm. He had not his father's high forehead, nor his sister's wonderful eyes. In fact he bore no resemblance whatever to either his father or sister. One peculiarity about him, which I was positive I had not seen before in so young a man, was that his temples near the ears had no traces of short, downy hair and that similarly there were no short hairs at the base of his head near the neck. This led me to believe that he wore a wig.

Probably he was equally busy gathering together the threads of his memory in regard to me. Whether he had as much difficulty as I had in finding distinctive traits, I of course do not know, but at any rate it took him till dessert to come to a decision. When at length, however, he did find a clue, he was emphatic in declaring it. The table had been cleared of all except the wine and cake, and M. Paladine was making some remarks to me, while I was equally engaged in cracking pecans for Ory, when suddenly we were startled by Bonair bringing his hand down violently on the table, and like Aquinas at the board of the French King, exclaiming:

"I have found it at last!"

And as he said the words, he looked steadily

at me with a countenance made beautiful by the light of a new and welcome intelligence.

"Excuse me, sir," said he to me with perfect politeness, "but would you mind answering a few questions of mine?"

"I will do so with pleasure," I replied.

"If I ask it is because I believe I am on the track of an agreeable discovery. You are acquainted with the Manchester road, Mr. Gilbert?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"You have travelled it?"

"Often; every summer for years."

"You passed over it in June last year?"

"Yes."

"You know the Rock Bridge House?"

"I do."

"And the hollow just beyond it?"

"Yes."

"Is that spot associated in your memory with any event more or less remarkable?"

"It is, sir; in June of last year I remember meeting there a weary, broken down traveller."

"Whom you roused from his lethargy and caused to be conveyed to the city, thereby, most probably, saving his life."

"Stop!" I exclaimed, rising from my seat and bending over to the table; "you are—no, it cannot be." My memory had a sudden illumination; then as suddenly found itself darkened again.

"Let me see—the man I refer to was dressed in soldier's clothes."

Bonair sat back in his chair and smiled.

"And he had a military pass."

Bonair's smile expanded into a laugh.

"And his name—I remember it distinctly—was—"

"Gustave Dablon!"

I began to understand now; but in my excitement was not entirely convinced.

"The man I refer to had been scalped by the Indians."

"Here!" shouted Bonair, starting to his feet. "Look here!" and he tore off his wig.

Oh! the horrid, pitiful sight. Now I knew him. But what a change from a moment ago!

The upper portions of the forehead bore marks of scarification, and the whole convexity of the head from the frontal bone to the extreme base of the occiput was stripped of its hairy covering. What replaced this was a grayish film, seemingly as fragile as tissue paper, though by a physiological mercy, it had the consistency of gutta serena. Through it, however, the play of the brain and cerebellum could be fairly discovered. Baldness often makes a monkey of a man, but scalping transforms him into a monster. It gives a preternatural broadness to the face; takes all shadow from the eyes; brings the ears into undue prominence; breaks the seal of intelligence which God has stamped upon the brow. It changes the smile into a grin and casts a ghastliness over the whole face.

The scene which followed this action of Bonair's was deeply moving indeed. M. Paladine and his daughter both rose from their seats. The old man uttered some exclamations of surprise and pain. Ory turned to me with suppliant eyes and then hid her head upon my shoulder.

Bonair stood looking at me for some minutes. There was a wild excitement in his eyes and his nostrils dilated.

"Do you know me now, Mr. Gilbert?" he said. "Am I not the same man you succored fourteen months ago? Yes, I am. I am Gustave Dablon. I am that soldier. I have been scalped."

At these words, he looked at his wig with an expression of despair, then replaced it on his head.

There was a pause during which we all took our seats one after the other. M. Paladine was the first to speak, offering me his thanks in the most affecting words, for the service I had done to his son. Ory followed in the same strain. She said that her brother had informed them at the time of the kindness he had received from a young stranger, but as he did not know his name and could not learn it from the farmer lad who had driven him to town, they had never been able to discover their benefactor. She thanked God that she and all her house lay under this further obligation to me. There was a providence in all this, she said, and it was only a part of that mysterious train of events which had brought us together. I immediately seized upon this view. I stated the presentiment I had had at the time that my meeting with the wounded and spent soldier was not a fortuitous one, and that we were destined, sooner or later, to cross each other again.

"When I saw you yesterday at the boat," said Bonair, in his turn, "I was struck by your appearance. I had the same feeling on meeting you in the garden, awhile ago. But it was only here at table, that, catching a peculiar smile of yours as you were speaking to Ory, I was at once brought back to the precisely similar smile which you gave me when the

farmer boy whipped up from the tavern and you bade me good-bye. I have not thanked God for much in my wild life, but I humbly and fervently thank Him now that He has allowed me to discover my benefactor."

VIII.

ROWING FOR THE WAIF.

Toward the close of the afternoon, at a moment when M. Paladine and Bonair appeared to be engaged in serious conversation, Ory proposed to me a ramble to the water's edge. I assented all the more readily that she manifested particular earnestness about it. We passed rapidly through the garden and thence along a portion of the grounds, till we reached the semi-circular basin where the family boat was moored. There it lay in the shadow of a large willow, its beautiful lines half hidden by ferns and rushes. Approaching nearer, I observed on the hind seat the white leaves of a book which the wind had blown open.

"Your father has forgotten one of his books," said I.

"No," she replied, "that is my book, forgotten last evening."

"What author has the honor of being your favorite, the companion of your solitary hours?"

"Lamartine is one of my favorites, and this is a work of his."

"Lamartine?" I repeated. "Are you fond of his verse?"

"His verse, Carey! His poetry, you mean. He is one of the new voices of our century, fresh, juvenile, simple, yet potent withal to stir the deepest recesses of the heart. He is the poet of woman, though that I fear is no compliment."

"It is the greatest of compliments; for woman, being the most keenly sensitive and the most imaginative, is, therefore, the most poetic being that God has made. A professor of mine—a good authority, because he was a priest, and, as such, not susceptible of any undue partiality for the sex—laid it down among his literary canons, that a book which was popular among cultivated women could not be a common book, and, in many cases, it would be found an uncommon one. You see, Ory," I continued, smiling, "that I have been brought up in a good school. I know nothing of Lamartine except from hearsay, but on your recommendation I will read him."

"Do so, Carey. Read his *Meditations* and his *Harmonies*, especially. I know them by heart. The work, however, which you see in the boat is not one of his poems, but a fragment of his *Confidences*, just received from Paris."

"Prose or poetry?"

"Prose. But it is a divine poem all the same, a sea-pastoral, iridescent with the loves of life's morning, fresh with the adorable beauty of that Italian nature which so intoxicates the poetic mind. Lamartine wrote it with a stubbed pencil in a blank book balanced on his knees as he lay under a lemon-tree in the island of Ischia. *Graziella* is the name of the simple fisherman's daughter, whose lonely life and innocent love form the subject of this volume. I know not why, Carey, but I have likened myself to this poor wail of the sea of Naples. Her solitude and isolation on the terrace of Procida have been as mine in my cavern of the quarry; her sorrows have been my sorrows; her disappointments my disappointments, and I only pray, though I scarce dare hope, that my end may not be like hers, embittered by false promises and darkened by that worst of all horrors—desertion. Read '*Graziella*,' Carey, and then tell me what you think of it."

She stepped into the boat, took up the book and presented it to me. Then stepping out again she invited me to walk on.

"Let us go up the bank," said she; "the afternoon is advancing."

On the way I questioned her about her boating tastes, remarking that a person so delicate as she seemed to be, and of so meditative a turn of mind, could hardly take pleasure in that rude exercise, especially in such a headlong river as the Mississippi. She informed me that she had taken to boating, not so much through any fancy for the exercise itself, as because it afforded her some outlet for her cramped energies, some recreation in her loneliness, some companionship during the enforced seclusion in which she occasionally pined. The boat ushered her into the glad, rushing waters, which sang her a song of freedom that she liked to hear; it opened new bits of sky, unbounded save by the lines of water and of prairie, and under these skies she breathed a new life; it led her, on both sides of the river, into quiet little bays and basins, full of beautiful surprises in the way of scenery, sights of flowers and animal life, holy quietude and solemn shadow. Through these sheltered nooks, following the languid windings of the current, under the overhanging branches, she loved to drift in her boat, while her mind floated gently along another current—that of imagination or memory.

At other times she would choose these occasions to read a favourite volume, from which she averred that she received higher inspirations and experienced keener emotions than she would have done if the reading had been made in her room. It was in her boat and in one of the shady bends on the Illinois shore that she had read *Graziella*.

These explanations gave me an insight into Ory's character for which I was not prepared. I knew that her nature must be pensive, but I

did not know that it was so recondite, so concentrated, so introspective. There is the simple field-flower with pale colors and faint perfume. It is always beautiful but it looks pale. And there is the double flower, a marvellous reproduction of itself, a growth of its own substance, with deeper combined hues and a richer fragrance.

Hitherto I had taken Ory for a mere ingenuous girl. Now, I discovered she was a reflective woman.

"But you do not go alone, Ory," I said.

"You could never stem the current."

"Sometimes I have a companion, but it is rare. Papa used to like to come out with me, but he seldom does so now. As to the current, it is not such an obstacle as it appears. I have learned an art of tacking which helps me wonderfully, though I do not know whether it is according to approved rules or not. By inching up sideways I find three or four miles against the stream a not very exhausting task, and I never venture further down than that."

"Would you mind taking a turn with me? I know little of rowing professionally, but I have strength enough to do some good pulling, and you could help me at the rudder."

"I intended to ask you," answered Ory; "that is why I invited you down, but before that I wanted you to walk up the beach a little to reconnoitre."

"To reconnoitre what, Ory?"

"You will see presently. Nay, you will see at once, for, don't you notice a thin smoke rising over the river, yonder?"

"Yes; that is a steamboat which has just pushed out from the levee. She is now in mid-stream."

"The steam is still compressed; her paddles describe only half circles. She is slowly turning on her own length. Presently her bow will be pointing southward; her engines will exert their full power; her boilers will glow like furnaces; she will dip the flag as a parting salute to the city and then she will take the water at the rate of fifteen miles an hour."

"She must be doing that already," I exclaimed, pointing to the north, "for see how the two columns of black smoke are rising upward and then suddenly sheering off in long trails behind, swept by the wind."

"Ah! there she comes, there she comes!" said Ory, with excitement. "Look, she is just rounding the point yonder. How like a thing of life she seems. Is she not graceful? I think our Western boats are so much handsomer than the big propellers on the Potomac and the Hudson, which are only ugly compounds of the ocean steamer and the river boat."

"You are an enthusiast about steamboats, Ory," I said.

"I am acquainted with every boat that plies between St. Louis and the Ohio and Lower Mississippi. I stand here for hours nearly every day watching them come and go. I know their names, their destination, their speed, the number of their trips, the accidents which each has encountered. Some of them have such pretty names. Their captains must be poets. This, for instance, which is now coming down on us, is the 'Prairie Bird,' and don't she look like a bird skimming the water? See! She is fast approaching; I think it is time we should go for our boat."

"Remain here," I said, hastening away; "I will fetch it. I will be back in two minutes."

I had no trouble whatever in unfastening the boat, finding the oars, setting them in their locks and making my way out of the basin. When I reached the river the steamer was nearly opposite the spot where Ory stood, and she was intently gazing upon it. Her attention was indeed so fixed that she took not the slightest notice of me as I stopped the boat at her feet. Her features expressed something more than curiosity; sorrow and anxious sympathy were imprinted upon them. Suddenly she gave a little cry, drew out her handkerchief and waved it violently. The movement was so singular that I, too, looked in the direction of the steamer. It was now gliding along the Illinois bank, and consequently at a considerable distance from us, but still I distinguished a dark figure which detached itself from the white surface of the hurricane deck. It also was agitating a white handkerchief.

"Who is that, Ory?" I asked, not moving from my seat.

"Look!" said she, and she produced an ivory-mounted binocular, which she handed down to me.

I held up the glasses. No; it was not possible. It must be an optic delusion. I looked again. Yes; there could be no mistake. It was the lady in black.

I glanced at Ory for an explanation.

"Ah! yes," she replied, "it is she, it is my poor Gai-so."

I started at the word. Where had I heard that name before? What dreadful scene was it that it recalled?

"Gai-so!" I cried, "Gai-so!"

"Yes, that is her name. Did you not know it?"

"I never heard her even mention her name. For me she was always *La Dame Noire*," I answered.

Here Ory waved her handkerchief for the last time, exclaiming:

"Farewell, poor, dear Gai-so. Think of me. I will never forget you. We shall meet again. Farewell," and she wiped the tears from her cheeks.

Meantime I had reflected with the lightning rapidity of passion and excitement, and discovered