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MY CREOLES:

A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

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Book IV.

THE DREAD ALTERNATIVE.

I.

THE MARIGNY ROOMS.

On the eastern side of Second street, between Pine and Chestnut, there stood at the time of which I write, a little brick house known as the Marigny Rooms. They were so named from their owner, Theodore Marigny, one of the first citizens of St. Louis. His own children and the numerous flock of his nephews and nieces—he had married my mother's eldest sister—called him Mon Poup. A genial man was he. Small in stature, with handsome, mobile features, a deep black eye, a fine forehead encircled with curling hair, iron-gray at the time that I knew him, an ardent temperament and manners of exquisite gentility, Mr. Marigny was distinguished in every circle. With his own family and relatives he was a particular favourite.

After retiring from active business pursuits, with an independent fortune, he devoted the evening of his days to literature, of which he was passionately fond, and to the society of his friends. For the latter the Marigny Rooms became a favourite haunt. All the old French, who have died within the last five and twenty years, gathered there by a sort of mutual attraction. There they came to rest and smoke. There many of them sat, like Irving's Dutchman, watching the noontide and eventide shadows. There they told stories of the early days of the colony, seasoning them with comic anecdotes, and expressing them in that picturesque, liquid Creole dialect, the flavour of which has nearly died out. There they bewailed together the good old Spanish and French times.

They were rare relics of a past age, but kept their identity to the last. They never became Americans. They clung to their ancient language, manners, costumes and notions of the eighteenth century. The heterogeneity of American society presents many contrasts, but none could be more singular than the existence of these glorious old Frenchmen in the St. Louis of a quarter of a century ago.

I have distinct remembrance of several of them. There was one little dried up man, with a big head, a fair round belly and shrivelled legs. He wore immense goggles mounted in horn. He was the notary public of the company. He knew on his fingers' ends the genealogy of all the Creole families of the settlement from the beginning. His stories of *drame intime* might have afforded material for more than one sensational novel. If the Missouri Historical Society had been in existence then, he surely would have been its first president. I recollect that he was the only one of the whole assemblage who did not smoke. But he took snuff. That, he said, was more professional. His name was Pere Duprez.

There was another little man of whom I had a superstitious fear. In his younger days he had been connected with the Hudson's Bay Company, and in one of his frequent encounters with the Indians had had his windpipe damaged by a musket ball. He spoke with a kind of hissing, his words being jerked out one after another. He was very old and wrinkled. His hair, brows and lashes were as white as snow, and the roots of his stiff, white beard, when he was not clean-shaven, gave his face a harsh, wintry appearance. But he was the gayest of the gay. His stories, not always the most select, invariably provoked roars of laughter; and he never repeated the same story twice, as old men are apt to do.

Another character was Bonhomme Papish. A tall, awkward old man, with a stoop in his shoulders and enormous hands. He used to keep a little candy shop around the corner, which served as a temporary stopping-place to the patriarchs on their way to Mon Poup's Rooms. The aged confectioner was very fond of children. Many is the time that after selling a "picayune" or a "long bit," worth of drops and lozenges, the old gentleman would take me on his knee or hoist me on his counter and tell me stories of the Spanish governors in their *tricornes* set with lilies, of the ancient missionaries with brass crucifixes fixed in the girdles of their gowns, of the first American commissioner who came, in the name of the President, to take possession of the territory and proclaim the first municipal elections. The Bonhomme had a simple way of narrating, which impressed all he said on the memory, while his half-closed eyes and smiling lips, as he spoke, induced the children to listen to him long after their sugar-plums or candy-sticks were consumed.

But the most original figure in that circle was Uncle Pascal. He, too, was near four-score, but lively as a humming-bird. He was always singing snatches of song, such as *Le Pont d'Arignon*, *Ma Normandie* or *Ni rames plus, la belle batelière*. He was a Gascon and a Parisian rolled in

one—a rare amalgam even in France. His talk, when he was in the mood, sparkled with epigram. His sallies of wit and the vivacity of his retorts were remarkable in a country where the art of conversation, as understood in the salons and clubs of Europe, was—and for that matter is still—unknown. Yet there was nothing of the modern Frenchman about him. He was a type of the age of Louis XV. He might have been taken for a *sieur* of Port Royal translated to the western world. And why not? Did not Fontenae and Vaudreuil transplant the spirit of Versailles to the Chateau St. Louis at Quebec, and the vice-regal mansion at New Orleans? And have not travellers found rare exotic-blooming amid wild flowers on our prairies? Uncle Pascal wore knee-breeches. He powdered his hair. He sported a queue that would have done honour to Beaumarchais. He had the habit of talking to himself and gesticulating with great animation. It was the exuberance of his mind reacting on his muscles. I have seen him, while sweeping his door-step, stop short, throw himself into an attitude and apostrophize his broom-stick. The old man amused us, yet we all respected him. Though I loved to hear him discourse, I stood in awe of his wicked railery and his harsh criticism of young people.

It was precisely he whom I met at the Marigny Rooms, as I dropped in there one of my first rambles after my illness.

II.

ASMODEUS.

He was alone, busy paring his nails. Just the worst occupation, after shaving, in which an irascible old gentleman can be found engaged.

As soon as he saw me enter he cried, in his shrill voice:

"Hullo! Here is Spooney."

"Oh! Uncle Pascal!" I exclaimed, deprecatingly.

"Well, and what of it? Haven't you been sick?"

"I have, sir."

"And hadn't you two foolish girls waiting upon you all the time?"

"I had two kind friends assisting mamma to nurse me."

"Two kind friends assisting your foster-mother to nurse you? Pshaw! The idea of a big calf like you wanting to be nursed."

I saw it was no use explaining further, so I laughed.

"Hum!" continued the old man, "and who were the two kind friends?"

"One was my cousin Mimi."

"Ah! And the other?"

"My mamma's god-daughter."

"That is a diplomatic answer. Your mamma has god-daughters at least a score."

I smiled at the compliment to my shrewdness.

"But what is this other thing I hear about you? Consorting with the Paladines? Is that so?"

"Yes, Uncle Pascal. I have made the acquaintance of M. Paladine."

"What! Hector Paladine?"

"The same, sir."

"And you have gone to visit him?"

"Several times."

"Then you are as good as blown to the devil," said the old man, pulling his cheeks.

"I don't fear the devil, at all," I replied, with a hearty laugh. "A little holy water and the *Asperges*, you know, Uncle Pascal."

"Yes, I know. These will drive off Satan, but they have no effect on Asmodeus. Paladine is Asmodeus. Consult the old demonologists for the difference."

My only answer was a peal of laughter.

The perverse old man laughed also. Closing his penknife, he rose and said stily:

"Pretty daughter, though, eh? At least she ought to be."

"Why so, sir?"

"Because her mother was a beauty. Of all the pretty Creoles of her time—and I am a judge, Carey—she was second to none but your poor dead mother. Ah! your incomparable mother, my boy."

"What pity she was born in this backwood, far from the sight of princes and of lords. She that was fit to stand where queens have stood. And be the prize of heroes' conquering swords."

I could have thrown my arms around the old man and hugged him for this genuine outburst.

"If the girl is anything like her mother," he continued, "hold on to her. She is a prize."

"She is very beautiful," Uncle Pascal.

"Hasn't she particularly fine eyes?"

"Yes, sir."

"So had her mother. Then hold on to your advantage. And remember, besides, that Paladine is as rich as the devil. This is not profanity, Carey, according to my estimate of Hector's character."

We were interrupted in this very interesting

part of our colloquy by the entrance of Mon Poup.

"Ah! Carey," said he. "Well again? Glad to see it. Come to the old place? It's always in the same tumble-down condition. How is your mother? I owe her a visit. Have not seen her for several weeks. The Mountain boat is coming in, Pascal. Will you walk down to the levee to see her land? Old acquaintances on board. I am sure there is a lot of pemmican consigned to us, which we will manage to eat, though we have lost our teeth."

Uncle Pascal refused to go.

"It is just noon," said he, "and I have been promised a plate of gumbo soup, if I am punctual to dinner."

"O, I understand," answered his friend; "you would forswear your ancestors and walk to Vide Poche and back for a dish of gumbo."

"If well made, Marigny. But that is a rarity to be met with not more than once or twice in a season."

"Then you will come with me, Carey," said Mon Poup. "Let me just get these papers from my desk. One, two, three: there, now, let us go."

III.

ON THE LEVEE.

The "Mountain boat" was a steamer which made one trip every year from St. Louis to the Yellowstone and the head waters of the Missouri. It started in April, loaded with provisions and stores for the different trading-posts along the route, and returned in August or September with a cargo of furs and peltries. It brought back, too, for a brief visit to civilization, many of these hairy adventurers who explored the Far West and spent most of their lives treating with the red man. The arrival of this boat was always an event in St. Louis, at that time the chief centre of trade with the Rocky Mountains and New Mexico.

When we reached the levee we found a vast multitude assembled. The steamer had fired off its cannon and was slowly creeping to the shore, gaily belocked with flags. As soon as the first plank was thrown out, Mon Poup, with scores of others, rushed on board, leaving me on the boulders to take care of myself. I remained in my position eagerly watching the scene. There were a bustle and an excitement which interested me deeply. Finally, when the crowd had been cleared a little, the disembarkation commenced. All kinds of trunks, boxes, bags and parcels were brought out. A procession of stout, bronzed men, wearing bean-new clothes, in which they looked a little awkward, passed to the shore. In less than half an hour the boat was emptied of its passengers and the levee returned to its normal state.

I, too, was about to go off when I observed one of the belated travellers making his way to the bank. He was a slight young man whose face was partially hidden by a slouched hat. I saw enough of his features, however, to observe that he appeared fagged and sickly. His eye, too, was dull and almost expressionless. He appeared to be a stranger. He passed through the crowd on the boat and on shore without receiving a sign of recognition from anybody. When he came nearer I noticed that he looked at me very hard. Even when he had gone on, he turned back to glance at me again. And, strange to say, I scrutinized him as sharply. It seemed to me that neither that face nor that figure was unknown to me. I ransacked my memory to find where I had seen the man before. But, as so often happens when our curiosity is keenest, the more I searched, the less I could remember. Meantime, the youth walked up to the top of the levee, called a carriage, gave some directions to the driver, threw his carpet-bag on the front seat, entered the vehicle and drove off rapidly in a southerly direction. As he disappeared, my attention was drawn elsewhere and I soon forgot all about him. A few moments later, seeing that M. Marigny did not return, I walked up to the city.

IV.

Djinn.

I went to the warehouse of the American Fur Company, than one of the principal institutions of the city, situated on Washington avenue, between Second and Main. This was another resting-place for Creoles, and on this day, of all others, was sure to be full of life and noise. The building was a museum of curiosities. There were seen piles of pictured buffalo robes, huge elk-horns, beavers imprisoned in large tin boxes, grizzly bears chained in the court-yard, heaps of buffalo tongue and chipped meat, most delicious when dished with the small-grained Indian corn, which at that time grew only in the Mountains.

All descriptions of queer people haunted the spot, speaking every variety of lingo. There were Creoles from Portage des Sioux, Cape Girardeau and Prairie du Chien—bright-eyed, agile fellows and very garrulous; Canadian *coureurs des bois* from the St. Lawrence and the Ottawa—dark, thick-set, great walkers, and forever smoking; Mexican trappers, in leather suits—copper-coloured, mustachioed, good marksmen, wonderful riders, treacherous and vindictive; Western hunters, of the Daniel Boone or David Crockett type, chiefly from Kentucky and Missouri—tall, lank, great story-tellers, hard swears, indefatigable tobacco-chewers, lynxes in vision and infallible guides. These were the men employed by the Chouteaus, the

Sires, the Sarpys, the Picottes, the Papins, the Duchouquettes, the Giroux, the Kipps, the Chardons, the Beauvais, the Laberges, and others in the annual excursions among the Indians of the Upper Missouri.

As I entered the front office, I met Henry, the youngest son of M. Marigny. He was in his shirt sleeves, with his pen behind his ear, taking advantage of a moment's lull in the business of his desk to look about him. After shaking hands with me, he inquired whence I came. I replied that I had just witnessed the landing of the Mountain boat.

"Ah!" said he, "I have been copying the captain's manifest and the list of passengers. A great many of the old codgers have come down this year."

And he ran over the names of several of them.

"But," he continued, "the oldest passenger of all is Bonair Paladine."

"Bonair Paladine?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, son of old Paladine of The Quarries. A hateful-seem kind of a fellow, not more than twenty years old, but who has gone through adventures enough for a man of fifty. In his youth, he was the wildest sort of a scape-grace; played some awful shindies on his father's farm, and when the old man threatened to turn him out, volunteered in the army. He went off to Mexico, somewhere, stayed there awhile, came back—some say honorably, others dishonorably discharged, and almost immediately after started off for the Mountains, where I thought he would remain forever. But here he is again. I have not seen him yet, but he must come down here to settle his accounts with the company, and then I will have a talk with him. They say he is half-crazy."

My wonder on hearing all this was intense, but I did not care to let my cousin Henry know it. I contented myself with saying:

"I did once hear, I believe, that such a being existed, but I had forgotten it completely."

"Yes. You see old man Paladine married at forty-seven a young girl not much more than seventeen. It looked like an ill-sorted marriage, and everybody cried out against it. But for a wonder, it turned out all the contrary. The old man adored his child-wife and made her very happy. But she had no health, and died in the fourth year after her marriage. Her first child was this Bonair. Her second was Ory. That second birth cost her her life. Left to the care of their father, it was only natural that these children should be spoiled. However, the girl inherited her mother's virtues, and, besides, she was sent at an early age to a convent in Maryland, where she remained till within a couple of years ago. The boy, on the contrary, was kept at home, where the old man undertook to teach him. Of course he could not profit much by this, and he soon began to distinguish himself by his capers."

"Why, I declare, you seem thoroughly posted on the subject of the Paladines," I said. "If I had known that before, I should have come to you for information."

"Oh! there has been too much fuss made about these people. I don't dislike old Paladine myself. He is something of a philosopher, and I rather admire philosophers. Owing to his quarrels with our grandfather it has been the fashion in our family to taboo even his name, but I guess that will die out before long. If I were not such a *riche garçon* and half-entangled in another quarter already, I would not hesitate to throw out my nets to Ory. She is confoundably pretty."

I should have liked to prolong the conversation on so agreeable a theme, but unfortunately a business visitor entered the office, and we had to break it off.

Another word about my cousin Henry Marigny before going further. We called him Djinn. He was the favorite of all the younger children of the family. I was particularly attached to him. He lived with us for many years, and we both slept in the same room. I remember with pleasure the many lessons he gave me, of evenings; the assistance he kindly furnished in the beginning of my studies. He was a finely educated man, of exquisite taste and with an artistic fondness for poetry and the highest forms of literature. History was his delight. Whenever we asked him for stories, he would always draw from his historical recollections and make up narratives which were as entertaining as romances. At the age of eight, I asked him to name a history that I should read. He gravely told me to take Herodotus. I did so, and to this day the keen passion with which I devoured the Nine Muses is fresh to my mind. Ever since, I have retained a weakness for the legendary historians, as opposed to the inexorably critical school of Niebuhr and Arnold.

V.

DJINN'S PROPHECY.

There is no need to say that my curiosity was roused by what Djinn had just told me concerning young Paladine. It became still greater when, upon recollection, I connected him with the stranger whom I had observed on the levee. Were these one and the same person? And if so, did I know that person? Was it possible that I had somewhere seen Bonair Paladine before?

My first impulse was to repair to The Quarries at once. That would be the simplest way of solving the riddle. But I was deterred from this, first, because it would be intruding on the