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MY CREOLES:

A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

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Book V.

BEGINNING LIFE.

XII.

DIPLOMACY IN LOVE.

I found Mimi alone. She came forward to meet me with her usual smile and that familiar grace which always put me at ease in her presence. It was then upwards of two months since I had seen her, and I expected to find her altered both in manners and appearance. But not so. She proved the same Mimi, caudid, unaffected, playful, and she bore all the marks of florid health. There were none of those signs of physical ache and mental pining, for which my mother's words had almost prepared me.

Mimi had not heard of my return to the city, and I saw at once that she was particularly pleased at the earliness of my visit. Here was a capital opportunity of testing her real sentiments. I therefore informed her that I had called on Ory the evening previous within a few hours after my arrival. She heard this without any perceptible movement or the slightest change of color, but she made no remark and her thoughts seemed to be occupied elsewhere. Satisfied with this experience, so far as it went, I immediately added that I had been thus prompt in my visit to The Quarries because of Ory's alarming illness. It was now that Mimi's generous nature displayed itself. She could hardly believe that Ory had passed through a mortal malady since the few days when she had seen and gone out with her.

"Poor Ory!" she exclaimed: "without a friend in the world. Why did I not know of her illness! I should have hastened to her bedside. But I will do so to-morrow. I am aware of no existence more deserving of sympathy than hers. Since I have made her acquaintance—a favor for which I am indebted to you, Carey—I have done all I could to keep her company. But notwithstanding my every effort to amuse and distract her and gain her confidence, I have never been able to probe the secret of the sorrow which undermines her. Not that I was moved in this by any vain curiosity, but I had thought, judging from my own experience, that if she could persuade herself to make a friend the half of her own soul, she would thus discharge at least half the burden of her brooding woe. I hope, Carey, that you have been more successful. I hope that the confidence which she withholds from me, has been made over to you. Thanks be to God, it could not be put into better hands."

Mimi's cheek was aflush and her eyes glowed with soft fire as she spoke the words. I could not analyze the nature of the emotion which thus kindled in her breast, but I was certain there was not a spark of selfishness in it. The sympathy which she evoked was all meant for Ory; none of it was intended to flow back upon herself.

"I do not know," I answered, "that Ory has anything to hide from any one; but if she has, I am sure it is not particularly from you, Mimi, that she would wish to hide it. If she knew you better, as I hope she will come to know, I think you would be the very friend in whom she would find it a comfort and a delight to confide."

"No, Carey. You are mistaken there. More than once have I noticed that after touching upon a delicate point, she suddenly paused and maintained a troubled silence. More than once, when the conversation drifted to a certain channel, she quietly and dexterously diverted it into another direction."

Mimi smiled as she spoke, and I smiled while I listened.

"Might I inquire what were the delicate points and the certain channel to which you refer, Mimi?" I said gaily.

"Ah!" she replied as gaily, "You want to hear our confessions."

"I would not object to hear a fair maid's story, and I am sure I would not be so cruel as your grim father confessor. I would reward you not with a penance, but a kiss."

"Indeed! You have grown tender in your travels."

"I trust I have, Mimi. I trust I shall ever go on melting in tenderness. But when have I ever refused a kiss? Did I ever refuse one from you when I could get it? I will take one now with or without your permission."

"Hold!" exclaimed my beautiful cousin. "Restrain your oppressive tenderness a little. You forget that I have not made my confession."

"I am eagerly listening then; go on."

"There is only this to say, and I hope that Ory, if she were in my place in the confessional, would be ashamed to say it as I am now—the particular conversations referred to were all about your most serene highness."

An innocent railery was one of Mimi's natural charms. I was pleased to see her use it on this occasion. It proved that her mind was in its normal healthy state. I answered in the same vein:

"I feel flattered beyond measure at having been the subject of your silver-handled scalps. The victim is often ennobled by the choice of his immolator. It is really too much honor. But excuse me, Mimi, if I do not precisely understand, and therefore appear a little inquisitive. You say that whenever the conversation was upon a certain subject Ory generally contrived to turn it off. How am I to interpret that? I suppose you were cutting me up in the most approved surgical style, and that poor Ory, being yet a novice and a trifle qualmish, averted her eyes from the operation."

"You have hit upon it, exactly. I can never pronounce your name without an expletive; never descend upon your qualities but for the cruel pleasure of tearing them to pieces. That is a cousin's privilege, you know."

The emphasis she placed on the word *cousin* had a delightful ring in my ear. I should have had the wit to let it pass without remark, but I did just the contrary. I harped upon the unfortunate word.

"Ah!" said I, "it is thus you construe your prerogative as cousin? I understand the cousin's privilege very differently; indeed, I do, my fair cousin."

"Oh! I know you do, Carey. Different men, different minds. Some talk too much; others are silent. With some there is a little malice, with others utter neglect. I leave you to judge which of these is best."

Mimi's tone was no longer the same. She looked serious and sad. Alarmed at this, I tried to keep up the playful note.

"You are turning the tables on me, Mimi. The penitent is becoming the judge. Neglect? Silence? I know not to whom you mean to apply the words, but I am sure you cannot mean them for me. If I have a failing, which I am not prepared to admit—"

"Arrogant Pharisee!" murmured Mimi, with a burning look of love.

"If I have a failing it is that of sounding your praise too highly whenever opportunity presents."

Mimi had arisen and advanced to a little marble console on which stood a purple Bohemian vase filled with hyacinths. She deliberately took down the glass, inhaled its delicious fragrance, then slowly replaced it on the bracket.

"When the sweet memories of the past are forgotten it is a consolation to breathe the living perfume of these flowers, evanescent though it be. But when the past is still fresh and blossoming in the heart, all the flowers of the garden with their subtle odors are a mockery. The emblem of constancy must not be sought upon earth. All flowers die. It can be found only in the heavens above us, where the deathless stars are blooming. Ah! Carey Gilbert, do you remember? There were songs of angels in the air that afternoon, a ray of golden sunshine lay about on the face of the fountain, and strange sharp currents glided at our feet under the greenward. Do you remember it? O day, O day of revelation! My lips spoke then what my heart felt not. It was my first and last dissemblance, a falsehood which may pursue me with its vengeance to the verge of my life. You walked away then with fallen countenance and humbled heart. I was your torturer. But the blow reached my own soul as well. Not many days later came your hour of triumph. The revenge you wreaked on me was worthy of a noble spirit. Listen! Don't you still hear, O Carey, from the height of Big Fork Bridge the rattle of flying hoofs and the snort of a frightened steed? Ah! better that I had floated down and away, out of sight of the world forever, if I forgot who it was that faced a dreadful doom to save me from the torrent. And the brave words since spoken, the fervent embraces at parting and meeting again after months of weary, weary absence and the tender letters, leaves from the book of the heart, which I treasure with a reverence that will cease only with death. Thinking of them as I do, can you understand now, Carey, that Mimi Raymond, in season and out of season, thinks and speaks so often of Carey Gilbert, and how it is that between her and Ory Paladine he is the constant theme of delightful entertainment?"

She leaned for support against the console and hid her face in her hands, her white brow resting on the marble edge. I left her to her own reflections for many minutes, awaiting with anxious curiosity the issue of the scene. But she remained immovable, till the silence of the room grew oppressive to me, and I felt that the situation was becoming more and more embarrassing. I then rose in my turn, went up to her, laid my arm around her shoulder, and drew her gently toward me. She made no resistance, but with her face still bent down, like

a drooping flower, followed me to a sofa near by, where we both sat down.

"Mimi!" I said softly. She raised her head and looked at me. Her eyes were swimming in tears and her beautiful face was as pale as ashes.

"Why recall these things, if they pain you so?" I added.

"Why recall them?" she asked in a voice of reproachful surprise. "Would you have me forget the blesseddest moments of my life?"

"But these tears, Mimi; this mortal pallor!"

"If I weep, Carey, it is not because I remember, but because others forget."

"Forget! How can you say so, Mimi! There is another to whom every one of the scenes which you recall is as vividly present, as if it had happened yesterday. Ah, my dear, time flies, and we grow older and the fierce struggles of life are there to harden our hearts. To many of us there remains only the recollections of happier days in the rosy years of childhood and he were a fool who would cast off the strength and the consolation which that imparts. No, Mimi, I have not forgotten."

Then followed a long pause during which Mimi seemed profoundly engaged in tracing out the intricate arabesques of the velvet carpet. Throwing myself back in the angle of the sofa, I watched the play of her handsome features. Gradually, very gradually, the shadow which had rested upon them wore away, like a mist slowly melting in the soft sunlight of happier thoughts. The pale forehead brightened; a rich color suffused the cheeks; the compressed lips relaxed into their wonted smile. At length, quickly raising her head and turning to me, she said with a laugh:

"We have wandered far from our subject, have we not, Carey? I think we were speaking of Ory."

"It was you led the way, Mimi," I replied, more seriously. "I would have followed you even further, if you had wished it."

"We have gone far enough for to-day; perhaps too far, though I would not for the universe have the words unsaid which you spoke to me only a moment ago."

"They will never be unsaid while I live."

"Pardon my weakness, Carey."

"I have nothing to pardon; everything to admire. You have taught me a lesson which I will profit by."

Her eyes were fast filling with tears.

"That was a proud name you used to give me, Mimi. Do you remember it?"

"I do, Carey," she answered in a whisper.

"Am I still worthy of that name? Could you repeat it now from your heart?"

She bent forward, and holding out both her hands to me, exclaimed with rapture:

"Yes, you are my hero."

My first impulse was to throw my arms around her neck and kiss that candid brow; but a strong, mysterious feeling of awe restrained me. However I had tried to convince myself and her that she was always to me what she had been, a secret something told me that we could not at that moment exchange our former familiar tokens of love. I therefore contented myself with pressing her outstretched hand to my lips.

"Let us both remember these words, Mimi, and the solemn circumstances under which you have spoken them. They will teach you to have confidence in me, while I promise, whatever may happen, to be deserving of them."

Did I know what I was saying? Had I fully weighed the meaning of this vow? Could I lay my hand on my heart and declare that I understood it in the plain sense which I knew the confiding girl necessarily gave it? Alas! Man compromises with love; woman never does. There is such a thing as a trick to gain time. I loved Mimi Raymond. I intended to do my duty by her. I would never wilfully cause her a pang, but I even then foresaw a perplexity compared to which all my former troubles would prove to be the veriest trifles. What would come of it, who could tell? I must, therefore, take no irrevocable pledge. If heroism were required in that crisis, I hoped I would be equal to it. This much, then, I promised Mimi, but no more.

XIII.

GAISSO'S PROPHECY.

The first tidings which M. Paladine received of his son came from me. Gone East! There was something vague in that; yet it reassured him. It was agreeable, at all events, to know that Bonair had left the city. No further scandal need be feared from him, and Gaisso might remain safely at The Quarries. With his knowledge of the young man's violence and pertinacity, M. Paladine was astonished that he had so soon abandoned his threat; but if I had told him all that I had learned from Djin, this astonishment would probably have been dispelled.

As to Ory, she was only half pleased with the intelligence, though she, too, regarded her brother's disappearance from the city as a good sign. If it were certain that he had gone East, then she predicted that his destination was New York.

"He is a spoiled child," she said. "He knows papa's weakness for him. Though he left here in a disgraceful manner, under the stroke of his father's most terrible wrath, he is well aware that he has nothing to fear and that all will be forgiven. I shall not be surprised to learn that he is really in New York, that he

will negotiate the business which he contemplated there, using papa's name confidently, and then return to us as if nothing had happened."

None of these things had been spoken before Gaisso, but following me a day or two later into a passage, as I was leaving The Quarries, she entreated me to tell her what I knew of Bonair. When I did so in as few words as possible, she thanked me humbly and said:

"He will not return for many months, but when he does, his dear heart will be softened."

XIV.

HOW HARD I STUDIED.

The winter had now set in. Five and twenty years ago that season was far more severe in the West than it is at present. There were abundant snowfalls, and all the water-courses, even the Mississippi, were covered with ice. Sleighting and skating—almost unknown now—were favorite amusements then. Have we gained or lost by the change?

This winter, however, was to be for me not a time of recreation, but of work. The short days were devoted to my clients at the office; the long nights to my books in my private study. The idea thrown out by Uncle Pascal had seized my imagination. Could I or could I not master the science of mechanics and certain special departments of engineering in the course of a single winter? Could I or could I not do so so without a master? I answered both these queries in the affirmative, bravely, unhesitatingly.

I procured the best works I could find on these subjects. I then spent several days in determining that which would suit my purposes. When it was found, I laid the other aside for ornament or chance consideration. In literature, where individual spontaneity has fair play, a multiplicity of books is unavoidable; but in science where a certain round of facts is always cited to illustrate a certain set of principles, one book is sufficient, provided it be the clearest, the amplest and the most recent.

I studied with pen and pencil in hand. I analyzed every chapter in my own way, in a book prepared for the purpose. Every problem, even the most trifling, was worked out and then neatly copied. Some of these problems were of prodigious difficulty, requiring special knowledge which I had to hunt up before I could proceed. I made diagrams of every machine described. I constructed models of the most ingenious and intricate.

I will say without affectation that I never spent a happier winter. Every step of my progress was an incentive to further exertion, so that fatigue I really felt none. There were times when difficulties piled up before me like mountains, when I thought I should have to abandon the task or call in the aid of a master. I sometimes carried a problem three or four days in my head, till it almost became a sudden light would flash; the solution would shine before me as a star, and a wonderful calm would enter my mind. Invariably after such struggles I made giant strides. The solving of one stupendous problem seemed to open the way to a hundred others.

I here learned also the difference between studying by one's self and studying with a teacher. Not only had I to rely on myself for everything, but the keenness of my desire to learn made me discern with infallible certainty what was essential to my study and what only accessory; what I might leave out or pass over lightly and what I must fathom. I believe that half the secret of solid and successful study lies in this discernment. Then, too, I had a motive in my studying. The ambition which urged me on pointed to the success of all my life. My future depended on these studies. Altogether, my experience of this winter was that nothing is impossible to undaunted courage and stern perseverance.

XV.

OLD TIMES.

Ory had recovered from her sickness, but was never really well at any time during that winter. She herself had repeated more than once that she would not be herself again so long as Bonair remained estranged from his father. My visits to The Quarries were very frequent. Indeed, the only distraction I allowed myself in my studies was the companionship of Ory and Mimi. During the festive days of Christmas and New Year, more especially, I enjoyed their society.

These holidays were then still observed in the good old Creole manner. On Christmas eve, for instance, there was no retiring to bed. The whole family sat up till about eleven o'clock, when all made ready to drive to the church to assist at the celebration of midnight mass. The idea of this midnight mass is a pretty one, derived from the simple piety of mediæval times, and intended to commemorate the solemn hour when the Messiah came into the world. Then, it was believed, nature performed the prodigy of recognizing in her dumb, grand way the fact of the Nativity. The kine in their enclosures, the sheep in the fields, even the fierce brutes in their rocky lairs or in the wildwood bent the knee at exactly the hour of twelve to adore the new-born master of the world, even as the ox and the ass had knelt in the cavern at Bethlehem when the maid-