CHAPTER XXXVII.
La Prairie du Rocher
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From "The Far West."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

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> All things have an end.
> Churches and cities, that have diseases like to man,
> Must have like death that we have.
> Birth has gladdened it: Death has sanctified it.
>
> The roof-tree sinks, but moulders on the wall
> In massy hoariness.
>
> *Childe Harold.*

In remarking upon the history of the French in the ...est, and the peculiarities which still continue to cha...terise them, I am aware I have lingered longer than ...ld have been anticipated; much longer, certainly, ...n was my original intention. The circumstances which have induced this delay have been somewhat various. The subject *itself* is an interesting one. Apart from the delight we all experience in musing upon the ...ents of by-gone time, and *that* gratification, so singu...larly exquisite, of treading amid the scenes of "things departed," there is an interest which every individual who has cast his lot in the great valley cannot fail to feel in every item, even the most minute, which may pertain to its history. In dwelling, too, upon the features of "old Kaskaskia," my design has been to exemplify the distinguishing characteristics of all these early settlements, both French and Spanish, in the valley of the Mississippi. The peculiarities of all are the same, as were the circumstances which first conduced to them. The same customs, the same religion, the same amusements, and the same form of government, prevail among all; and though dissimilar in dialect, and separated by the broad Mississippi, yet, cut off from all the rest of mankind, both the French and the Spanish villagers were glad to smother differences, and to bind themselves to each other in their dependent situation by the tendrils of mutually kind offices and social intercourse. Thus, several of the villages stand opposite each other upon the banks of the Mississippi. Ste. Genevieve is only across the stream from Kaskaskia, and many fine old traditionary legends of these early times are yet extant, and should be treasured up before too late.

But another circumstance, which has been not unfavourable to that prolixity into which I have suffered my pen to glide, and without which other inducements might have proved ineffectual, has been the quiet, dreamy seclusion of this old hamlet, so congenial to the workings of the brain. Yesterday was like to-day, and to-morrow will be the transcript of yesterday; and so time's current slips lazily along, like

> The liquid lapse of a murmuring stream.

As to objects of interest, one could hardly have lingered so long as I have within the precincts of this "sleepy hollow" without having met with some incidents worthy of regard for their *novelty*, if for naught else.

There are few situations in Illinois which can boast advantages for mercantile transaction superior to Kaskaskia. But the villagers are not a commercial, enterprising, money-making people, and the trade of the place is, therefore, very small. The river is said to be navigable for fifty miles from its mouth; the current is gentle, and an inconsiderable expense in clearing the channel of fallen timber would enable small boats to penetrate nearly two hundred miles higher, by the meanderings of the stream, to Vandalia. Measures for this purpose have been entered upon. A land-office for the district is here established. The number of families is seventy or eighty, nearly all French and all catholics, besides considerable transient population—boatmen, hunters, trappers, who traverse the great rivers and broad prairies of the valley.

Opposite Kaskaskia, on the summit of a lofty crag overlooking the river, once stood a large fortress of massive timber, named Fort Gage. Its form was an oblong quadrangle, the exterior polygon being several hundred yards in circumference. It was burnt to the ground in 1766. About twelve years subsequent to this event, the place was taken by the American troops, under Colonel George Rogers Clarke, "Hannibal of the West." After most incredible exertions in the march from Virginia, he arrived before Kaskaskia in the night; and, though fortified, so bewildering was the surprise of the villagers, that not a blow was struck, and the town was taken.

The aged catholic church at Kaskaskia, among other relics of the olden time, is well worthy a stranger's visit. It was erected more than a century since upon the ruins of a former structure of similar character, but is still in decent condition, and the only church in the place. It is a huge old pile, extremely awkward and ungainly, with its projecting eaves, its walls of hewn timber perpendicularly planted, and the interstices stuffed with mortar, with its quaint, old-fashioned spire, and its dark, storm-beaten casements. The interior of the edifice is somewhat imposing, notwithstanding the sombre hue of its walls; these are rudely plastered with lime, and decorated with a few dingy paintings. The floor is of loose, rough boards, and the ceiling arched with oaken panels. The altar and the lamp suspended above are very antique, I was informed by the priest, having been used in the former church. The lamp is a singular specimen of superstition illustrated by the arts. But the structure of the *roof* is the most remarkable feature of this venerable edifice. This I discovered in a visit to the belfry of the tower, accomplished at no little expenditure of sinew and muscle, for stairs are an appliance quite unknown to this primitive building. There are frames of two distinct roofs, of massive wormanship, neatly united, comprising a vast number of rafters, buttresses, and braces, crossing each other at every angle, and so ingeniously and accurately arranged by the architect, that it is mathematically impossible that any portion of the structure shall sink until time with a single blow shall level the entire edifice.* It is related, that when this church was about being erected, the simple villagers, astonished at the immense quantities of timber required for the frame, called a meeting of the citizens, and for a time laid an interdict upon operations, until enquiry respecting the matter should be made. It was with difficulty the architect at length obtained permission to proceed; but, when all was completed, and the material had disappeared, they knew not where, their astonishment surpassed all bounds. The belfry reminded me of one of those ancient monuments of the Druids called *Rocking-stones;* for though it tottered to and fro beneath my weight, and always swings with the bell when it is struck, perhaps the united force of an hundred men could hardly hurl it from its seat. The bell is consecrated by the crucifix cast in is surface, and bears the inscription, "*Pour L'Eglise des Illinois. Normand A. Parachelle*, 1741." The view from this elevation was extremely beautiful: the settlement scattered for miles around, with the quaint little cottages and farms all smiling in the merry sun-light, could hardly fail of the lovely and picturesque. The churchyard attached to the building is not extensive, but crowded with tenants. It is into this receptacle that for four generations Kaskaskia has poured her entire population. I saw but few monuments and a pile of stones. The first record on the register belonging to this church is, I was informed by the priest, to the following effect, in French: "1741, *June* 7. *This morning were brought to the fort three bodies from without, killed by the Renards, to whom we gave sepulture.*" There is here also a baptismal record, embracing the genealogies of the French settlers since 1690, and other choice old chronicles. Some land deeds still remain extant, bearing date as early as 1712, and a memorial also from the villagers to Louis XV. dated 1725, petitioning a grant of "*commons*," &c., in consequence of disasters from the flood of the

* The reader will recollect that these notes were sketched two years ago. Since that time some changes in this old edifice have taken place; the whole south-west angle has fallen to the ground, and, agreeable to the text, the entire roof would have followed but for the extraordinary strength of one solitary piece of timber. High mass was in celebration at the time, and the church was crowded, but no accident occurred. The old building has been since dismantled, however; its bell removed from the tower, and the whole structure will soon, probably, be prostrated by "decay's effacing finger."

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preceding year, in which their all had been swept away, and they had been forced themselves to flee for life to the bluffs opposite the village.

The nunnery at Kaskaskia is a large wooden structure, black with age, and formerly a public house. With this institution is connected a female seminary, in high repute throughout this region, and under superintendence of ten of the sisters. A new nunnery of stone is about being erected.

It was a glorious morning, and, with many a lingering step, I left behind me the village of Kaskaskia. As I rode leisurely along the banks of that placid stream, and among the beautiful farms of the French settlers, I was more than once reminded forcibly of similar scenery high up the Kennebeck, in a distant section of Maine, known by the name of "*Indian Old Point*," where I once took a ramble with a college classmate during an autumn vacation. The landscape is one of singular beauty; yet, were it otherwise, there is a charm thrown around this distant and lonely spot by its association with an interesting passage in the earliest history of the country. In the expressive language of an eloquent writer, who has made the place the scene of an Indian tale, *the soil is fertilised by the blood of a murdered tribe*. Here, one hundred years ago, stood the village of the Norridgewocks, a tribe of the powerful Abnaquis, who then held undisputed domination over the extensive wilds of the far east. Though possessing not the fierce valour of the Pequods, the sinewy vigour of the Delawares, the serpent-like subtlety of the Penobscots, the bell-toned idiom of the Iroquois—we are yet told they were a powerful tribe for their intelligence and their numbers. The Jesuit missionaries of Canada, while at this era they were gliding upon the beautiful rivers of the distant west, had not neglected the sterile rocks of the equally remote east; and the hamlet of the Norridgewocks had early been subjected to the influences of the fascinating ceremony and the lofty ritual of the catholic faith. Under the guidance of the devoted Sebastian Rasle, a rude church was erected by the natives, and its gray, cross-crowned spire reared up itself among the low-roofed wigwams. Beloved by his savage flock, the venerable Father Rasle lived on in peacefulness and quietude for thirty years in the home of his adoption. During the troubled period of the "French and Indian war" which ensued, suspicions arose that the Norridgewocks were influenced by their missionary to many of their acts of lawless violence upon a village of English settlers but a few miles distant. In the autumn of 1724 this distrust had augmented to a conviction that the Abnaquis had resolved on the extermination of the white race, and a detachment of soldiers ascended the Kennebeck. It was a bright, beautiful morning of the Sabbath when they approached the Indian hamlet. The sweet-toned bell of the little chapel awoke the echoes with its clear peal, and announced the hour of mass just as the early sunlight was tinting the far-off hill-tops. A few moments, and every living soul in the village was within the church, and had bowed in humbleness before the "Great Spirit." The deep tones of the venerable Rasle were supplicating, "*Ora, ora pro nobis*," when the soldiers rushed in. Terrible and indiscriminate was the massacre that ensued. Not one was spared: not *one!* The pious Rasle poured out his heart's blood upon the altar of his devotion. Those of the natives who escaped from the chapel were either shot down or perished miserably in the river, their bark canoes having been previously perforated by the treachery of their foes.* The drowsy beams of that day's setting sun dreamed beautifully as ever among the fragrant pine-tops and the feathery hemlocks of the river-bank; but his slanting rays smiled upon the ancient hamlet beneath whose ashes its exterminated dwellers were slumbering the last sleep!

The grave of Father Rasle, a green mound overlooking the stream, was pointed out to us. A granite obelisk to his memory was erected by Bishop Fenwick, of Boston, a few years since, but was demolished by a party of miscreants soon after its completion. My object in this lengthened episode upon the Norridgewocks, so casually introduced, has been twofold: to illustrate the peaceful policy of the French towards the Indian all over the continent, and to contrast it with that of other Europeans.

The ride from Kaskaskia to Prairie du Rocher in early autumn is truly delightful. Crossing *Aubuchon*, formerly called St. Philippe—a passage from the Mississippi to the Kaskaskia, about four miles above the town, and through which, in high floods, a rapid current passes from one river to the other—the path lay through a tract of astonishing fertility, where the wild fruit flourishes with a luxuriance known to no other soil. Endless thickets of the wild plum* and the blackberry, interlaced and matted together by the young grape-vines streaming with gorgeous clusters, were to be seen stretching for miles along the plain. Such boundless profusion of wild fruit I had never seen before. Vast groves of the ruby crap-apple, the golden persimmon,† the black and white mulberry,‡ and the wild cherry,§ were sprinkled with their rainbow hues in isolated masses over the prairie, or extended themselves in long luxurious streaks, glowing in the sun. The pawpaw,‖ too, with its luscious, pulpy fruit; the peach, the pear, and the quince, all thrive in wild luxuriance here; while of the nuts, the pecan or Choctaw nut, the hickory, and the black walnut, are chief. As for grapes, the indigenous vines are prolific; and the fruit is *said* to be so excellent, that wine might be, and even has been, made from them, and has been exported by the early French in such quantities to France, that the trade was prohibited, lest the sale of a staple of that kingdom should be injured! But all this is undoubtedly exaggeration, if no more. Although the grape and the wine of southern Illinois have long been the theme of the traveller through that delightful region, from the worthy Father Hennepin, who tells of the purple clusters lending their rich hues to the gliding wave, to the tourist of the present day; yet from personal observation I am confident they are *now* by no means of much importance, and from good authority am inclined to think they *never* were so. As to the manufacture of wine becoming a matter interesting to commerce, there is no probability of that. A kind of liquor was formerly made in some quantities from what is called the *winter grape*, common to the same latitude in many portions of the United States, but it is said to have been a very indifferent beverage. It was made in the following simple manner: the clusters were heaped in broad, shallow vessels of wood, and, after being crushed, the juice was expressed through perforations for the purpose in the sides and bottom, by the application of heavy weights, into vessels prepared for its reception. Slight fermentation then completed the process.¶

A ride of some hours through this delightful region brought me to the bluffs, which, at this point extending into the plain, confine the bottom to a narrow strip, bounded on the one side by the Mississippi, and on the other by the battlement of the cliffs, upward of an hundred feet in height. Beneath lies the French village of *Prairie du Rocher*, so called from its situation. It is thirteen miles from Kaskaskia, and its low cottages scattered along, like the tents of a nomadic tribe, for miles, are completely overhung by the huge, beetling crags above. From the deep alluvion along the river's edge rises an enormous growth of cottonwood trees and sycamores, concealing the stream from the view. From the bluffs to this belt of forest stretches away the vast *common field*, rustling with maize. The castor-bean and tobacco plant are also often seen carpeting the ground with emerald. Around each tenement, as usual, is a plat of cultivated land, and the luxuriance of vegetation is unrivaled. Passing these outskirts, I at length arrived at the body of the village, lying upon a creek or *bayou* of the same name, which winds through its centre, and empties into the Mississippi. This quiet stream was once the scene of a very bloody tragedy. When Illinois first came under territorial government, and courts of civil judicature were established, the functionaries of the law, in passing one day from Cahokia to Kaskaskia, to hold at the latter place a session, stopped a few moments at this creek to water their horses. The animals had scarcely begun to drink, when a shower of balls from an adjoining thicket laid three of the party weltering in their blood. They had neglected the usual precaution to disguise themselves in the garb of the French villagers, and such was the hostility of the Indian tribes, especially that of the Kickapoos, to our countrymen at the time, that to travel in American costume was almost inevitable death. The Indians at that day had the ascendancy in point of population, and the Kaskaskia tribe, as well as others, was powerful.

At Prairie du Rocher, as every where else where these ancient villages remain as yet undisturbed in their century slumbers, the peculiarities to which I have so frequently alluded stand forth to the traveller's eye. The narrow lanes, the steep-roofed houses, the picketed enclosures, the piazza, the peculiar dress, manners, and amusements of the villagers, all point back to a former age. At this place I tarried for dinner, and while my olive-browed hostess, a trim, buxom little matron, was "making ready," I strolled forth to the bluffs, having first received most positive injunctions to make my reappearance when the *horn sounded;* and, scrambling up a ravine, soon stood upon the smooth, round summit. The whole tract of country over which my route had led was spread out like a map before me; and the little village lay so directly at my feet I could almost look down its chimneys. Among the crags I obtained some fine petrifactions, which I exhibited to my simple host, much to his astonishment, on my return. Forty years had this man dwelt upon the very spot he then inhabited, the scene of his birth; and almost every day of his life had he ascended the cliffs among which I had been clambering; and yet, though the sea-shells were standing out in every direction from the surface of the ledge, not the slightest peculiarity of structure had he ever dreamed of. That the great ocean had rolled among these rocks, he could have formed no conception. Experience had told him that when burned they were lime, and he neither knew nor cared to know any thing farther of their character or history. This slight incident well exemplifies the simplicity of this singular people. Content to live where his father lived; content to cultivate the spot he tilled; to tread in the steps which he trod; to speak the language he spake, and revere the faith he observed, the French villager is a stranger to the restless cravings of ambition, and acknowledges no inclination to change. At Prairie du Rocher is a little, dark-looking, ancient catholic church, dedicated to St. Sulpice, formerly "chapel of ease" to Fort Chartres, but at present it has no resident priest. The population of the village is about two hundred. Its site is low, and, buried as it is in such enormous vegetation, the spot must be unhealthy; yet, year after year, and generation after generation have its present inhabitants continued to dwell where death almost inevitable must have awaited an American. But where will you search for a fleshier, sleeker, swarthier-looking race than these French villagers? Some attribute this phenomenon to diet; some to natural idiosyncrasy; and other some do not attribute at all, but merely stand amazed. The truth of the matter is—and the fact is one well ascertained—that, give a Frenchman a fiddle, a pipe, a glass of claret, and room enough to shake his heels, and, like a mushroom, he'll vegetate on any soil!

La Prairie du Rocher, Ill.

* I give the tradition of the farmers now resident upon the spot. History differs somewhat.

* *Prunus Americana.*

† Indian date, by the French called Placminier, *Diospyrus Virginiana.*

‡ *Morus Rubra and Alba.* § *Prunus Cerasus Virginia.*

‖ Custard apple, *Annona glabra.* ¶ Breckenridge.

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