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MY CREOLES:

A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

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Book VI.

REPARATION AND ABNEGATION.

XVII.

I REDEEM MY PROMISE.

I shall make no apology for mentioning a last time so humble a personage of this story as Gaston. I had not forgotten my promise to Toinette. She never alluded to it in these years, but often when she met me there was an appeal in her eyes which would have reminded me, even if I had forgotten. Since the departure of Gaisso, Toinette had been Ory's confidential servant, and her conduct in that situation was exemplary. This circumstance contributed also toward deciding me to do something for Gaston. Now that our experiment at the quarry succeeded even beyond our expectations, and that I had a little money to spare for the purpose, I resolved on negotiating for the boy's return. I had never received an answer to my letter to him, nor any tidings whatever. I had therefore to apply to the man Hobbes to assist me in the matter. He promised to do his best. A few months later, he informed me that he had heard of Gaston as broken down in health and almost good for nothing. The fellow had always been more or less rebellious; had had more than his share of the Yankee overseer's lash, and was finally reduced by the marsh-fever to a state of chronic debility.

"His master would have sold him quick enough," added Hobbes; "but I wouldn't take the responsibility of buying him. When any nigger gets that bad he is not worth having. The sooner he drops off the better."

I told Hobbes to buy him at his next trip, no matter in what state he found him. If the poor lad was in a decline, it would be some comfort to him to die among his own; but I had the suspicion that his ailment was mainly due to ill-treatment and loneliness, and therefore hoped that he would recover on returning to his friends. Hobbes did as I bade him.

"The chap was fit to die when we started, but he picked up wonderfully on the way, and by the time we reached St. Louis he looked as well as I did. I bought him in your name for five hundred dollars and passage paid. My commission is fifty dollars, but I will knock off five per cent. to help a little in your good work," he said with a grin.

M. Paladine, at the desire of Ory, insisted on paying one-half of the purchase money. I would have wished that those who make it their business to culminate the negro race had witnessed the meeting of this poor boy with Hincinthe, Dada and Toinette, and heard the pathetic expressions of his gratitude to me.

I placed him in the quarry with the other blacks, and he soon became one of my strongest and best workmen. I need hardly add that, not many weeks later, I consented to his marriage with Toinette.

XVIII.

FORCING MY HAND.

I now approach the great act of my life. Once fairly established in business and, unless some unforeseen disaster overtook me, on the high way to fortune, I was urged on all hands to take a further step, by making myself a home. My mamma was particularly solicitous about it; so was Uncle Pascal; so was M. Paladine. It is curious to recall now in what different manner and from what different points of view, these three persons, to whom I owed so much, advanced their pleas.

M. Paladine, whenever he referred to it, did so with a solemn and almost sorrowful mien. What he particularly insisted on was that a young man able to maintain a wife ought to marry young. His own bitter experience of the contrary was invariably cited as a lesson which I ought to learn from. The old gentleman sought only my good. He never even hinted a word about his daughter in connection with the subject.

My mamma was more yearning and pathetic. She, too, aimed only at my welfare, but she had always that old love of Mimi's in mind, and never failed to bring it up gently, yet affectionately. Not a word, however, against Ory, whom she continued to cherish always more and more.

Uncle Pascal was offhand as usual. He was wont to tell me bluntly to marry Ory Paladine and be done with it.

When M. Paladine spoke he made me dream; when mamma spoke she made me weep; when Uncle Pascal spoke he made me laugh.

It was a long time before I could bring myself to look this matter full in the face. It was not that I did not share with my friends the desire of an establishment, but the difficulty of a decision was such as none of them could

suspect. So long as this decision remained dimly distant in the future, it rather excited my mind than depressed it, and I toyed with it as cowards do with a hypothetical peril. But whenever it presented itself as a fact, I put it off, finding my courage fail me. I should probably have continued my procrastination much longer if an unforeseen incident had not forced me to take final action.

During a visit which they made to Chicago in the previous summer the Raymonds had fallen in with a young lawyer by the name of Shelton, a splendid fellow of good family and fine promise in his profession. He took a fancy to Mimi from the first, and acted as her chaperone in all her visits through the city and its beautiful environs. A friendship naturally sprang up between them which, in the case of the youth, soon ripened into a more tender sentiment. Indeed, his passion was not slow in declaring itself most demonstratively. Scarce a month after the return of the Raymonds, the lawyer, on pretence of some business, came on to St. Louis and, during his stay, he called daily on Mimi with whom he enjoyed many a ride and promenade. Less than this would have been required to set the gossips a-going. The tidings speedily reached my ears that Mimi was deeply engaged with Shelton. I made no account of the rumor, but Mimi's father did. Being very much taken up with his new friend, he availed himself of these stories to sound his daughter's views with regard to him. I suspect, too, that the young advocate made certain advances to the old gentleman.

Mimi listened to her father with amazement. She protested that though she admired Shelton for his high breeding, perfect propriety of manners, generous sentiments and ripe intelligence, she knew of nothing in her conduct or, indeed, in his, to warrant the commentaries which her father repeated. The old man insisted. He maintained that the lawyer seemed desirous of making his court to her, and that he might be expected to come again in the course of the winter—probably at the Christmas holidays—in order to renew it.

Mimi replied that if such was the case, he ought to spare himself the trouble, as his visit would certainly be useless.

Her father detailed his qualities, position and prospects of the young man. He was a most excellent party who should not be lightly dealt with.

Mimi admitted all this, but said it had no influence on her.

Why? Didn't she like him?

Yes. She liked him very well, as she had already said. But she did not love him, could never love him.

Never love him? That was a rash speech. Why not?

Mimi here began to weep, wondering that her father did not understand.

Her father had never busied himself with such things. He understood nothing, knew nothing. She must tell him.

She then confessed to him that her heart was already engaged.

Already engaged! To whom?

Mimi broke down completely and could say no more. So the father consulted the mother. The mother, of course, knew all. What can escape a mother's eye? She whispered my name. The father then determined to see me at once.

XIX.

I KICK AGAINST THE GOAD.

Can I ever forget that visit? I was seated in my office at the quarry when Mr. Raymond was announced. This particular uncle of mine—the reader must perceive by this time that I was blessed with a large avuncular heritage—was a cold, positive man, who had never been more than civil to me and for whom, in consequence, I did not particularly care. When I saw him enter my office, for the first time since I occupied it, I felt that his call was going to be an unpleasant one. However, I received him with studied politeness.

"Carey," said he, without further preamble, "I have come here on business."

"Ah!" I replied, assuming an attitude of attention, "I am, then, at your service."

"Your frequent visits to my house have been known to me, of course, but I always regarded them as the unceremonious calls of a near relative. In the case of Mimi, more especially, your interviews never appeared to me to be other than the meetings of cousins who sympathized together. I am told now, however, that they had far deeper aims and results. How about that, Carey?"

The tone of this little exordium was not exactly harsh; it was only somewhat peremptory and incisive. It ruffled me, nevertheless, considerably. I replied in consequence:

"Why, uncle, have I done or said anything,

at any of these meetings, which can call for your animadversion? Have I offended anybody in any way?"

"Oh, no! it is not that. All I want to know are the facts."

"What facts?"

"Come now. Don't you know that Mimi loves you?"

"I do, sir. She loves me dearly and I feel proud of it."

"And you—?"

"I love her dearly."

"And then?"

I looked at him inquisitively.

"Is that all?"

"That is all I know of. If you know more, I would thank you to be informed of it."

"I came to get, not to give information. You will allow that I have the right to know all about such things."

"Most assuredly, uncle."

"And that it is the duty of a loyal man, as I take you to be, to disclose his mind on the subject."

"Certainly."

"Then speak. I listen."

"I have told you all I know."

Mr. Raymond made a movement of impatience.

"Have you never spoken to Mimi of marriage?"

"No."

"Never proposed to her?"

"No."

"No word of betrothal has ever passed between you?"

"None."

"That is satisfactory. I will tell you now why I asked." And he entered into a long story about the Chicago lawyer. "I fancy," he added, "that the young man would be particularly pleased to know that he had found favor with my daughter. I hope he will succeed, but for this he must have the assurance that she is not bound to another. After what you have told me, I can now give him that assurance. Of course, I will likewise report this conversation to Mimi."

"I would rather you did not, sir."

"Why not?"

"It might pain her."

"But she must know the truth."

"The truth may be misinterpreted."

"I don't half like this, Carey. It looks like shuffling. I don't want to have my daughter trilled with. I hoped you have not amused her in one of those many ways which young men have of befooling girls."

I did not answer, but crossed my arms and looked stonily at the speaker. I was indignant.

He continued in the same rasping voice:

"We are now in October. Between this and Christmas the question must be decided between you, for by that time I expect Shelton. You and Mimi have frequented one another long enough to know your minds. You are now in a fair condition to settle down and support an establishment. As to Mimi, her marriageable years are fast passing. In the interval named, therefore, choose one way or the other, and for good. I shall tell Mimi the same thing."

"That is categorical, uncle," I said dryly.

"I mean it so."

"Too categorical for me by half. With all respect, I will inform you that I am not in the habit of being driven. In this, of all other things, I want to abide my time."

"Do you refuse then?"

"I neither refuse nor promise. If I see my way to do as you dictate, I will do so; if not, then I will not do so."

"You are frank, Carey. I don't dislike that. Only be as frank with Mimi. The poor child has been pining long enough. I never noticed her, but her mother and your mother have. Speak up to her like a man. Declare your intentions. You know how women are the slaves of men's wills. Don't stand in her way. If you will not have her, don't prevent her from taking advantage of other honorable and fortunate chances. I hope you have sense and delicacy enough for that."

"Now, uncle," said I, "you speak as I like to hear you speak. Let this conversation rest between ourselves. I will see Mimi and have a complete understanding with her. Not for the world would I consciously do her a speck of injury."

"I am not given to eating my own words, but for this once and for Mimi's sake, I will consent to wait, to give you three days' grace, as creditors say. I rely on your word. Don't disappoint me."

And the old man departed not much more cordially than he had entered.

XX.

THE TRIUMPH OF RESIGNATION.

I had kept my countenance with Mr. Raymond. The moment he was gone my spirits collapsed. The great difficulty of my life was never so sharply, so truthfully presented to me. At last there was the dread necessity of action. I could no longer put it off, no longer cradle my heart in delusive hopes. The vague trust that time would bring a change, that the problem would somehow solve itself, without any intervention, now vanished. I must grapple with the case and settle it myself.

When Mr. Raymond marked out a time for me, I rebelled because I was not certain that my mind would be free enough within the period specified to enter upon so arduous a

duty. When left to myself, however, I decided that it was in every way best to act at once.

I gave myself two days to gather my thoughts and nerve my resolution. I then sought and obtained the critical interview. Was it mockery of my sorrowing mood that I found Mimi as playful as a bird? Was it to mark a contrast with the tears which we were going to shed, that she was so lively, brilliant, sarcastic, exuberant? It was only after many futile efforts and the most delicate precautions that I succeeded at length in making her understand the real object of my visit. What was my astonishment to find that the announcement did not affect her painfully. She ceased her merriment, but her good humor remained. Seeing the embarrassment which I experienced, the real sorrow of my looks and words which I did not attempt to conceal, she took pity on me and interrupted me in my speech.

"Don't go further, Carey. I know exactly what you wish to say, and how trying it is for you to say it. I know too what has brought on this declaration of yours. It was my fault. I had a moment of weakness in papa's presence the other day, forgetting myself completely when I found that he was gently forcing a stranger's love upon me. The words I then uttered were taken up and have been repeated to you, for I learned that papa called upon you the same afternoon. Judging from the decision of his character, I suspect he went further and tried to bend your will. Hence your visit today. I can divine what this visit has cost you. Your dull eye, your blanched cheek, your haggard appearance, all tell me of the tempest which you have passed. But be calm, Carey. Excuse my indiscretion. It was a momentary faintness. It will never recur again. For more than a year my mind has been made up and though the combat was long and terrible it ended by leaving me in a state of comparative serenity."

I looked vacantly at her. Her last words were a mystery and seeing that I did not understand her she continued:

"I know that you have loved me, Carey. I know that you love me still. But I know, too, that your love is not undivided. Do not start, my dear. Let me say all. For a long time I lived in the blessed illusion that all your love was mine, as all my love was, and still is, yours. Even after your acquaintance with Ory Paladine, I never cherished a misgiving about you. You remember the interview we had together in this very room, when you went into full explanations and we thought we understood one another thoroughly. Oh, how happy I was after that meeting. How beautiful the future appeared before me. But the reality flashed upon me at last. I learned the truth suddenly, though unmistakably. You seem to ask me when and how? Ah! Carey, do you mind that winter evening at Valmont when we visited the frozen spring together? Your manner there opened my eyes. You were kind and pleasant, but the whole-souled cordiality with which you had until then treated me was wanting just a little. It might have been imperceptible to others. I am sure it was unknown to yourself. But for me it amounted to a revelation. Since then a thousand things have confirmed this belief. You have been as regular in your visits to me as ever; you have never spoken a word or done a deed which I could construe into the shadow of a slight, but a certain warmth had cooled, a certain brightness had paled, and in my heart the gay hope gradually died out."

"These are hard words," Mimi, I murmured.

"They are not harshly meant. I am speaking the truth, that you may be spared the torture of telling it yourself. I am prepared for this, Carey. You are not. I have schooled myself to the great lesson of resignation, while you are still reeling under the stroke of fate. You have been honestly, honorably, heroically trying to be faithful to both Ory and me. You have tried to reconcile these loves. You dreamed of a beautiful impossibility. But I have faced the reality and accepted my share of it. You might love Ory and myself, but you could marry only one of us. Ory and I could go together hand in hand up to a certain point, but there one had to step before the other. That blessing has been reserved for Ory. I will not say that I rejoice at it, but I am content. Every woman has her destiny in love. This is mine and I embrace it."

Mimi's voice gradually lowered as she spoke these last phrases and she stopped to calm the emotion that was rising in her.

"Mimi," I said, "it is a terrible humiliation or me to assist at this dissection of my heart by your hands. All has been a whirlwind of confusion in my brain, a tempest of passion in my soul. I had expected to pour a volley of wild words in your ear. Instead of that, it is you that place a frightful alternative before me with a clear, cold precision. Alas! what am I to do?"

"Follow your heart, Carey," she replied with animation. "You are not master of your affections. God has implanted them, and He shapes your destiny, as He does mine. Ory is worthy of all your love. Your life and hers have been intermingled by a series of most wonderful, mysterious circumstances. Do not fancy that I was blind to that. Indeed, I never knew of two beings who were so imperiously drawn to each other. You cannot help loving Ory. She cannot help loving you. She was predestined from eternity to be your wife."

"But you, Mimi, you? What would become of you?"