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MY CREOLES:

A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

By JOHN LESPERANCE,

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

Book II.

VOUDOUS AND VOUDOUISM.

VII.

AN ABRUPT PAUSE.

The girl was a thoroughbred Congo. Her face was as black and shiny as a lump of Lackawanna coal. Her teeth were two large ranks of sparkling ivory. Her hair was as tufted as leeland moss; no comb could possibly go through it, and it was propped up on the back of her head in pyramidal shape. She had, however, two exceptions to the original type, and these were redeeming features. Her lips were heavy and thick, but not blubbery, and the under one did not protrude. Her nose, instead of being bridgeless and outspread at the nostrils, was a saucy little pug, very provocative, no doubt, to sable swains. There was a devil in her eye, too, which explained all the slaughter she had made among the young bucks of her condition, and how it was she had completely conquered the poor son of Hiacinte.

From my examination, I concluded that the girl could be best dealt with by coaxing. Intimidation would have only the effect of hardening her.

"See here, Toinette," said I, approaching my chair an inch or two, while Hiacinte, with a yearning, anxious look, did the same, "I told you I wanted to do something for you and Gaston, if I could; but I can do nothing, unless you tell me the whole story. I don't wish to force you to speak, mind, but if you can't or won't tell me more, say so at once, and I will go."

I spoke this very gently and without the least intimation of resentment.

Hiacinte followed me up in a strain of the most pitiful entreaty. It was a low, moaning whine, full of a peculiar pathos.

The girl looked at me wildly and said:

"Ef I told on my brudder, he'd choke me dead."

"But he never need know, Toinette."

"He'd be sure to know, sah. The devil tells him everything. I never seed such a man for finding out everything."

"Bah! bah!" said I, laughing, "don't mind that. You have only Hiacinte and myself to hear and we would never tell, not if we were torn to pieces for it; would we, Hiacinte?"

Hiacinte arose and swore a terrible oath.

"There now; what do you say?"

"And ef I told you, what would you do to Nain?"

"Nothing."

"Nothin'? Nothin'? And you want to know all dis for nothin'?"

"I told you before that I came here to try and help Gaston. For that I must know the whole truth. Ah! Toinette, I am afraid that, after all, you don't care much for the poor fellow, who by this time must be suffering in the cane brakes of Louisiana."

"Oh! sah, don't say so. I will tell you all."

I had risen from my seat and taken up my hat, preparing to go away.

The girl, wrought to the highest pitch of emotion, and fearing my departure, sprang from her chair and threw herself at my feet. I moved backward a few steps, but she followed, creeping on the floor. Then she flung her arms around my knees and looked up imploringly into my face. No female countenance can be declared ugly when lit up with intellect or love. De Stael had a beauty of her own when animated with literary converse, and this slave-girl, spite of her colour, was partially transformed in the love-light which streamed from her eyes.

I tried to make her rise, but she would not.

"You will bring Gaston back," she said, "ef I tell you all."

"I can't promise that, Toinette, but I will try."

"Oh! If you try, you will succeed; I know you will."

"I will first go to his master and explain matters to him. The master liked Gaston and may be led to forgive him. He knows the man he sold him to, and though the boy is gone, he may find a way of getting him back again. I will try this first, and if I can't succeed, I'll go about it in some other way. If nothing else will do, though I have little money of my own, I will work for or borrow the sum necessary to buy him back. Gaston will then be free, and I know he will make enough with his wages to repay me."

"That he will, sah," exclaimed Toinette.

"That he will," echoed Hiacinte, who though she remained seated, was transported beside herself.

"Yes, and we all 'ell help him," added the girl. "Old mas'r allows us a little purse. I'll give wat I got or kin make, and so I knows 'ell

Paul and Suse and Marthe. And our young missus Ory, who 'es all the money she wants, will do wat she kin for us. O, sah, save poor Gaston; bring him back, let me only see him once more."

Toinette rose and stood in front of me. I thought I could read in her face that her mind was decided. Hiacinte rose, too, and advanced toward us.

"Now, sah," said the girl in a low voice, "you kin tell Gaston's mas'r how it all happened. Wen Gaston made up to me, he got to be a great friend of my brudder. Arter talking to me awile, he'd go and 'ev long talks with Nain. I liked dat well 'nough, for brudder bosses over all of us, old folks and young folks, and ef he liked Gaston, he'd let me 'ev him for beau. Things went on dat way fur a good piece. One night Gaston had jst come and was talkin' to me, when brudder called him out. Dry boaf staid away a long time. Then, at last, Gaston come back and said he must go. 'Whar to?' I says. 'Oh,' says he, 'way up town.' 'How fur?' says I. 'As fur up as de college,' he says. Dat looked funny, and he looked funny, and I told him so. He only laughed. Den I axed him wen he'd be back. He said I'd be in bed wen he got back, but dat I'd see him agin in de mornin'. Somehow I didn't like all dis, and was gwine to talk him out of it, when brudder comes up and says: 'Don't mind, Toinette; he's goin' for me.' I didn't say no more, and Gaston walked off."

At this point, a noise as of steps was heard outside, and a gust of wind rumbled down the chimney. The girl stopped, listened, and looked around with a frightened face.

"The debil allays comes down the chimbley, sah," said she, "go and look."

I was aware of this superstition, and, to reassure her, pretended to make an examination of the large fire-place.

"It's nothing, Toinette," said I, "only a little blow. Don't fear."

She still hesitated a moment, but as all relapsed into deep silence again, she took heart and continued:

"As I was sayin', sah, Gaston went away, but next mornin' I seed him agin, and he looked down in the mouf. I axed him wat was de matter, but he only shook his head. Arter a wile, tho', he said he'd ben away from home all night and was afeard to go back. His mas'r would scold him, shore. Wile he was a talkin' to me, a boy comes runnin' up and he says to Gaston: 'I knowed I'd find you here. Whar you ben? Old mas'r is ragin' mad. He'll lick the hide off o' you. A young gemmen jst come down to see mas'r and he talked 'bout you, 'cause mas'r called for you, and wen Nance told him you'd ben out all night and hadn't got back, he took it awful. Now you'd best hurry back right 'way, for mas'r's went off in his buggy wid de young gemman and ef he don't find you at de house wen he gets back, it'll be terrible.' Den poor Gaston he hit his forehead so—(imitating the gesture)—and he said: 'Dare's somethin' wrong about dat darned letter, and he ran off widout eber kissin' me. I ain't neber seen him sence.'"

Here Toinette gave way a moment to her tears.

"I sot down," she continued, "and begun to cry. Somethin' told me dat Gaston had got into a bad scrape. Brudder Nain seed me and axed me wat I was a cryin' 'bout. I told him. Oh, how he did flash out. He stamped on the ground and he tore his hair, and he cussed like the debil. My! how he did carry on. 'De infernal fool and jackass,' he said, meaning Gaston, 'wat made him let 'em find him out. I ought er ev know'd better than send such a confounded goose.' At first I was gwine to talk up to him, but I didn't. I put in a good word fur Gaston, and axed him wat was wrong wid dat letter dat Gaston talked 'bout. But Nain was afeard dat Gaston had blabbed some, and so he took me round de neck and hugged me. 'Toinette,' says he, 'you must hush up 'bout dis. It will be best for all of us.' Den I axed him ef it was him ed wrote dat letter. He looked at me very cross and said—"

"Well, what did he say, Toinette?"

She glanced around the room and bending to my ear:

"He said dat—"

"If you didn't hold your saucy tongue, he'd burst your brains out," thundered a voice at the open door.

The girl gave a shriek and fell senseless at my feet.

She had recognized her brother Nain.

VIII.

NAIN KNOCKS UNDER.

I, too, had recognized the negro who had startled me in the wood-path. He stood in the door-way cool, stern, drawn up to his full height, ready for anything, but unarmed. He did not

look at me, his eyes being fixed on the fallen girl. After a moment's pause, he advanced into the room, and was about stooping over his sister, when Hiacinte rushed at him.

"Stand off, old woman," said he, in excellent French, "this is no business of yours. I know you. You are Gaston's mother. I pity you, but you must not interfere."

Hiacinte drew back, seemingly more frightened at these quiet words than she would have been at a volley of threats.

I felt that it was my turn to speak.

"Leave that girl alone," said I, "she is here under my protection. I will take care of her."

The fellow stood up and made me a most elegant French bow.

"I have the honour to salute Monsieur Carey Gilbert," said he. "I would not take the liberty to address him first, but now that Monsieur has done me the honour of speaking to me, I will answer him. Monsieur is very kind to take care of my sister. If Mademoiselle Ory knew it, she would be very grateful to him."

"Hush, you villain," I exclaimed, overwhelmed at the sarcasm of this allusion; "how can you dare pronounce that name here?"

I approached him threateningly. He did not budge from his place.

"Ah! Monsieur is excited. Very well. It is time to stop this comedy. You know me, sir, and I know you. You are a gentleman; I am a miserable slave, but we have important matters to settle between us, nevertheless. Not to-night, however. At least, not if I can help it. I know the object of your visit here. I have heard everything. It is very honourable. No one regrets the misfortune of Gaston more than I do. I would give myself up to redeem him. But that is no reason why Toinette should betray her promises and expose herself to the most terrible of punishments for treachery. She is now recovering from her fright, and I will take her home."

Considering the social difference existing between us, and considering, especially, the deadly enmity which I knew the negro harbored against me, it would only have been natural that I should have stopped his mouth before he had time to utter all this impertinent nonsense. But, to my own surprise, I not only listened to him, but while he spoke found myself half lost in admiration of his cunning and audacity. My anger had so far subsided that I appreciated a little the comic of the situation.

When he had ceased speaking, Nain held out his hand to Toinette, who was now sufficiently recovered from her terror and surprise to be able to stand up. She kept her eyes down, however, and I noticed on her face that absence of glossiness which in the negro is a substitute for paleness.

"Come home with me now," said Nain, in a sharp voice. "We'll settle the rest there."

"Not so," I exclaimed, interposing my hand; "Toinette will return, as she came, with Hiacinte. I will remain here till Hiacinte comes back and reports that she is safe."

A flash shot from the negro's eye and he set his teeth, but I was roused now. I was determined on carrying my point.

"I will follow them," said he.

"If you do, I will follow you and bring you further than you care to go to-night. I will bring you into the presence of your master, even if I have to call him up from his bed."

At these words the fellow started. His countenance fell, and all his assurance deserted him.

"I will remain here," said he.

"Very well. Now, Hiacinte and Toinette, be off as quick as you can."

Not more than a quarter of an hour after, Hiacinte returned with the announcement that they were met at the outer gate of The Quarries by Miss Ory and another lady, and that Toinette was immediately taken in by them. I noticed that the statement made a powerful impression on Nain, who glanced furtively at me, and, meeting my eye, averted a guilty look.

Did Ory know of my meeting with Toinette, or did she only suspect? In either case I was comforted, for I felt that she would help me.

I was about leaving the room when "Auntie" came in precipitately to tell us that two policemen had just passed down the common.

"That's ben some bad c'racters about here of late, at nights, en de p'lice is a smellin' 'em out," said the old dame.

Nain tumbled nervously into his pockets, but his search must have been futile, for he dropped his arms on each side of him. He then looked up appealingly to me.

"Come, Hiacinte, let us go."

"Very well, Mas'r Carey," and turning to the negro, she said:

"Ain't you gwine, too, Nain?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I've lost or forgot my pass."

The law at that time was that no negro, old or young, male or female, slave or free, might be out after nine at night without a written pass, signed by some responsible white person. The penalty for infraction of this law was the imprisonment of the culprit in the calaboose, his trial next morning, and a fine for release mulcted on the owner.

"It won't do for you to remain here," said I. "I'll give you a pass and you will leave at once."

"Thank you, sir," said Nain, very humbly.

Tearing out a leaf from my pocket-book, I wrote in pencil:

"Pass Nain, one of the servants at The Quarries."

CAREY GILBERT.

"Here," said I, "now go."

He took the paper with a respectful bow, put it in his pocket, sipped toward the door, and the moment he reached it, made a leap forward into the darkness.

"Dat nigger is a debil, Massa Carey," said Hiacinte, as we walked away together.

IX.

HAD I LOST MY TIME?

I had had two distinct objects in my interview with Toinette. The first was to make her tell me, in so many words, that Nain had written the letter to Father Wye; the second, to learn from her whether or not Gaston was a Voodoo. I had not directly succeeded in either object, though I was on the point of it, but I had learned enough to make me sure of both facts. Nain had sent the letter. That much was confessed, and, on a stretch, it was enough. He could read and write. Of his exceptional mental culture I could judge for myself, from the purity of his accent, his choice of language and the artificial self-possession of which he had given me such provoking proofs. An ignorant slave, no matter how cunning, could never have borne himself thus. With regard to Gaston, I could not be quite so positive. But his sudden and intimate relations with Nain; their long, secret talks together; his consent to carry the letter; the mystery he made about it; his braving the punishment for remaining out all night; his own remark when his master's anger was told him; the words of Nain to Toinette when he heard that Gaston had been caught—all these were so many points of presumption that Gaston was more or less under the influence of Voodooism. That is, he was hardly a free agent in the whole transaction.

I may be asked why I did not interrogate Nain himself, when I had him in my power, in the cabin? Surely I might have drawn some answer from him, or there might have been circumstances attending his very silence which could have gone far to confirm my suspicions. The thought did occur to me, but one glance at the fellow sufficed to dissuade me. Either he would have refused point blank, assuming a stony silence, or he would have beaten about the bush—a trick of which he appeared to be a master—and by driving me thus to lose my temper, bring on a scene which would have humiliated me, if it had not led to more deplorable results. My patience had already been almost worn by Toinette, and I was not prepared to strain it further. Besides, there was that about the fellow—I cannot precisely say what—which showed that he had come there thoroughly armed for just such an encounter. Another circumstance was that it was late when he made his appearance and I was not willing to assume the responsibility, rather a grave one for a youngster like me, of keeping slaves out of their master's houses at an undue hour.

If I had had positive proof of Nain's guilt, my intention was to have denounced him at once to his owner. As it was, I could not go so far. Regarding Gaston, I had learned quite enough to be able to make out a plausible case for him and I resolved to see Mr. Parley, as soon as possible, with that view. Whether I succeeded or not, I would not lose sight of the fellow, for I had pledged myself to that effect. And I felt that his fate was more or less bound up with the solution of my trouble.

Altogether, I was not dissatisfied with what had happened. I had seen my enemy between the two eyes. I had read his character in all its phases. I had shown him that I was wiser and more afraid of him. Furthermore, I had done him a service. This service, of course, would only add fuel to his revenge. But it was something to be prepared for such increase of hatred.

By the time I had got home my course of action was fully decided. I determined to follow up the negro and bring the whole matter to a prompt and decisive issue.

X.

AN UNEXPECTED PERMISSION.

It will be remembered that I had hitherto studiously avoided revealing my connection with the Paladines to any of my family. Even when I explained to my foster-mother the cause of my difficulty with Father Wye, I had mentioned the anonymous letter without giving the names of the persons who were implicated. Singularly enough, too, my mamma had put no questions, and seemed satisfied with what I had told her. But, now that I was about to take an important and perhaps a final step, I thought it my duty to inform her of my acquaintance with M. Paladine and all the circumstances of my visits to him. I should even have liked to speak to her of Ory, but my promise of secrecy concerning our interview put that out of my power. The moment I uttered M. Paladine's name, my mamma shuddered and turned deadly pale, but she did not interrupt me, and as I went on with my story, gradually resumed her usual placidity. When I detailed the events of my first meeting, especially the scene at the garden gate, she laughed very heartily, nodding her head in a playful manner, as if she meant to say, "Just like him; just like him." At different parts of my narrative, I noticed that she was more or less affected, but she suffered me to go on to the end, without offering any observation.

When I had done, she said:

"It is many years, my son—I can't remember how many—since I have breathed M. Paladine's name. But I will not say one word against him now."