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MY CREOLES:

A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

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Book V. BEGINNING LIFE.

I.
C. E.

The time had now come when I must choose a position in the world, a career wherein to gain a livelihood. The vacation to which I had fancied myself entitled was passed, and what a vacation it had been! How much I had learned in those three months! How much I had suffered, too, which is the best, because the most keenly personal mode of learning.

Had I been left to myself and obliged to go from door to door in search of a place, I might possibly have shared the fate of many worthier boys than I, who run the gauntlet of humiliations and play the demeaning rôle of mendicants in order to obtain the privilege of working, which, as the world goes, ought to be claimed as a right. But I had so many friends, so many relatives in my native city that I was sure I could not lack recommendations or instructions. Gratuitous favour I wanted none and I resolved to ask for none. I was poor; I did not aspire to immense riches, but whatever I earned, whatever position I attained, I wished to be the fruit of my own toil. If my education could not procure me a living, I might as well, like the love-sick Maxwellton swain, lay me down and die.

I bethought me of my uncle Marigny, went direct to him and explained my situation. He received me with that perfect kindness which I had expected, and then went into a minute rehearsal of the stations which I might attempt to fill. When seven or eight had been examined and abandoned, owing to my confession of incompetence, he concluded by saying:

"There remain, I believe, only the situations of salesman and shopwalker. All they require is good sense, assiduity and fidelity. What do you say to them?"

I answered that I was perfectly willing to try them.

"But they are slow promotion and poor pay, Carey."

My heart rebelled at this somewhat. I had hoped I might have a chance of beginning in the middle of the ladder, instead of at the lowest rounds. However there was apparently no choice. And, then, the young heart is always hopeful. It was, therefore, with sincerity that I told my uncle that I was ready to take service as a salesman.

"All right, Carey," he replied. "But remember I can promise you nothing definite. I will go round to the best houses and see what I can do for you. You will have an answer in the course of the week."

After having duly thanked my kind patron I was about taking my leave, when old Uncle Pascal entered the room. Of course his first business was to inquire what I was doing there, what I came for and the rest. I repeated the object of my visit. The old man was busy lighting his long pipe and did not appear particularly attentive to my answers, but after a whiff or two he walked up to me, saying:

"Salesman! Bosh. Marigny is an old fogey. I'll tell you what you'll do, young man; start a paper. You can read and write, can't you? Well, start a paper. Go into one of the back counties of the State, buy up a second-hand press somewhere, add a few fonts of type, even if they have been worn a little—people are not very particular. The editing of the sheet need give you no trouble. Look out for advertisements everywhere; they are the only things that pay. Scissor sentimental verses and spicy love stories for the women; dash off vitriolic articles—the more fiery the better—for the men, and your paper will be sure to take. You will in a short time become the biggest man in the place. As soon as ever you find that out—and even a little sooner will do no harm—run for Congress or the Legislature. When you get in there your fortune is made. You will make plenty of money. All our Congressmen are rich, though some I know were the leanest kind of rats before they went to the capital."

The old cynic poured out this *boulette* all at a breath, and the consequence was that his pipe went out. That being an important event, it made him stop short. I presented him with a light. He then resumed:

"Tell me, my boy, is there nothing of all you learned at college that you can use in practical life—make money by, I mean?"

"There are Greek and Latin," said Mon Poup, answering for me; "I did not think of them. We might make a professor of him."

"Too young for a professor," retorted the old man.

"Well, a tutor, I mean."

"Treadmill work. Better salesman than that. He at least has his mind free, while a tutor has mind as well as body cramped up in a daily round of routine. Besides, tutorship pays nothing, and

that settles the point. Is there anything else that you particularly studied, Carey?"

"There are mathematics, sir. I paid much attention to them."

"The mathematics are something to go by. What branch did you fancy most?"

"Trigonometry, sir."

"Ah! the prettiest study of them all, with its nice formulas. Half geometry and half algebra. I have forgotten all that now, but I used to love it. Trigonometry is connected somehow with surveying and mensuration, is it not?"

"Yes, sir, and I studied these too."

"You can do practical surveying?"

"I can, sir."

"In all its parts?"

"Yes, in all its parts."

"You could take up a survey at a moment's notice; do all its field work and resolve all its problems?"

"I could, indeed, sir. I am sure of myself there."

"Then, boy, why didn't you say so from the first?"

The old man looked at Mon Poup and they exchanged nods of intelligence.

"Why I have just the thing for you. You are just the man we want," added Uncle Pascal, and he proceeded to inform me that a company of capitalists, of whom he was one, having decided on exploring the lead mines of Potosi, were about buying a large area of the mineral land in the vicinity. This land belonged to a single family of heirs, but as only some of the heirs were willing to sell, there would have to be a partition sale consequent, of course, on a careful survey. The county surveyor was particularly busy then by similar work in other quarters, and needed one competent assistant to help his deputy. The company wanted the survey made as soon as possible. Uncle Pascal thought there would be no difficulty about my getting a share of the work.

Here was a stroke of luck for which I was not prepared. I could not have found better if I had been left to my own choice. It was congenial work; it was professional and it was lucrative.

"That point settled, let me give you a piece of advice," continued Uncle Pascal, in his off-hand, playful manner. "I don't doubt in the least that you are altogether prepared for the new duties which will be assigned you, but this is the age of humbug—I like it all the more on that account—and it is well to live up to the spirit of the age. I want you to assert yourself a little; to show that you are conscious of the dignity of your calling. Hence this very day, before the sun goes down, you must get yourself a room or rooms on some frequented street. This shall be your office. You must get a set of instruments from Blattner, a few scientific books—I could lend you some of mine—ink, pen, pencils, paper, card-board and a looking-glass."

"A looking-glass, Uncle Pascal?"

"Yes, and a good-sized one. American professional men would be much the better for a looking-glass in their office. It would make them comb their hair, at least, every time they go out, and thus not appear as if they had just got out of bed. But to crown all, you must get two signs, to be tacked on each side of your outer door frame, with this inscription:

CAREY GILBERT, C. E.

OFFICE.

"Crackey, but won't that be grand?"

"What is C. E. for, Uncle Pascal?" I inquired, heartily amused and as heartily flattered.

"Civil Engineer, man."

"But I am not a civil engineer—only a land surveyor."

"That's all one. 'Aim high' is the Indian Bowman's device. Nobody will ever know the difference. I am sure the county surveyor can't, for I very much doubt whether he is well grounded even in simple mensuration. However, that's not for you to judge. You must respect your superiors."

Mon Poup here interrupted the voluble old man by saying that there were several houses of his on different streets which would make good offices, and he authorized me to take my choice of them. I saw from this that he approved of his eccentric friend's suggestion.

"Yes," continued Uncle Pascal, "and when you get fairly installed, I will go to Martin," (that was the county surveyor), make my bargain with him, settle your place on his staff, then take hold of him and bring him down to your office. It shall be a formal introduction."

"But, Uncle Pascal, supposing he should ask me for my diploma, then what?"

"Your fiddlestick. How is he going to ask you for what he has not got himself? But if he does, answer him as Napoleon answered those who asked him his patent of nobility. Tell him it is in your head."

"But is there not a license of some sort required?"

"Not a bit of it. Licenses in this free country are not required of lawyers, doctors, preachers or mountebanks; why should they be required of civil engineers?"

This was convincing. I dropped the subject and the conversation was broken up by Uncle Pascal lighting another pipe and intoning a Bordelais rigadoun.

Before sunset I had carried out the old man's instructions to the letter. As the painter could not have my two signs ready at so short a notice, I had my name stencilled on the door. That night I passed in my office, on the same principle, I suppose, that the youngster must sleep in his first pair of boots.

II.

A RULE OF LIFE.

Everything turned out exactly according to promise. Within three weeks after the opening of my office, I was on my way to Potosi, a lead region, which, with its neighbours, the Iron Mountain and Pilot Knob, make of the great State of Missouri one of the richest mineral countries in the world. For about ten days prior to my departure, the county surveyor, or the chief, as he was more generally known in our set, had given me a deal of office-work to do, in the shape of charts, drawings and the deciphering of some notes taken on all sorts of soiled and ragged paper. If it was his intention to test my capacity he could hardly have chosen harder problems than those contained in the notes. But I got through them without extraordinary difficulty and he expressed his entire satisfaction.

I was hurried away to the field a day or two sooner than I had expected. I was unable in consequence to go the rounds of my friends as I had contemplated doing. This was a bitter disappointment, but as I knew it would not be the last incident in my new career, I put up with it patiently enough. I barely had time to write a few lines to Ory, to Mimi, to my relatives at Valmont, and some other intimates.

Our party, consisting besides myself, of the deputy county surveyor and two "field-hands," and a couple of the directors of the new company, went a portion of the way down the river by steamboat. After landing, there were about forty miles of rough country to get over before we reached our destination. To perform this journey we were provided with two light wagons, each drawn by four mules. It was a pleasure excursion to no one but me. The deputy, too much accustomed to such drives, tired with the monotony of his work, sat silent in his corner, solacing himself like a ruminant with his quid. The fielders, equally fagged with routine, told stories to the drivers, and sought oblivion in their whiskey bottles. The two directors talked of nothing else but shares, stocks, dividends and bonuses. I alone had eyes to admire the fair October landscape, the deciduous trees, the red leaves, the russet hillsides, the silvery expanses of water, and the dreamy solitudes of the solemn valleys. For me it was more than an ordinary trip; it was my first life-journey, my entrance through the beautiful avenues of nature into the realities of a new career. My future lay before me vague, undetermined; my memory recurred to the past out of which I had just emerged, and to the dear friends whom I had left behind me. I was thoughtful, but not sad. My hopes were high; my courage was braced up; my heart swelled with lofty aims and a resolution to do my whole duty. When we reached the ground of our labour at last, I was the first to jump out of the wagon, and I planted the first stake as a landmark in the soil.

Work began without loss of time. The field was divided into two parts, one undertaken by the deputy, the other entrusted to me. I soon found the difference between professional and amateur surveying. At the close of each day I was as tired as if I had followed the plough. To add to my discomfort the weather proved very variable. We had mackintoshes, oil-cloth caps and cavalry boots for rainy days, but these could not relieve us from the fatigue of trudging in the mud, nor from the muscular tension induced by the damp atmosphere. Other days were so hot that we had to throw off coats, waistcoats, neckties, and take to straw hats. Our fare was rustic. We had lodgings in the neighbouring farm houses, and our food, with the exception of eggs, butter and milk, was of the coarsest.

I am of opinion that when once the novelty has worn off, all work—whether of the brain or of the hand—falls to a uniform level of monotony. Routine is the rule of life; romance only the exception. My experience was that after the first three days, the labours of the morrow were only a dull repetition of those of the eve. The fact that I loved my profession the more I got into it did not mask any of this dullness. The poetry was gone, but the philosophy remained. I willingly accepted the change.

One of my professors, in lecturing precisely on this inevitable change, had laid down a golden rule which I now remembered. It is this: Have regular hours of daily work—six, eight, ten or even twelve—and go through them with all your might. But after they are over, keep to dreaming; that reposes the mind and takes the heart young; hence, never work after hours; never think of your work even. The lawyer must not think of his brief; the preacher of his sermon; the notary of his act; the professor of

his lesson; the writer of his book. In this way time is equally divided. Duty does not trench upon pleasure, and without pleasure life is not worth having.

I began to practise this rule. When the day's work was over I put up my instruments, folded my papers, changed my clothes. The deputy ciphered at his notes till midnight and desired me to do the same. I refused. While he lay lazily in bed till breakfast I was up, doing in an hour of the cool morning what had taken him three or four hours of wasting toil the evening before.

III.

SONGS WITHOUT WORDS.

Two months had passed and our work was done. At two o'clock of the last day we returned from the field. By four I had concluded all my arrangements. My instruments were unscrewed, nicely oiled and locked up in their boxes. My papers were carefully numbered, docketed and secured with tape. My clothes and all the little articles which lay about my room were packed in my valise. I had labored hard, but I was content. There was first the consciousness of having done my duty as well as I knew how, and next the assurance that that duty had been fully rewarded. My agreement had been for fifty dollars a month, exclusive of board and travel. I had therefore a hundred dollars in my pocket. I looked in the glass: my cheek was bronzed, but my eye was bright. I went down to the mill on the creek and weighed myself. I had gained twenty pounds.

With a light heart, then, and a buoyant step, I set out for my usual ramble. I had no objective point in view, and it was by the merest chance that I found myself taking the direction of the neighboring village. I knew no one there, so I walked listlessly through it till I came to the church-door, where I stopped to examine its neat architecture. There was some beauty about it, especially a peristyle of very elegant effect. While I was busy looking, I heard the sound of music within. I listened. It appeared to me of a superior character. Pushing the door gently before me I stepped into the vestibule, and there a fuller volume of sound burst upon my ear. I paused a moment, wrapped in attention, then noiselessly penetrated into the sacred edifice. There was a hush in the music for a few seconds, and I looked around me. Everything tended to inspire awe. Darkness was already gathering in the side aisles and lateral chapels, though the nave was still illumined by the setting sun whose golden light was mellowed and divided into picturesque fragments by the high lancet windows. The freshness of evening streamed in from openings in the dome and roof, and the smell of incense yet lingered in the holy atmosphere of the house of God. There was no one in the body of the church, but in the chancel I saw the kneeling form of the village pastor. This good man was greatly esteemed by his parishioners for his saintliness. His venerable white head was sharply defined by the yellow and crimson light which fell from the wheel window behind the main altar. It was such a head as Domenichino would have liked to study and reproduce on one of his monastic canvases. The old man held his breviary in his hand, but his mind was evidently absorbed in meditation, for the book was half closed and his eye fixed intently on a fine crucifixion which hung in the sanctuary. Suddenly the sound of the music called my attention to the organ loft, and there, to my surprise, I noticed the slender form of a young girl sitting before the keys. The huge pipes of the instrument rose like a forest before her, hiding their heads in the gloom which had already gathered on the ceiling. The girl seemed like a little child who had heedlessly adventured into a region of immensity and superincumbent force where she would be overwhelmed. She was quite alone in the gallery. Fearful lest I should be observed by the priest or the organist, I softly glided behind a pillar of the nave in whose shadow I was hidden from view, while I could see everything that took place in the church. Perhaps there is no spot on earth which so impresses an imaginative mind as that of an empty church, especially at the hour of sunset and when the stillness of the external world only deepens the silence that reigns in its long-drawn aisles. The spirit of peace then falls on one like a sensible presence, refreshing the innermost cells of the soul. Prayer is also felt, not as a fancy, but as a reality, a necessity of the hour, and lips long unused to supplication instinctively repeat the holy words learned at the mother's knee. On occasions like these wild, worldly men, whose thoughts are all fleshly, and who habitually recoil from the self-reproach of meditation with a feeling of dread, can sit in the consecrated gloom and brood over their sins with a soothing contrition and the sweet assurance of pardon. To their altered eyes there is nothing grim or forbidding in the immovable fixtures of the altar; nothing harsh in the agonized face of the Crucified. The gentle Madonna and the grotesque saints in the niches are invested with a loveliness which recalls the simplicity of the ancient church days. Everything breathes a calm, contentment and peace. Blessed moments in which man's better nature rises to its highest level and catches glimpses of its spiritual destiny.

Being naturally of a reflective temperament, I felt all the influences of the hour and place. In my case the impression was even deepened by the singularly beautiful music which I heard.