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MY CREOLES:

A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

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

Book IV.

THE DREAD ALTERNATIVE.

X.

THE OLD STORY.

That letter, obscure as it was, opened out a series of circumstances which, put together with a kind of intuitive precision, led me to the bottom of that mystery which had been more or less wound around me during the past three months. But I was not to be left to any further conjectures or indecision, for, that evening, before leaving The Quarries, M. Paladine took occasion to relate to me what he called the second half of the story of his house. The conversation took place on our way through the park and out on the road, along which the old man chose to accompany me that evening.

M. Paladine's narrative was very circumstantial. He began, as the most practised novelist would have done, precisely at the point where he left off on the first occasion. He gave me the details of his marriage, that part of his story tallying exactly with what Djim had told me. His wife was thirty years his junior. He had rocked her in her cradle. Yet his love for her had been far more than that of a father for a child. He had cherished her with marital tenderness, and for four years had enjoyed unbounded marital happiness in her society. He related all the circumstances attending the birth of his two children. Tears were in his voice when he described, in his own pathetic and eloquent language, the heroic sacrifice of the mother who falls victim to one of the cruellest and sweetest functions of nature.

"Ah!" said he, and I remember that as he pronounced the words he had stopped under one of his fine beeches, "if a man and wife have loved each less before; if they have been unmindful of one another's good qualities; if they have sought, as they should have sought, their mutual happiness in the intimate communion of their souls together, it is a solemn moment like this which I have related that all their differences should be annulled and their beings transfused one into the other, with more affection than even on the day of their bridal. The birth of a child which God is pleased to give them is a powerful reminder to the husband of the debt of obligation and gratitude which he owes his wife. It is for him that she submits to unknown aches of mind and body; for him that she passes through the most mysterious and painful of ordeals; for him that she braves the chances of a sudden and violent death; for him that she condemns herself to seclusion and fatigue in the discharge of her maternal duties. No wonder when she falls a victim to her state that we instinctively rank her among the saints of God. Yes. A mother who gives her life for her child is a martyr. A wreath of palm is woven for her and babe-angels await her at the gate of pearl to place it on her brow."

The old man then explained to me all that he had done for the raising and education of his children, to whom now his whole life was exclusively devoted. Both were bright children, but their characters, as developed at a very early age, were quite different. The girl was a copy of her mother. The boy—M. Paladine confessed it to his shame, and accepted it as a merited punishment—had inherited all the most reprehensible qualities of his father. Ory had never given him any trouble; on the contrary, she had been his unfailing source of consolation and encouragement. Though she had a mind and a will of her own, and a peculiar strength of purpose, she had always known how to adapt herself to the idiosyncrasies of her father and the exceptional circumstances of her situation.

Not so with Bonair. He had always been wilful and absolute in his opinions. He could never brook any constraint. He had violent likings and antipathies. His better feelings were fitful and evanescent; his enmities and his rancors were enduring. He had brighter parts even than his sister, and learned remarkably well, but it was only by fits and starts. His father was his instructor; he taught him as well in conversational lessons as in text-book exercises. But his education, thorough as it gradually became, had not the usual softening influence on his character. *Emollit mores* could not be repeated in his case. He was always in some unpleasant scrape or other, either with servants of the plantation or with persons of the outside. His wild, reckless behavior contributed a great deal towards perpetuating the unpopularity of his father. People said: "The young Paladine will be the *bête noire* of the neighborhood as old Paladine was before him." Many is the time that the father had to put out money to repair or to hush up some mischief in which his son had been the principal actor.

And here I may be permitted to repeat publicly a remark which I made to myself at the

time that M. Paladine was going over this portion of his narrative. I refer to the false difference which many fathers make in regard to the education to be given to their sons and daughters. Believing—and very justly believing—that too tender or sedulous a care cannot be had of the latter, they hedge them in by the most vigilant guardianship and place them early in those seminaries, real paradises of childhood, where religion takes them by the hand and attends them everywhere, at play, at study, in the refectory, in the dormitory, in the promenade, through every hour of the day, through every duty of the hour. It is thus that the virginal heart is preserved pure till the critical time when the emotional nature blossoms out and the girls are to go forth to confront the temptations of the world. For boys, in the majority of cases, no such safeguards are employed. They are left to shift for themselves; they are constituted their own masters, or nearly so, from an early age; the years they should spend in solitude and under discipline, schooling their hearts to the strong, sturdy virtues, at the same time that they store their minds with the principles of Christian philosophy, are spent on the street or in the liberty of more mature society. Thus the boy becomes a man before his time and enters the world either initiated into its vices or totally unprepared to do battle against them. The fallacy of this system needs no demonstration. It requires no recondite analysis to prove that the boy-nature is not radically different from the girl-nature and that one wants as much cultivation as the other. The case of M. Paladine's children is a sufficient lesson. Bonair's conduct and character ceased to be matters of wonder to me when I listened to M. Paladine's explanations.

A crisis was sure to come, and it came at length. At the time of Mme. Paladine's death there was in the house a little octoroon girl, three years of age, whom she had taken out of the herd of her father's blacks, as a rose from among nettles, and charitably adopted, with the view of making her a family servant. When he was left a widower, M. Paladine kept the child to take charge of his little Ory. Thus the three children—Bonair, Ory and Gaisso—grew up together. When Ory, in course of time, was sent to the convent M. Paladine, having no further use for Gaisso and being unwilling to put her among his own slaves, who were a clannish set, sent her to a relative of his residing at Cape Girardeau. There she remained for several years, until about six months before Ory's definitive return, when she was summoned back to make adequate preparations for her young ward's reception. During her absence she had grown out of childhood and become a fine looking girl. Her character, too, had gone on improving, and M. Paladine was particularly pleased with her manners. At first Bonair took no special notice of her. Towards him she maintained even more than the usual deference which she had shown him when they were younger and understood less the social distinction existing between them. But this state of things soon changed. There was no use insisting on the dismal episode. Bonair fell in love with the girl and made the usual advances. She was handsome; she was gentle; she was affectionate. She was accomplished, too, in a certain degree. Though she had had little schooling, properly so called, yet with both Ory and Bonair, she had learned to read and write, had gone through many books which enlarged the sphere of her information, as the continual society of white people had refined her manners, which were those of a true lady. Like almost all persons of mixed blood, she had acute perceptions and keen sensibilities, and it was due to these that she understood her position much better than Bonair did his. At first she did not appreciate the real character of his approaches, but, after a time, when she found that he persisted, she tried her best to avoid them. This, however, was not easy. He was her superior. As a dependent, she hardly ventured to make a show of open resistance. Terrible situation of feeble woman in presence of hot, impetuous lovers; of needy women in presence of wealthy suitors; of lowly women in presence of lofty wooers. Sad palliation, too, of their downfall. Her first attempt was to reason with the blind youth; to explain her condition as contrasted with his. But this did not answer. The fellow would not listen. He poured out his love in torrents of fervid words. He stole kisses and caresses which the trembling creature dared not refuse. Next came the usual promises, oaths which the Eternal was taken to witness. Finally, the poor girl began gradually to soften; she hearkened more attentively; she submitted like a bird that is being tamed. The slumbering hunger for love was awakened in her heart; she loved in return; her judgment was darkened, and she ended by believing in the pledges given. The fatal step before which the tempted pause so long was taken, and then—and then—

The old father knew nothing, saw nothing of all this. There was no mother in the house whose quick eye would have detected these scenes from their inception and whose chaste influence would have averted a catastrophe. Ory, who had returned from the convent in the meantime, was too young and too ingenuous to suspect any wrong.

At length, when the matter forced itself into light, M. Paladine opened his eyes and resolved to act. But in his wrath he was generous enough to pity the weak and rage only against the strong. He removed the girl from the house, and was about to pass terrible sentence on his son, when the latter shirked the blow by enlisting in the army. We have seen that he did so under an assumed name.

A year passed. It was some compensation to the aged father to know that Bonair had done his duty in the war, and the pitiable plight in which he returned softened the old man's heart. But in the interval Gaisso had been admitted again into the house, at the tearful solicitations of Ory, who had heard all and was moved to pity for her companion. Simple and pure-minded as she was, Ory defended the reputation of Gaisso, and when it was represented to her that the octoroon could no longer be trusted as a fit companion, she replied that she would feel safer in her keeping now that the poor thing had been so sorely tried than she would have felt before. To make more certain still she consulted her spiritual adviser, a man of sterling sense, who knew the world well, and he engaged her to take back the girl, if only as a compensation for her wrong and to prevent the recurrence of temptation.

Thus Bonair and Gaisso met again, but only for a few days. The young man, chafing under the strict watch which his father exercised over him, barely took time to recruit his health, and announced his departure for the Rocky Mountains. M. Paladine favored the scheme, in the hope that several years of rough life on the plains would cure him of his passion. On leaving, Bonair assured Gaisso of his constant love, but made no promise of reparation for the injury which he had done her.

In the interval of the girl's absence from The Quarries and of Bonair's campaigning in New Mexico, the Voudous of the locality had chosen Gaisso their queen. It seems that she had no voice in the matter, but was obliged to accept the dignity whether she liked it or not. The black fraternity obey the mandates of the devil, as expressed to them by the serpent, in the choice of their sovereign. The oracle had appointed Gaisso. They had to acclaim her and she had to submit.

As soon as she was enthroned the Voudous took up her cause. It inspired new life into their organization. They must always have an object for vengeance and blood; here was one ready to their hand. The plan of action was this: They were not to rest till Bonair had married Gaisso. Nothing less than sacramental marriage would satisfy them. Not that they cared particularly for sacramental marriage in itself, but because they knew it entailed social recognition. Meantime, the house of the Paladines was under a ban. Ory—not a hair of whose head they were to touch—must not be allowed to have a suitor. Whoever presented himself to visit her, no matter if he were the best and noblest of mortals, must be tracked, persecuted, and, at the first favorable opportunity, stricken down. Nain was appointed to fulfil this sacred trust. He, too, had no option but to accept. His oath, more awful than that of Hannibal over the ancestral tablets at Carthage, was registered between the two argus eyes of the Beast.

Ory knew of this black conspiracy, though how she came by her knowledge she would not tell even her father. That knowledge was the reason why she screamed and swooned on the landing of the stairs when she overheard my first inquiries about her. That curiosity of mine she knew was to be the beginning of my danger. It was to warn me that she arranged our meeting in the cavern of the quarry; to protect me that she gave me the Egyptian cross.

Now that I know all from beginning to end, I was not so surprised as I thought I should be. The story taught me less than I had expected. Something like this, except in unessential particulars, had floated through my mind in those many eventful hours during which I reflected on the mystery, and wove together the words that had been spoken or the several incidents which had come under my notice. I lay claim to no special gifts of perspicacity, but the peculiar circumstances in which I had found myself, and especially the mortal danger I had incurred, contributed to sharpen my wits. I was glad, however, that the whole enigma had now been made clear and my mind was relieved of an oppressive burden.

M. Paladine was by no means so easy. The sudden and unexpected return of his son from the mountains had led to fresh complications. Gaisso had to be put out of the way again. He had sent her to his friends at Cape Girardeau, the same with whom she had spent several years of her girlhood. There she would have to remain indefinitely, for Bonair had that evening announced his intention of remaining at home during the winter. The question arose—what was he to do?

XI.

M. PALADINE BELIEVES IN THE DEVIL.

M. Paladine did not let me into his confidence on that occasion, but from an expression that

escaped him I was induced to judge that he intended, for the present at least, to let the matter rest and await the chapter of accidents. The expression which fell from him was this:

"I have Nain's promise of a six months' truce."

These words, which he had used once before in his letter to me during my illness, grated strangely on my ear. I took them up at once.

"But, M. Paladine," I said, "surely you do not mean to allow yourself to be led by your own slave in this affair?"

"I do not see how I can help myself," was his sad reply.

"We have the power to break up this abominable conventicle."

"In my own grounds I have. This has already been done. They must henceforth meet elsewhere. My power stops there."

"But you can interdict your slaves; prevent them from belonging to it."

"Not unless I drive them all away; sell them."

I reflected a moment. Evidently there was more in this Voudouism than I thought there was, even after my experience of it.

"Then, M. Paladine," I resumed, "you believe in Voudouism?"

"I do, indeed. There it stands before us black, threatening, resistless, impervious to reason, incapable of compromise."

"And you believe in its alleged communication with the Devil?"

"Perfectly."

"I am surprised at this, sir," I could not help saying.

"You need not be surprised. If you knew negro nature as well as I do, there are many other things would surprise you. Besides, I have made a profound study of the occult sciences and of the manifestation of spirits among all nations and in all ages. I have a complete series of works on that subject, in my library, which you may read some day, if you have a fancy. From that study, I have come to the conclusion that Voudouism is almost a natural thing among such poor creatures as are our negroes, and that it must be accepted as a matter of course. I have known of its existence in this State and notably among my own slaves, for the last forty years, and I long since made up my mind that the best way to deal with it was to give it a quasi-official recognition, or toleration. This plan worked well with me until the recent deplorable events. You are silent, Carey. Possibly you regard my conduct as a weakness. I will not argue the point. I will say only that the mortal is not born before whom my heart ever quailed; fear is a feeling of which I have no conception whatever and never had, but with the black powers of the underworld I prudently decline having any encounter."

The old man smiled grimly as he said this.

"Personally, sir, you have nothing to fear from the Voudous?" I suggested.

"No; I believe not."

"Nor has Ory?"

"Oh! I am sure not."

"Nor your son?"

M. Paladine started at the word, but after a pause he said:

"Not for the next six months anyhow."

This reply confirmed me in the suspicion that the old gentleman meant to temporize with the possible danger that threatened his son. I thought it was the time to show him the message of Gaisso. That would acquaint him with a turn in the plot of which he manifestly had no suspicion. I produced the paper, relating at the same time the circumstances under which I had received it. We were standing in a secluded part of the road under some trees, and there, by the aid of a light from a coil of wax taper which I carried in my pocket, M. Paladine read the missive. He seized its meaning much more readily than I had done.

"I see the diabolical project," said he. "I had sent Gaisso away with the utmost secrecy, but there is no secret for these demons, and I ought to have remembered it. They know also the object of her departure. They know the place of her retreat. They will follow her there. There are emissaries of the clique at the Cape, of course, and even on the plantation where she is going to stay. They will force her to come to a decision. Her position as queen will oblige her to act. This alternative will be set before her: there are only two things which can prevent her marriage with Bonair, either that she renounce him or that he refuses her. If she renounces him, she dies; if he refuses her, he—"

The old man bowed his head and did not pronounce the fatal word.

"But is there not a third condition, sir?" I said.

"What is that, Carey?" asked M. Paladine, looking up.

"Your son's escape."

"Oh! yes. I might bundle him off to the mountains again, where he likes well enough to live, or wherever else he might choose to go. But that would only leave matters as they are. It would make a perpetual exile of my son. It would be yielding, too, to an ignoble fear. No. That will not do. The devils have their logic. There are only two forms of settlement. I am thankful to you, Carey, for your information. It will enable me to provide for a terrible contingency which I did not foresee. I believe that I have been too passive in all this business heretofore. But my blood is up now. I will see to it. That poor girl must not go and immolate herself. I should never be able to wash her blood from my soul. Neither shall my son suffer. I will take the matter in hand at once."