

Literature, &c.

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PLACE DE LA CROIX.

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THERE is much of beautiful romance in the who's history of the early settlements of Florida. De Soto and Ponce de Leon have thrown around the records of their searches for gold and the waters of life a kind of dreamy character, that renders them more like traditions of a spiritual than of a real world. They and their followers were men of stern military discipline, who had won honors in their conquests over the Moors; and they came hither not as emigrants, seeking an asylum from oppression, but as proud nobles anxious to add to their numerous laurels by conquests in a new world. The startling discoveries, the fruits, the gold, and the natives that appeared with Columbus at the court of Isabella, gave to fancy an impetus and to enthusiasm a power that called forth the pomp of the 'Infallible Church' to mingle her sacred symptoms with those of arms; and they went joined together through the wilds of America.

Among the beautiful and striking customs of those days was the erection of the Cross at the mouths of rivers and prominent points of land that presented themselves to the discoverers. The sacred symbol thus reared in solitude seemed to shadow forth the future, when the dense forest would be filled with its followers instead of the wild savage; and it cheered the lonely pilgrim in his dangerous journeys, bringing to his mind all the cherished associations of this life, and directing his thoughts to another world. In the putting up of these crosses, as they bore the arms of the Sovereign whose subjects erected them, and as they were indicative of civil jurisdiction and empire, the most prominent and eminent locations were selected, where they could be seen for miles around, towering above every other object, speaking the advances of the European, and giving title to the lands over which they cast their shadows.—Three hundred years ago the sign of the cross was first raised on the banks of the Mississippi. From one of the few bluffs or high points of land that border that swift running river, DeSoto, guided by the aborigines of the country, was the first European that looked upon its turbid waters, soon to be his grave. On this high bluff, taking advantage of a lofty cotton wood tree, he caused its majestic trunk to be shorn of its limbs; on this tall shaft was placed the beam that made the cross.—This completed, the emblazoned banners of Spain and Arragon were unfurled to the breeze, and amid the strains of martial music and the firing of cannon, the steel clad DeSoto, assisted by the priests in his train, raised the host to Heaven, and declared the reign of Christianity commenced in the valley of the Mississippi.

The erection of this touching symbol in the great temple of nature was full of poetry. The forests, like the stars, declare the wonderful works of the Creator. In the silent grandeur of our primal forests, in their avenues of columns, their canopies of leaves, their festoons of vines, the cross touched the heart, and spoke more fully its office than it ever will, glistening among the human greatness of a Milan cathedral, or the solemn splendor of a St. Peters.

Two hundred years after a Ponce de Leon mingled his dust with the sands of the peninsula of Florida, and De Soto reposed beneath the current of the Mississippi, the same spirit of religious and military enthusiasm pervaded the settlements made by both French and Spaniards in this 'land of flowers.' Among the adventurers of that day were many who mingled the romantic ambition of the crusaders with the ascetic spirit of the monk, and who looked upon themselves as ambassadors of religion to new nations in a new world. Of such was Rousseau.

It requires little imagination to understand the disappointment that such a man would meet with in forest life, and as an instructor of the intractable red man. The exalted notions of Rousseau ended in despondency, away from the pomp and influence of his Church. Having been nurtured in the 'Eternal city,' he had not the zeal and lacked the principle to become an humble teacher to humbler recipients of knowledge. Disregarding his priestly office, he finally mingled in the dissipation of society, and in the year 1736 he started off as a military companion to D'Artaguet in his expedition against the Chickasas. The death of D'Artaguet and his bravest troops, and the dispersion of his Indian allies, left Rousseau a wanderer, surrounded by

implacable enemies, he being one of the few who escaped the fate of battle. Unaccustomed to forest life, more than a thousand miles from the Canadas, he became a prey of imaginary and real dangers; unprovided with arms, his food was of roots or herbs; at night the wild beasts howled round his cold couch, and every stump in the day time seemed to conceal an Indian.

Now it was that Rousseau reviewed the incidents of his past life with sorrow. He discovered when it was too late that he had lost his peace of mind and his hopes of a future existence for a momentary enjoyment. Wasting with watching and hunger, he prayed to the Virgin to save him, that he might by a long life of penance obliterate his sins. On the 12th day of his wanderings he sank upon the earth to die, and casting his eyes upward in prayer, he saw far in the distance, towering above every object, the cross! It seemed a miracle, and inspired strength in his trembling limbs; and he pressed forward that he might breathe his last at its foot. As he reached it, a smile of triumph lighted up his way-worn features, and he fell insensible to the earth.

Never perhaps was this sacred emblem more beautifully decorated or touchingly displayed, than was the one that towered over Rousseau. From indications, some fifteen years might have elapsed since the European pilgrim had erected it. One of the largest forest trees had been chosen that stood upon the surrounding bluffs.—the tall trunk tapered upward with the proportions of a Corinthian column, which, with the piece forming the cross, was covered with ten thousand evergreen vines, that spread such a character over the southern landscape. It seemed as if Nature paid tribute to the sacred symbol, and festooned it with a perfection and beauty worthy of her abundance.—The honey suckle and the ivy, the scarlet creeper and the fragrant jasmine, the foliage enamelled with flowers, shed upon the repentant and insensible Rousseau a shower of fragrance.

Near where he lay, there was a narrow and amply worn path; you could trace it from where it lost itself in the deep forests, to where it wound itself in the steep washed bank, until it touched the water's edge. At this point were to be seen the prints of foot-steps; the traces of small fires were also visible, and one of them sent up puffs of smoke. Here it was that the Choctaw maidens and old women, performed their rude labor of washing. In the morning and evening sun a long line of the forest children might be seen with clay jars and skins filled with water, carrying them upon their heads, and stringing up, single file, the steep bank, and losing themselves in the woods; with their half clad and erect forms, making a most picturesque display, not unlike the processions figured in the hieroglyphical paintings of Egypt.

Soon after Rousseau fell at the cross, these might have been seen emerging from the woods, and following the path we have described, a delicately formed Indian girl. In her hand was a long reed and a basket, and she came with blithe steps toward the river. As she passed the cross, the form of Rousseau met her eyes. Stopping and examining him, with almost overpowering curiosity, she retreated with precipitation, and almost instantly. She approached nearer and nearer, until the wan and insensible face met hers. Strange as was his appearance and color, the cord of humanity was touched; the woman forgot both fear and curiosity, in her anxiety to allay visible suffering. A moment had hardly elapsed, before water was thrown over Rousseau, and held to his lips. The refreshing beverage brought him to consciousness. He stared wildly about him, and discovering the Indian form bending over him, he sank again insensible to the earth. Like a young doe the girl bounded away and disappeared.

A half an hour might have elapsed when there issued out of the forest a long train of Indians. At their head was the young maiden surrounded by armed warriors; in the rear followed women and children. They approached Rousseau, whose recovery was but momentary, and who was now unconscious of what was passing around him. The crowd examined him first with caution, gradually with familiarity; their whistles became animated conversation, and finally blended in one noisy confusion. There were among those present many who had heard of the white man and of his powers, but none had ever seen one before. One Indian, more bold than the rest, stripped the remnant of a cloak from Rousseau's shoulder, another emboldened by this act, caught rudely hold of his coat, and as he pulled it aside

there felt from his breast a small gilt crucifix, held by a silken cord. Its brilliancy excited the cupidity of all, and many were the eager hands that pressed forward to obtain it. An old chief gained the prize, and fortunately for Rousseau, his prowess and influence left him in undisputed possession. As he examined the little trinket, the Indian girl we have spoken of, the only female near Rousseau, crossed her delicate fingers and pointed upward. The old chief instantly beheld the similarity between the large and small symbol of Christianity, and extending it aloft with all the dignity of a cardinal, the crowd shouted as they saw the resemblance, and a change came over them all. They associated at once the erection of a large cross with Rousseau, and as their shout had again called forth exhibitions of life from his insensible form, they threw his cloak over him, suspended the cross to his neck, brought in a moment green boughs with which a litter was made, and bore him with all respect toward their lodges. The excitement and exercise of removal did much to restore him to life; a dish of maize did more; and nothing could exceed his astonishment on his recovery that he should be treated with such kindness; and as he witnessed the respect paid the cross, and was shown by rude gestures that he owed his life to its influence, he sank upon his knees overwhelmed with its visible exhibition of power, and satisfied that his prayer for safety had been answered in the perfection of a miracle.

The Choctaws, into whose hands the unfortunate Rousseau had fallen, (although he was not aware of the difference,) were not the bloody minded Cherokees, from whom he had so lately escaped. Years before, the inhabitants of the little village on their return from a hunting expedition discovered the cross we have described; its marks then were such as would be exhibited a few days after its erection. Footsteps were seen about its base, that from their variance with the mark left by the moccasin satisfied the Indians that it was not erected by any of their people. The huge limbs that had been shorn from the trunk bore fresh marks of terrible cuts, which the stone hatchet could not have made. As is natural to the Indian mind, on the display of power, they cannot explain, they appropriately though accidentally associated the cross with a Great Spirit, and looked upon it with wonder and admiration. Beside the cross there was found an axe, left by those who had formed it. This was an object of the greatest curiosity to its finders. They stuck it into the trees, severed huge limbs, and performed other powerful feats with it, and yet fancied their own rude stone instruments failed to do the same execution from want of a governing spirit, equal to that which they imagined presided over the axe, and not from difference of material. The cross and the axe were associated together in the Indians' minds, and the crucifix of Rousseau connected him with both. They treated him therefore with all the attention they would bestow upon a being who was master of a superior power.

The terrible and strange incidents that had formed the life of Rousseau, since the defeat of his military associate D'Artaguet, seemed to him, as he recalled them to his mind, an age. His dreams were filled with scenes of torment and death. He would start from his sleep with the idea that an arrow was penetrating his body, or that the bloody knife was at his heart. These were then changed into visions of starvation, or destruction by wild beasts. Recovering his senses, he would find himself in a comfortable lodge, reposing on a couch of soft skins, while the simple children of the woods, relieved of their terrors, were waiting to administer to his wants. The change from the extreme of suffering to that of comfort he could hardly realize. The cross in the wilderness, the respect they paid to the one on his breast, were alike inexplicable; and Rousseau, according to the spirit of his age, felt that a miracle had been wrought in his favor; and on his bended knees he renewed his ecclesiastical vows, and determined to devote his life to enlightening the people among whom Providence had placed him.

The Indian girl who first discovered Rousseau was the only child of a powerful chief. She was still a maiden, and the slavish labor of married savage life, had consequently not been imposed upon her. Among her tribe she was universally considered beautiful, and her hand was sought by all the young 'braves' of her tribe. Wayward, or difficult to please, she resolutely re-

fused to occupy any lodge but her father's, however leal and enviable the settlement might have appeared in the eyes of her associates. For an Indian girl she was remarkably gentle; and as Rousseau gradually recovered his strength, he had through her leisure more frequent intercourse with her than any of the tribe. There was also a feeling in his bosom that she was in the hands of an overruling providence, the instrument used to preserve his life. Whatever might have been the speculations of the elders of the tribe, as day after day Rousseau courted her society, and listened to the sounds of her voice, we do not know; but his attentions to her were indirectly encouraged, and the Indian girl was almost constantly at his side.

Rousseau's plans were formed. The painful experience he had encountered while following the ambition of worldly greatness had driven him back into the seclusion of the church, with a love only to end in this life by death. He determined to learn the dialect of the people in whose lot his life was cast, and form them into a nation of worship recipients of the 'Holy Church'; and the gentle Indian girl was to him a preceptor to teach him her language. With this high resolve, he repeated the sounds of her voice, imitated her gesticulations, and encouraged with marked preference her society. The few weeks that Rousseau passed among the Choctaws had made him one bitter, implacable enemy. Unable to explain his office or his intentions, his preference for Checoulah had been marked by the keen eye of a jealous and rejected lover.

Wah-a-ola was a young 'brave,' who had distinguished himself on the hunting and war-paths.—Young as he was he had won a name. Three times he had laid the trophies of his prowess at the feet of Checoulah, and as often had she rejected his suit. Astonished at his want of success, he looked upon his mistress as laboring under some charm, for he could find no accepted rival for her hand. The presence of Rousseau, the marked preference which Checoulah exhibited for his society, settled in his mind that the 'pale face' was the charmer.

With this conviction, he placed himself conveniently to meet his mistress, and pleaded his suit, before he exhibited the feelings of hatred which he felt towards Rousseau. The lodge of Checoulah's father was, from the dignity of the chief, at the head of the Indian village, and at some little distance. The impatient Wahola seated himself near its entrance, where from his concealment he could watch whoever entered its door. A short time only elapsed before he saw in the cold moonlight a group of Indian girls approaching the lodge in busy conversation, and conspicuously among them all, Checoulah. Her companions separated from her, and as she entered her father's lodge, a rude buffalo robe shut her in. Soon after her disappearance, the little groups about the Indian village gradually dispersed; the busy hum of conversation ceased; and when profound stillness reigned, a plaintive note of the whip-poor-will was heard; it grew louder and louder until it seemed as if the lone bird was perched on the top of the lodge that contained Checoulah. It attracted her ear; for she thrust aside the buffalo skin, and listened with fixed attention. The bird screamed, and appeared to flutter as if wounded. Checoulah rushed towards the bushes that seemed to contain so much distress, when Wahola sprang up and seized her wrist. The affrighted girl stared at her captor a moment, and then exclaimed.—'The snake should not sing like the birds.' Wahola relaxed not his hold; there was a volcano in his breast that seemed to overwhelm him as he glared upon Checoulah with blood-shot eyes. Struggling to conceal his emotion, he replied to her question by asking 'if the wild flowers of the woods were only known by their thorns?' 'The water lilies grow upon smooth stems,' said Checoulah, striving violently to retreat to her father's lodge. 'The love of Wahola was full of jealousy, and the salute and reply of Checoulah converted it into hate. Dashing his hand across his brow, on which the savage workings of his passion were plainly visible, he asked, 'if a 'brave' was to whine for a woman like a bear for its cub?' 'Go,' said he, flinging Checoulah's arm from him, 'go! The mistletoe grows not upon young trees, and the pale face shall be a rabbit in the den of the wolf.'

From the time Rousseau was able to walk, he had made a daily pilgrimage to the cross, and there upon his bended knees greeted the morning sun. This habit was known to all the tribe. The