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# MY CREOLES:

## A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

By JOHN LESPERANCE.

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

## Book I.

## AT THE QUARRIES.

## I.

## SOLITAIRE.

I never knew my mother. She died when I was an infant. There is not the faintest clue in my memory by which I can recall her. I have often tried to picture her to myself till my head ached, but always in vain. What others, who knew her, have since told me afforded no indication. They have all assured me that she was uncommonly beautiful. An old man—a great admirer of the sex—used to say that she belonged to a type quite exceptional in America, and to be found only in the cultivated circles of Europe. Another said that he had known her a girl, and every morning on going down to his shop, passed along a certain street, where she resided, purposely to admire her beauty. A nephew of my mother wrote out, at my request, his reminiscences of her, and among them is that of her death-bed, where, he avows, her loveliness shone with almost a divine splendour.

It was, and is, a consolation to know these things; but, alas! they do not help me to trace her features, and therefore my mother has been doubly dead to me. I asked not an oil painting, but the faintest daguerreotype, the rudest pencil sketch. By some unaccountable neglect no such precaution against oblivion was ever taken.

There was more. I grew to manhood without the slightest article which had belonged to my mother. It was only a few years ago that, among the scanty effects of a venerable centenarian, who had been the connecting link between the first Creole generation of St. Louis and the sixth, was found a little parcel of yellow paper about a quarter of an inch square, with this superscription in a faint, old-fashioned writing: *Cherchez a Rita*. I was immediately thought of, and the parcel was handed to me at the old lady's funeral. I cannot say what I felt on seeing the paper and touching the dear hair. I laid it on my heart. I pressed it to my lips. A loved girl, who will figure in future pages of this story, took the treasure from me, and had it enclosed in a little golden locket on which are engraved the simple words: "My Mother." I have worn this around my neck, day and night, ever since.

Later, Djim, another character who will soon appear in my work, procured for me the fragment of a letter written by my mother to his sister, a little before her death. The paper is yellow, the ink faint, the writing large, but plain. It contained a few faults of orthography, whether the result of ignorance or negligence I know not, and I do not care. My mother's heart was in this letter when she wrote it. There is her name signed by her own hand. That is enough for me. She speaks only of her child. I count fifteen lines on the paper, and fourteen are consecrated to me. Oh, how she loved me! Why should mothers die? Or, dying, why should their infants survive them?

There are thousands and thousands who read every day in the papers that such or such a woman has died, leaving infant orphans. They think little or nothing of it. It is one death more, one more dereliction in the world. That is all. Such persons will not understand what I have written. For me, whenever I read of such a case I take down a book, which I keep for the purpose in my study, and transcribe the particulars, name, date, locality and all. This is my black list. Practically, it will result in nothing, but I take a sad complacency in this roll of kindred misfortune. I may never see these orphans, never hear of them again, but they are the only brothers and sisters I can claim. My father died when I was very young, but I have some remembrance of him. This recollection is full of melancholy. I can recall that my father had struggled hard with life; had had his hours of success and was once on the highway to fortune; had suddenly failed and ever after was reduced to make a living in the employ of others. The man who had ruined himself by indorsing the notes of his friends was forsaken by his friends in the day of his own distress. Naturally, my father was cheerful and even gay; but I oftenest remember his sad smiles and the tears which I saw him shed. He loved me to adoration. I was the light of his eyes, the only aim and object of his life.

I was my mother's first and only child. Thus, when my father died, I was alone in the world. Strange that I have never felt the want of a brother. But to this day I have not become reconciled to the want of a sister. It has always seemed to me that a sister would have filled a portion of that vacuum which has been the standing misfortune of my life. She would have given food to that great hunger of love whose insatiety has ever gnawed me. In a measure, she

would have replaced my mother. From my own experience I can safely assert that next to the child who has lost his mother the most incomplete being is he who has never had a sister. My mother, the youngest child of a large family, had been a special favourite with all her relations. Her premature death—at the age of twenty—proved the occasion of universal mourning. Every one was anxious to testify his esteem for her. It was with this feeling that her second sister, though already married and burdened with three children, offered my mother, on her deathbed, to adopt her orphan child. The solemn promise was given that I would be regarded as a child of the family, treated in every respect like my little cousins, and reared to do honour to my name. It need not be added how eagerly my mother accepted the proposition.

"I shall die tranquil now," said she. "My dear child will not be left among strangers. His father will have a help which will relieve him of a great responsibility. God be praised."

I need not say more of my aunt Teresa than that she fulfilled her promise to the letter. She was to me truly a mother. She always called me "my son;" I called her "mamma." She kissed me whenever I went away from home, and again when I returned. She wept with me when I was in pain. These were the dearest proofs of love. I was nearly of an age with her only son, and we were as brothers. We dressed alike, played together, went to school together. Ben was sweeter-tempered than I, better-behaved and far less troublesome. The only thing that compensated a little for my inordinate mischief was the fact that on Saturdays I always returned from school with a lot of pictures and improvement marks. This pleased my aunt very much.

At the age of eight Ben met with an accident which, after some months of ailment, resulted in his death. It seemed then that I was adopted more closely into the family. There remained only two daughters, younger than myself, I was taken in as their brother.

If things had remained so I should probably have been happy, but they did not so remain. Perhaps it was not in nature that my case should be exceptional. My father died about this time and other changes took place. Strange influences, part of which my dear mamma ignored, and part of which she could not control, were introduced to bear upon my fate. No one else appeared to notice these, but I did.

A great displacement finally occurred. At the tender age of nine I was sent to college as a boarder. It was the transplanting of a young sapling from the nursery into hard, uncongenial earth. As some trees will survive any ill-usage and flourish, so did I get on in my new sphere, spite of all the loneliness, the sense of abandonment, the harshness of college discipline, to which my young spirits could never take kindly. Year after year was spent in that dreary prison, but I never really got used to it. A natural love of study would sometimes induce long spells of forgetfulness, during which I lived in an ideal land with the dear old poets, historians and orators, whose works were my only companions; but when I returned to real life again I experienced a disappointment, a discouragement, a disgust proportioned to the pleasure I had enjoyed. I dare say no man ever learned earlier than I did the natural law of mental equilibrium, the inexorable law of moral compensation.

During these years two facts were impressed upon me, burned into me as with hot irons. By look, by word, by action, by suggestive silence, I was made to understand two things—that I was an orphan, and that I was poor.

Poverty in the future was a hard fact to deal with. There could be no illusion about that. I had just means enough to pay the expenses of my education, and when they were gone I remained with nothing to begin life. What made the prospect more painful was that there was wealth in all the branches of our family, and that I felt I would be looked down upon by my more fortunate relatives. The habit of riches had spoiled them and me. Poverty was regarded as a disgrace.

Yet youth is hopeful, and I did not allow myself to be too much cast down.

Meantime, I had still one stay. However others felt, I knew that my mamma's love was unchanged, and that her daughters loved me as sisters.

## II.

## IN MEMORIAM.

She was called away to her reward after my destiny had drifted me far from my native city, and I had to leave to others the pious duty of writing her epitaph. But now that her name has come up for the first time in these memoirs, what can I do less than consecrate a page to her remembrance? And as a specimen of that Creole type which it is the aim of this work to commemorate, there is none higher or purer than my foster-mother.

She was a life-long valetudinarian. As I recall her easiest, it was with a white band around her forehead. She was a martyr to nervous headache. Her hair was white at thirty. In the first years of the malady, when I was a little child, I often spent hours extracting these unwelcome monitors with her silver pincers. She loved me for what she called my patience in this good office, and used to say that the pressure of my small hands on her head was a relief. Her dark eyes had early faded to a light brown through these constant aches. There were lines on her broad white forehead. Her face was lengthened and emaciated from the same cause. Her cheeks were always pale. Her lips never lost their smile, but the corners might be often seen quivering from pain.

She led a life of solitude. For nearly twenty years her husband's occupation kept him away from home during the greater part of the twelve months. She thus remained alone in her large house, with no other company than her children, and no other protection than the faithful servants. She loved this peaceable, domestic existence. It suited her simple tastes. It was the school in which she had learned that unalterable patience, that sweetness of temper which were the most charming traits of her character.

I remember the long winter evenings in the children's room, when seated around the table, or ensconced under the pink and white coverlets of our little cribs, we heard her sing, one after another, the beautiful *Cantiques de St. Sulpice*. Often, too, on awakening during the night, we saw her kneeling before the large engraving of Raffaele's *Madonna della Sedda* which hung on the southern wall. What passed in that patient, struggling soul during those midnight vigils none will ever know.

And who shall recount her charities? She was one of those to whom giving is a necessity. She had an instinct for finding out the wants of the needy. Her way of administering help might be called the science of delicacy. Having survived all her brothers and sisters, it so happened that many of their children required her assistance, and they received it. Her eldest sister left two sons, who were the special objects of her care during their childhood and school life. Her youngest brother died prematurely in one of the southern counties of the State, leaving a large family. She caused the two eldest daughters to come up to the city, kept them in her house as her own children, and helped them on in their education. The daughter of a near relative—a girl of surpassing beauty—in a season of uncommon distress and danger, found a refuge under her roof until such time as she could go forth without risk. An aged aunt of hers, after many years of absence, wandered back to the city in such destitution that she was ashamed to present herself before her relatives. The day following her arrival she received from the porter of one of the principal mercers two large parcels containing a thorough outfit. After the first moments of surprise, the old lady fell on her knees in thanksgiving. She knew who it must be that had thought of her.

To my mamma's house how many came to tell their sorrows—to demand advice! How many came to be nursed in their sickness! How many came to die! One little maiden, especially, I remember, who came miles from her place of banishment to pass her last weeks of consumptive fever under the protection of her who was a mother to so many of us.

If I have singled out these few traits from so many which I could rehearse, it is because the persons to whom they refer are nearly all living, and should they ever come across these pages, will unite with me in blessing the memory of our benefactress.

Yes, a blessing on her name! Mother of the orphan, friend of the poor, comfort of the sorrowful, may a benediction, for her sake, rest on her children and on the children of her children!

## III.

## THE WHITE FIGURE.

The early consciousness of my dependence and poverty had an useful influence on my character. It helped, along with other circumstances, to make me apply very earnestly to my studies and set up for myself a fixed purpose. Thus, during the year which, as stated in the introduction, still remained to be gone through, I made as honest employment of my time as I could possibly do, being convinced that there was my golden opportunity to amass material for the future and complete my panoply for the great warfare of life.

I formed one of a special class of surveying. There was something attractive to me in the science itself (can anybody tell me how it is that while I disliked geometry, I was very fond of trigonometry?) and I hoped to make practical use of it afterward, as in our Western country professional surveyors and civil engineers were and are still in great demand.

A particular feature of the course were the field days. We had "chained" the college grounds till we knew their dimensions to the infinitesimal part of a square inch. We had determined the altitude of the chapel tower over and over again. We knew to the shade of a second the dip of the gambrel that roofed the observatory. We had ascertained the "lay" of every prominent object within sight of our classroom window. It was therefore necessary to extend the sphere of our observations. Our professor delighted in a tramp, and of course he

found eager companions in all his pupils. Those sunny, flowery afternoons of April and May, out in the fields, were full of enjoyment. We did a great deal of walking, of sighting, of setting, of dragging. The note-books were covered with figures. We were allowed to smoke openly. A rare privilege. We were not allowed to drink anything stronger than water, even in secret, but I am afraid that the little black bottles hidden at intervals behind the bushes were landmarks of something else besides our geodesic devotion. All of us came back to college very tired. There was a set who knew nothing of what was going on, grouped around the theodolite with their hands in their pockets, listening with forced attention to the professor's explanations and looking very wise. Another set knew a little, but made no pretensions to knowledge, lounging on the grass, smoking, gadding and watching any adventure that might present itself. A class is a little image of the world. The majority are either unable or unwilling to comprehend. It is only a handful that follow the teaching throughout.

One day we wandered much farther than usual. This happened through a trick of our leaders. The professor appointed, as usual, two of the oldest students, acquainted with the city, to guide the party. These fellows, bent on a lark, led us to the southern outskirts, through a region where there were plenty of beer-stalls, fruit-stands and tobacco-booths. On the way they gathered the pocket money of the rest of us, made notes of the articles which each one required, and these they were to distribute when we reached the surveying ground. It took us a long time to get there, and we were so tired when we arrived that the first thing we did was to sit down on the grass, under some trees, to eat our wormy apples and smoke Cuban-sixes. Civil, as well as military engineers, have an eye for reconnaissance. From my seat I took in the features of the "field" at once. Before us, within a stone's cast, flowed the Mississippi, muddy on our side, but crystal clear along the Illinois shore, whose tall forest trees it mirrored with wonderful distinctness. Behind stretched fields and gardens, irregularly fenced and only partially cultivated. Their owners probably resided in the city, which accounted for this neglect and for the absence of habitations. To our right were pastures whose bright green was relieved here and there by the white horns and the red and yellow coats of the grazing cows. To our left was an open space, which was to be the ground of our survey. Beyond, still further to the left, three circular hedges of dwarf shrubbery indicated as many stone-quarries, now abandoned.

Our siesta would have been prolonged through the afternoon but for our professor, who roused us with the cry: "To work!" At once, by the few who knew how to use them, theodolite, sextant, quadrant, plumb and level were set; while the vulgar herd, the *ignobile vulgus*, got ready to slip the chains from their necks. In an unusually short time, the open area was measured, each one working out the problem in his notebook, as he best knew how. It was the same old routine. Two or three struck off a ready and correct answer; two or three more went half right and half wrong and forged the answer; a half dozen copied the whole calculation from their neighbours' books without any ceremony and handed it up as their own. Of the remainder, some never took the trouble to put pencil to paper and others swore that the problem was impossible of solution.

For myself, I must confess to my confusion that I was found wanting on this occasion.

"Your figures are all wrong, Carey," said the professor.

"I was afraid they would turn out so, sir," was my reply.

"How? The problem is not half so difficult as others that you have solved."

"I have found it harder at any rate, sir. I suppose I must be out of sorts."

"Tut, tut," said the professor, who thought a great deal of me, "a mathematician's mind should always be as true as that spirit level."

"When it is set, sir," I exclaimed, laughing.

The professor never relished a joke. He turned on his heel and left me.

I profited by the movement to slip off the ground.

This is what had happened. While the surveying was going on, I had been stationed to make an observation, near the very edge of the field. It was within only a few feet of the stunted shrubs mentioned above. Curiosity led me to look over into the chasms. The first which I saw was small and presented nothing peculiar. The second was much larger, but partially filled up with shapeless masses of stone. Either a subterranean mine had exploded, or a portion of the wall had fallen in. In either case, it seemed to have been the scene of a catastrophe. The third quarry displayed an immense diameter and was fully two hundred feet deep. I had no time, at this first sight, to examine what it contained, but it impressed me with doubt and awe. The only thing I noticed particularly was a rugged descent, on the side opposite me. This extended from the brink to the bottom, in the shape of a rude flight of steps. About half-way along these stairs, to the right as you went down, there was an immense ledge of flat rock which seemed destined to serve as a platform.

Opening on this rock was a recess in the wall of the quarry, which looked to me like a cavern. The oblong black shadow which I took to be the mouth of the cavern was festooned with wild flowers and a profusion of green.