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INTRODUCTION

"SHOW BOAT" is neither history nor biography, but fiction. This statement is made in the hope that it will forestall such protest as may be registered by demon statisticians against certain liberties taken with characters, places, and events. In the Chicago portion of the book, for example, a character occasionally appears some three or four years after the actual date of his death. Now and then a restaurant or gambling resort is described as running full blast at a time when it had vanished at the frown of civic virtue. This, then, was done, not through negligence in research, but because, in the attempt to give a picture of the time, it was necessary slightly to condense a period of fifteen or twenty years.

E. F.

I

BIZARRE as was the name she bore, Kim Ravenal always said she was thankful it had been no worse. She knew whereof she spoke, for it was literally by a breath that she had escaped being called Mississippi.

"Imagine Mississippi Ravenal!" she often said, in later years. "They'd have cut it to Missy, I suppose, or even Sippy, if you can bear to think of anything so horrible. And then I'd have had to change my name or give up the stage altogether. Because who'd go to see—seriously, I mean—an actress named Sippy? It sounds half-witted, for some reason. Kim's bad enough, God knows."

And as Kim Ravenal you doubtless are familiar with her. It is no secret that the absurd monosyllable which comprises her given name is made up of the first letters of three states—Kentucky, Illinois, and Missouri—in all of which she was, incredibly enough, born—if she can be said to have been born in any state at all. Her mother insists that she wasn't. If you were an habitué of old South Clark Street in Chicago's naughty '90s you may even remember her mother, Magnolia Ravenal, as Nola Ravenal, soubrette—though Nola Ravenal never achieved the doubtful distinction of cigarette pictures. In a day when the stage measured feminine pulchritude in terms of hips, thighs, and calves, she was considered much too thin for beauty, let alone for tights.

It had been this Magnolia Ravenal's respiratory lack that had saved the new-born girl from being cursed through life with a name boasting more quadruple vowels and consonants than any other in the language. She had meant to call the child Mississippi after the tawny untamed river on which she had spent so much of her girlhood, and which had stirred and fascinated her always. Her accouchement had been an ordeal even more terrifying than is ordinarily the case, for Kim Ravenal had actually been born on the raging turgid bosom of the Mississippi River itself, when that rampageous stream was flooding its banks and inundating towns for miles around, at five o'clock of a storm-racked April morning in 1889. It was at a point just below Cairo, Illinois; that region known as Little Egypt, where the yellow waters of the Mississippi and the olive-green waters of the Ohio so disdainfully meet and refuse, with bull-necked pride, to mingle.

From her cabin window on the second deck of the Cotton Blossom Floating Palace Theatre, Magnolia Ravenal could have seen the misty shores of three states—if any earthly shores had interested her at the moment. Just here was Illinois, to whose crumbling clay banks the show

boat was so perilously pinioned. Beyond, almost hidden by the rain veil, was Missouri; and there, Kentucky. But Magnolia Ravenal lay with her eyes shut because the effort of lifting her lids was beyond her. Seeing her, you would have said that if any shores filled her vision at the moment they were heavenly ones, and those dangerously near. So white, so limp, so spent was she that her face on the pillow was startlingly like one of the waxen blossoms whose name she bore. Her slimness made almost no outline beneath the bedclothes. The coverlet was drawn up to her chin. There was only the white flower on the pillow, its petals closed.

Outside, the redundant rain added its unwelcome measure to the swollen and angry stream. In the ghostly gray dawn the grotesque wreckage of flood-time floated and whirled and jiggled by, seeming to bob a mad obeisance as it passed the show boat which, in its turn, made stately bows from its moorings. There drifted past, in fantastic parade, great trees, uprooted and clutching at the water with stiff dead arms; logs, catapulted with terrific force; animal carcasses dreadful in their passivity; chicken coops; rafts; a piano, its ivory mouth fixed in a death grin; a two-room cabin, upright, and moving in a minuet of stately and ponderous swoops and advances and chassés; fence rails; an armchair whose white crocheted antimacassar stared in prim disapproval at the wild antics of its fellow voyagers; a live sheep, bleating as it came, but soon still; a bed with its covers, by some freak of suction, still snugly tucked in as when its erstwhile occupant had fled from it in fright—all these, and more, contributed to the weird terror of the morning. The Mississippi itself was a tawny tiger, roused, furious, bloodthirsty, lashing out with its great tail, tearing with its cruel claws, and burying its fangs deep in the shore to swallow at a gulp land, houses, trees, cattle—humans, even; and roaring, snarling, howling hideously as it did so.

Inside Magnolia Ravenal's cabin all was snug and warm and bright. A wood fire snapped and crackled cosily in the little pot-bellied iron stove. Over it bent a veritable Sairey Gamp stirring something hot and savoury in a saucepan. She stirred noisily, and talked as she stirred, and glanced from time to time at the mute white figure in the bed. Her own bulky figure was made more ponderous by layer on layer of ill-assorted garments of the kind donned from time to time as night wears on by one who, having been aroused hastily and in emergency, has arrived scantily clad. A gray flannel nightgown probably formed the basis of this costume, for its grizzled cuffs could just be seen emerging from the man's coat whose sleeves she wore turned back from the wrists for comfort and convenience. This coat was of box-cut, double-breasted, blue with brass buttons and gold braid, of the sort that river captains wear. It gave her a racy and nautical look absurdly at variance with her bulk and occupation. Peeping beneath and above and around this, the baffled eye could just glimpse oddments and elegancies such as a red

flannel dressing gown; a flower-besprigged challis sacque whose frill of doubtful lace made the captain's coat even more incongruous; a brown cashmere skirt, very bustled and bunchy; a pair of scuffed tan kid bedroom slippers (men's) of the sort known as romeos. This lady's back hair was twisted into a knob strictly utilitarian; her front hair bristled with the wired ends of kid curlers assumed, doubtless, the evening before the hasty summons. Her face and head were long and horse-like, at variance with her bulk. This, you sensed immediately, was a person possessed of enormous energy, determination, and the gift of making exquisitely uncomfortable any one who happened to be within hearing radius. She was the sort who rattles anything that can be rattled; slams anything that can be slammed; bumps anything that can be bumped. Her name, by some miracle of fitness, was Parthenia Ann Hawks; wife of Andy Hawks, captain and owner of the Cotton Blossom Floating Palace Theatre; and mother of this Magnolia Ravenal who, having just been delivered of a daughter, lay supine in her bed.

Now, as Mrs. Hawks stirred the mess over which she was bending, her spoon regularly scraped the bottom of the pan with a rasping sound that would have tortured any nerves but her own iron-encased set. She removed the spoon, freeing it of clinging drops by rapping it smartly and metallically against the rim of the basin. Magnolia Ravenal's eyelids fluttered ever so slightly.

"Now then!" spake Parthy Ann Hawks, briskly, in that commanding tone against which even the most spiritless instinctively rebelled, "Now then, young lady, want it or not, you'll eat some of this broth, good and hot and stren'th'ning, and maybe you won't look so much like a wet dish rag." Pan in one hand, spoon in the other, she advanced toward the bed with a tread that jarred the furniture and set the dainty dimity window curtains to fluttering. She brought up against the side of the bed with a bump. A shadow of pain flitted across the white face on the pillow. The eyes still were closed. As the smell of the hot liquid reached her nostrils, the lips of the girl on the bed curled in distaste. "Here, I'll just spoon it right up to you out of the pan, so's it'll be good and hot. Open your mouth! Open your eyes! I say open—— Well, for land's sakes, how do you expect a body to do anything for you if you——"

With a motion shocking in its swift unexpectedness Magnolia Ravenal's hand emerged from beneath the coverlet, dashed aside the spoon with its steaming contents, and sent it clattering to the floor. Then her hand stole beneath the coverlet again and with a little relaxed sigh of satisfaction she lay passive as before. She had not opened her eyes. She was smiling ever so slightly.

"That's right! Act like a wildcat just because I try to get you to sup up a little soup that Jo's been hours cooking, and two pounds of good mutton in it if there's an ounce, besides vegetables and barley, and your pa practically risked his life getting the meat down at Cairo and the

water going up by the foot every hour. No, you're not satisfied to get us caught here in the flood, and how we'll ever get out alive or dead, God knows, and me and everybody on the boat up all night long with your goings on so you'd think nobody'd ever had a baby before. Time I had you there wasn't a whimper out of me. Not a whimper. I'd have died, first. I never saw anything as indelicate as the way you carried on, and your own husband in the room." Here Magnolia conveyed with a flutter of the lids that this had not been an immaculate conception. "Well, if you could see yourself now. A drowned rat isn't the word. Now you take this broth, my fine lady, or we'll see who's——" She paused in this dramatic threat to blow a cooling breath on a generous spoonful of the steaming liquid, to sup it up with audible appreciation, and to take another. She smacked her lips. "Now then, no more of your monkey-shines, Maggie Hawks!"

No one but her mother had ever called Magnolia Ravenal Maggie Hawks. It was unthinkable that a name so harsh and unlovely could be applied to this fragile person. Having picked up the rejected spoon and wiped it on the lace ruffle of the challis sacque, that terrible termagant grasped it firmly against surprise in her right hand and, saucepan in left, now advanced a second time toward the bed. You saw the flower on the pillow frosted by an icy mask of utter unyieldingness; you caught a word that sounded like shenanigans from the woman bending over the bed, when the cabin door opened and two twittering females entered attired in garments strangely akin to the haphazard costume worn by Mrs. Hawks. The foremost of these moved in a manner so bustling as to be unmistakably official. She was at once ponderous, playful, and menacing—this last attribute due, perhaps, to the rather splendid dark moustache which stamped her upper lip. In her arms she carried a swaddled bundle under one flannel flap of which the second female kept peering and uttering strange clucking sounds and words that resembled izzer and yesseris.

"Fine a gal's I ever see!" exclaimed the bustling one. She approached the bed with the bundle. "Mis' Means says the same and so"—she glanced contemptuously over her shoulder at a pale and haggard young man, bearded but boyish, who followed close behind them—"does the doctor."

She paused before the word doctor so that the title, when finally it was uttered, carried with it a poisonous derision. This mysterious sally earned a little snigger from Mis' Means and a baleful snort from Mrs. Hawks. Flushed with success, the lady with the swaddled bundle (unmistakably a midwife and, like all her craft, royally accustomed to homage and applause) waxed more malicious. "Fact is, he says only a minute ago, he never brought a finer baby that he can remember."

At this the sniggers and snorts became unmistakable guffaws. The wan young man became a flushed young man. He fumbled awkwardly

with the professionally massive watch chain that so unnecessarily guarded his cheap nickel blob of a watch. He glanced at the flower-like face on the pillow. Its aloofness, its remoteness from the three frowzy females that hovered about it, seemed to lend him a momentary dignity and courage. He thrust his hands behind the tails of his Prince Albert coat and strode toward the bed. A wave of the hand, a slight shove with the shoulder, dismissed the three as nuisances. "One moment, my good woman. . . . *If* you please, Mrs. Hawks. . . . Kindly don't jiggle . . ."

The midwife stepped aside with the bundle. Mrs. Hawks fell back a step, the ineffectual spoon and saucepan in her hands. Mis' Means ceased to cluck and to lean on the bed's footboard. From a capacious inner coat pocket he produced a stethoscope, applied it, listened, straightened. From the waistcoat pocket came the timepiece, telltale of his youth and impecuniosity. He extracted his patient's limp wrist from beneath the coverlet and held it in his own strong spatulate fingers—the fingers of the son of a farmer.

"H'm! Fine!" he exclaimed. "Splendid!"

An unmistakable sniff from the midwife. The boy's florid manner dropped from him. He cringed a little. The sensitive hand he still held in his great grasp seemed to feel this change in him, though Magnolia Ravenal had not opened her eyes even at the entrance of the three. Her wrist slid itself out of his hold and down until her fingers met his and pressed them lightly, reassuringly. The youth looked down, startled. Magnolia Ravenal, white-lipped, was smiling her wide gay gorgeous smile that melted the very vitals of you. It was a smile at once poignant and brilliant. It showed her gums a little, and softened the planes of her high cheek-bones, and subdued the angles of the too-prominent jaw. A comradely smile, an understanding and warming one. Strange that this woman on the bed, so lately torn and racked with the agonies of childbirth, should be the one to encourage the man whose clumsy ministrations had so nearly cost her her life. That she could smile at all was sheer triumph of the spirit over the flesh. And that she could smile in sympathy for and encouragement of this bungling inexpert young medico was incredible. But that was Magnolia Ravenal. Properly directed and managed, her smile, in later years, could have won her a fortune. But direction and management were as futile when applied to her as to the great untamed Mississippi that even now was flouting man-built barriers; laughing at levees that said so far and no farther; jeering at jetties that said do thus-and-so; for that matter, roaring this very moment in derision of Magnolia Ravenal herself, and her puny pangs and her mortal plans; and her father Captain Andy Hawks, and her mother Parthenia Ann Hawks, and her husband Gaylord Ravenal, and the whole troupe of the show boat, and the Cotton Blossom Floating Palace Theatre itself, now bobbing about like a cork on the yellow flood that tugged and sucked and tore at its moorings.

Two tantrums of nature had been responsible for the present precarious position of the show boat and its occupants. The Mississippi had furnished one; Magnolia Ravenal the other. Or perhaps it might be fairer to fix the blame, not on nature, but on human stupidity that had failed to take into account its vagaries.

Certainly Captain Andy Hawks should have known better, after thirty-five years of experience on keelboats, steamboats, packets, and show boats up and down the great Mississippi and her tributaries (the Indians might call this stream the Father of Waters but your riverman respectfully used the feminine pronoun). The brand-new show boat had done it. Built in the St. Louis shipyards, the new *Cotton Blossom* was to have been ready for him by February. But February had come and gone, and March as well. He had meant to be in New Orleans by this time, with his fine new show boat and his troupe and his band of musicians in their fresh glittering red-and-gold uniforms, and the marvellous steam calliope that could be heard for miles up and down the bayous and plantations. Starting at St. Louis, he had planned a swift trip downstream, playing just enough towns on the way to make expenses. Then, beginning with Bayou Teche and pushed by the sturdy steamer *Mollie Able*, they would proceed grandly upstream, calliope screaming, flags flying, band tooting, to play every little town and landing and plantation from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, from Baton Rouge to Vicksburg; to Memphis, to Cairo, to St. Louis, up and up to Minnesota itself; then over to the coal towns on the Monongahela River and the Kanawha, and down again to New Orleans, following the crops as they ripened—the corn belt, the cotton belt, the sugar cane; north when the wheat yellowed, following with the sun the ripening of the peas, the tomatoes, the crabs, the peaches, the apples; and as the farmer garnered his golden crops so would shrewd Captain Andy Hawks gather his harvest of gold.

It was April before the new *Cotton Blossom* was finished and ready to take to the rivers. Late though it was, when Captain Andy Hawks beheld her, glittering from texas to keel in white paint with green trimmings, and with Cotton Blossom Floating Palace Theatre done in letters two feet high on her upper deck, he was vain enough, or foolhardy enough, or both, to resolve to stand by his original plan. A little nervous fussy man, Andy Hawks, with a horrible habit of clawing and scratching from side to side, when aroused or when deep in thought, at the little mutton-chop whiskers that sprang out like twin brushes just below his leather-visored white canvas cap, always a trifle too large for his head, so that it settled down over his ears. A capering figure, in light linen pants very wrinkled and baggy, and a blue coat, double-breasted; with a darting manner, bright brown eyes, and a trick of talking very fast as he clawed the mutton-chop whiskers first this side, then that, with one brown hairy little hand. There was about him something grotesque, something

simian. He beheld the new *Cotton Blossom* as a bridegroom gazes upon a bride, and frenziedly clawing his whiskers he made his unwise decision.

"She won't high-water this year till June." He was speaking of that tawny tigress, the Mississippi; and certainly no one knew her moods better than he. "Not much snow last winter, north; and no rain to speak of, yet. Yessir, we'll just blow down to New Orleans ahead of French's *Sensation*"—his bitterest rival in the show-boat business—"and start to work the bayous. Show him a clean pair of heels up and down the river."

So they had started. And because the tigress lay smooth and unruffled now, with only the currents playing gently below the surface like muscles beneath the golden yellow skin, they fancied she would remain complaisant until they had had their way. That was the first mistake.

The second was as unreasoning. Magnolia Ravenal's child was going to be a boy. Ma Hawks and the wise married women of the troupe knew the signs. She felt thus-and-so. She had such-and-such sensations. She was carrying the child high. Boys always were slower in being born than girls. Besides, this was a first child, and the first child always is late. They got together, in mysterious female conclave, and counted on the fingers of their two hands—August, September, October, November, December—why, the end of April, the soonest. They'd be safe in New Orleans by then, with the best of doctors for Magnolia, and she on land while one of the other women in the company played her parts until she was strong again—a matter of two or three weeks at most.

No sooner had they started than the rains began. No early April showers, these, but torrents that blotted out the river banks on either side and sent the clay tumbling in great cave-ins, down to the water, jaundicing it afresh where already it seethed an ochreous mass. Day after day, night after night, the rains came down, melting the Northern ice and snow, filtering through the land of the Mississippi basin and finding its way, whether trickle, rivulet, creek, stream, or river, to the great hungry mother, Mississippi. And she grew swollen, and tossed and flung her huge limbs about and shrieked in labour even as Magnolia Ravenal was so soon to do.

Eager for entertainment as the dwellers were along the little Illinois and Missouri towns, after a long winter of dull routine on farm and in store and schoolhouse, they came sparsely to the show boat. Posters had told them of her coming, and the news filtered to the back-country. Town and village thrilled to the sound of the steam calliope as the Cotton Blossom Floating Palace Theatre, propelled by the square-cut clucking old steamer, *Mollie Able*, swept grandly down the river to the landing. But the back-country roads were impassable bogs by now, and growing worse with every hour of rain. Wagon wheels sank to the hubs in mud. There were crude signs, stuck on poles, reading, "No bottom here." The dodgers posted on walls and fences in the towns were rain-

soaked and bleary. And as for the Cotton Blossom Floating Palace Theatre Ten Piece Band (which numbered six)—how could it risk ruin of its smart new red coats, gold-braided and gold-buttoned, by marching up the water-logged streets of these little towns whose occupants only stared wistfully out through storm-blurred windows? It was dreary even at night, when the show boat glowed invitingly with the blaze of a hundred oil lamps that lighted the auditorium seating six hundred (One Thousand Seats! A Luxurious Floating Theatre within an Unrivalled Floating Palace!). Usually the flaming oil-flares on their tall poles stuck in the steep clay banks that led down to the show boat at the water's edge made a path of fiery splendour. Now they hissed and spluttered dismally, almost extinguished by the deluge. Even when the bill was St. Elmo or East Lynne, those tried and trusty winners, the announcement of which always packed the show boat's auditorium to the very last seat in the balcony reserved for Negroes, there was now only a damp handful of shuffle-footed men and giggling girls and a few children in the cheaper rear seats. The Mississippi Valley dwellers, wise with the terrible wisdom born of much suffering under the dominance of this voracious and untamed monster, so ruthless when roused, were preparing against catastrophe should these days of rain continue.

Captain Andy Hawks clawed his mutton-chop whiskers, this side and that, and scanned the skies, and searched the yellowing swollen stream with his bright brown eyes. "We'll make for Cairo," he said. "Full steam ahead. I don't like the looks of her—the big yella snake."

But full steam ahead was impossible for long in a snag-infested river, as Andy Hawks well knew; and in a river whose treacherous channel shifted almost daily in normal times, and hourly in flood-time. Cautiously they made for Cairo. Cape Girardeau, Gray's Point, Commerce—then, suddenly, near evening, the false sun shone for a brief hour. At once everyone took heart. The rains, they assured each other, were over. The spring freshet would subside twice as quickly as it had risen. Fittingly enough, the play billed for that evening was Tempest and Sunshine, always a favourite. Magnolia Ravenal cheerfully laced herself into the cruel steel-stiffened high-busted corset of the period, and donned the golden curls and the prim ruffles of the part. A goodish crowd scrambled and slipped and slid down the rain-soaked clay bank, torch-illumined, to the show boat, their boots leaving a trail of mud and water up and down the aisles of the theatre and between the seats. It was a restless audience, and hard to hold. There had been an angry sunset, and threatening clouds to the northwest. The crowd shuffled its feet, coughed, stirred constantly. There was in the air something electric, menacing, heavy. Suddenly, during the last act, the north wind sprang up with a whistling sound, and the little choppy hard waves could be heard slapping against the boat's flat sides. She began to rock, too, and pitch, flat though she was and securely moored to the river

bank. Lightning, a fusillade of thunder, and then the rain again, heavy, like drops of molten lead, and driven by the north wind. The crowd scrambled up the perilous clay banks, slipping, falling, cursing, laughing, frightened. To this day it is told that the river rose seven feet in twenty-four hours. Captain Andy Hawks, still clawing his whiskers, still bent on making for Cairo, cast off and ordered the gangplank in as the last scurrying villager clawed his way up the slimy incline whose heights the river was scaling inch by inch.

"The Ohio's the place," he insisted, his voice high and squeaky with excitement. "High water at Cincinnati, St. Louis, Evansville, or even Paducah don't have to mean high-water on the Ohio. It's the old yella serpent making all this kick-up. But the Ohio's the river gives Cairo the real trouble. Yessir! And she don't flood till June. We'll make for the Ohio and stay on her till this comes to a stand, anyway."

Then followed the bedlam of putting off. Yells, hoarse shouts, bells ringing, wheels churning the water to foam. Lively now! Cramp her down! Snatch her! SNATCH her!

Faintly, above the storm, you heard the cracked falsetto of little Captain Andy Hawks, a pilot for years, squeaking to himself in his nervousness the orders that river etiquette forbade his actually giving that ruler, that ultimate sovereign, the pilot, old Mark Hooper, whose real name was no more Mark than Twain's had been: relic of his leadsmen days, with the cry of, "Mark three! Mark three! Half twain! Quarter twain! M-A-R-K twain!" gruffly shouted along the hurricane deck.

It was told, on the rivers, that little Andy Hawks had been known, under excitement, to walk off the deck into the river and to bob afloat there until rescued, still spluttering and shrieking orders in a profane falsetto.

Down the river they went, floating easily over bars that in normal times stood six feet out of the water; clattering through chutes; shaving the shores. Thunder, lightning, rain, chaos outside. Within, the orderly routine of bedtime on the show boat. Mis' Means, the female half of the character team, heating over a tiny spirit flame a spoonful of goose grease which she would later rub on her husband's meagre cough-racked chest; Maudie Rainger, of the general business team, sipping her bedtime cup of coffee; Bert Forbush, utility man, in shirt sleeves, check pants, and carpet slippers, playing a sleep-inducing game of canfield—all this on the stage, bare now of scenery and turned into a haphazard and impromptu lounging room for the members of this floating theatrical company. Mrs. Hawks, in her fine new cabin on the second deck, off the gallery, was putting her sparse hair in crimpers as she would do if this were the night before Judgment Day. Flood, storm, danger—all part of

river show-boat life. Ordinarily, it is true, they did not proceed down river until daybreak. After the performance, the show boat and its steamer would stay snug and still alongside the wharf of this little town or that. By midnight, company and crew would have fallen asleep to the sound of the water slap-slapping gently against the boat's sides.

To-night there probably would be little sleep for some of the company, what with the storm, the motion, the unwonted stir, and the noise that came from the sturdy *Mollie Able*, bracing her cautious bulk against the flood's swift urging; and certainly none for Captain Andy Hawks, for pilot Mark Hooper and the crew of the *Mollie Able*. But that, too, was all part of the life.

Midnight had found Gaylord Ravenal, in nightshirt and dressing gown, a handsome and distraught figure, pounding on the door of his mother-in-law's cabin. From the cabin he had just left came harrowing sounds—whimpers, and little groans, and great moans, like an animal in agony. Magnolia Ravenal was not one of your silent sufferers. She was too dramatic for that. Manœuvred magically by the expert Hooper, they managed to make a perilous landing just above Cairo. The region was scoured for a doctor, without success, for accident had followed on flood. Captain Andy had tracked down a stout and reluctant midwife who consented only after an enormous bribe to make the perilous trip to the levee, clambering ponderously down the slippery bank with many groanings and forebodings, and being sustained, both in bulk and spirit, by the agile and vivacious little captain much as a tiny fussy river tug guides a gigantic and unwieldy ocean liner. He was almost frantically distraught, for between Andy Hawks and his daughter Magnolia Ravenal was that strong bond of affection and mutual understanding that always exists between the henpecked husband and the harassed offspring of a shrew such as Parthy Ann Hawks.

When, an hour later, Gaylord Ravenal, rain-soaked and mud-spattered, arrived with a white-faced young doctor's assistant whose first obstetrical call this was, he found the fat midwife already in charge and inclined to elbow about any young medical upstart who might presume to dictate to a female of her experience.

It was a sordid and ravaging confinement which, at its climax, teetered for one dreadful moment between tragedy and broad comedy. For at the crisis, just before dawn, the fat midwife, busy with ministrations, had said to the perspiring young doctor, "D'you think it's time to snuff her?"

Bewildered, and not daring to show his ignorance, he had replied, judicially, "Uh—not just yet. No, not just yet."

Again the woman had said, ten minutes later, "Time to snuff her, I'd say."

"Well, perhaps it is." He watched her, fearfully, wondering what she might mean; cursing his own lack of knowledge. To his horror and

amazement, before he could stop her, she had stuffed a great pinch of strong snuff up either nostril of Magnolia Ravenal's delicate nose. And thus Kim Ravenal was born into the world on the gust of a series of convulsive a-CHOOs!

"God almighty, woman!" cried the young medico, in a frenzy. "You've killed her."

"Run along, do!" retorted the fat midwife, testily, for she was tired by now, and hungry, and wanted her coffee badly. "H'm! It's a gal. And they had their minds all made up to a boy. Never knew it to fail." She turned to Magnolia's mother, a ponderous and unwieldy figure at the foot of the bed. "Well, now, Mis'—Hawks, ain't it?—that's right—Hawks. Well, now, Mis' Hawks, we'll get this young lady washed up and then I'd thank you for a pot of coffee and some breakfast. I'm partial to a meat breakfast."

All this had been a full hour ago. Magnolia Ravenal still lay inert, unheeding. She had not even looked at her child. Her mother now uttered bitter complaint to the others in the room.

"Won't touch a drop of this good nourishing broth. Knocked the spoon right out of my hand, would you believe it! for all she lays there looking so gone. Well! I'm going to open her mouth and pour it down."

The young doctor raised a protesting palm. "No, no, I wouldn't do that." He bent over the white face on the pillow. "Just a spoonful," he coaxed, softly. "Just a swallow?"

She did not vouchsafe him another smile. He glanced at the irate woman with the saucepan; at the two attendant vestals. "Isn't there somebody——?"

The men of the company and the crew were out, he well knew, with pike poles in hand, working to keep the drifting objects clear of the boats. Gaylord Ravenal would be with them. He had been in and out a score of times through the night, his handsome young face (too handsome, the awkward young doctor had privately decided) twisted with horror and pity and self-reproach. He had noticed, too, that the girl's cries had abated not a whit when the husband was there. But when he took her writhing fingers, and put one hand on her wet forehead, and said, in a voice that broke with agony, "Oh, Nola! Nola! Don't. I didn't know it was like . . . Not like this. . . . Magnolia . . ."—she had said, through clenched teeth and white lips, surprisingly enough, with a knowledge handed down to her through centuries of women writhing in childbirth, "It's all right, Gay. . . . Always . . . like this . . . damn it. . . . Don't you worry. . . . It's . . . all . . ." And the harassed young doctor had then seen for the first time the wonder of Magnolia Ravenal's poignant smile.

So now when he said, shyly, "Isn't there somebody else——" he was thinking that if the young and handsome husband could be spared for but a moment from his pike pole it would be better to chance a drifting

log sent crashing against the side of the boat by the flood than that this white still figure on the bed should be allowed to grow one whit whiter or more still.

"Somebody else's fiddlesticks!" exploded Mrs. Hawks, inelegantly. They were all terribly rude to him, poor lad, except the one who might have felt justified in being so. "If her own mother can't——" She had reheated the broth on the little iron stove, and now made a third advance, armed with spoon and saucepan. The midwife had put the swaddled bundle on the pillow so that it lay just beside Magnolia Ravenal's arm. It was she who now interrupted Mrs. Hawks, and abetted her.

"How in time d'you expect to nurse," she demanded, "if you don't eat!"

Magnolia Ravenal didn't know and, seemingly, didn't care.

A crisis was imminent. It was the moment for drama. And it was furnished, obligingly enough, by the opening of the door to admit the two whom Magnolia Ravenal loved in all the world. There came first the handsome, haggard Gaylord Ravenal, actually managing, in some incredible way, to appear elegant, well-dressed, dapper, at a time, under circumstances, and in a costume which would have rendered most men unsightly, if not repulsive. But his gifts were many, and not the least of them was the trick of appearing sartorially and tonsorially flawless when dishevelment and a stubble were inevitable in any other male. Close behind him trotted Andy Hawks, just as he had been twenty-four hours before—wrinkled linen pants, double-breasted blue coat, oversize visored cap, mutton-chop whiskers and all. Together he and Ma Hawks, in her blue brass-buttoned coat that was a twin of his, managed to give the gathering quite a military aspect. Certainly Mrs. Hawks' manner was martial enough at the moment. She raised her voice now in complaint.

"Won't touch her broth. Ain't half as sick as she lets on or she wouldn't be so stubborn. Wouldn't have the strength to be, 's what I say."

Gaylord Ravenal took from her the saucepan and the spoon. The saucepan he returned to the stove. He espied a cup on the washstand; with a glance at Captain Andy he pointed silently to this. Andy Hawks emptied its contents into the slop jar, rinsed it carefully, and half filled it with the steaming hot broth. The two men approached the bedside. There was about both a clumsy and touching but magically effective tenderness. Gay Ravenal slipped his left arm under the girl's head with its hair all spread so dank and wild on the pillow. Captain Andy Hawks leaned forward, cup in hand, holding it close to her mouth. With his right hand, delicately, Gay Ravenal brought the first hot revivifying spoonful to her mouth and let it trickle slowly, drop by drop, through her lips. He spoke to her as he did this, but softly, softly, so that the others could not hear the words. Only the cadence of his voice, and that

was a caress. Another spoonful, and another, and another. He lowered her again to the pillow, his arm still under her head. A faint tinge of palest pink showed under the waxen skin. She opened her eyes; looked up at him. She adored him. Her pain-dulled eyes even then said so. Her lips moved. He bent closer. She was smiling almost mischievously.

"Fooled them."

"What's she say?" rasped Mrs. Hawks, fearfully, for she loved the girl.

Over his shoulder he repeated the two words she had whispered.

"Oh," said Parthy Ann Hawks, and laughed. "She means fooled 'em because it's a girl instead of a boy."

But at that Magnolia Ravenal shook her head ever so slightly, and looked up at him again and held up one slim forefinger and turned her eyes toward the corners with a listening look. And in obedience he held up his hand then, a warning for silence, though he was as mystified as they. And in the stillness of the room you heard the roar and howl and crash of the great river whose flood had caught them and shaken them and brought Magnolia Ravenal to bed ahead of her time. And now he knew what she meant. She wasn't thinking of the child that lay against her arms. Her lips moved again. He bent closer. And what she said was:

"The River."

II

SURELY no little girl had ever had a more fantastic little girlhood than this Magnolia Ravenal who had been Magnolia Hawks. By the time she was eight she had fallen into and been fished out of practically every river in the Mississippi Basin from the Gulf of Mexico to Minnesota. The ordinary routine of her life, in childhood, had been made up of doing those things that usually are strictly forbidden the average child. She swam muddy streams; stayed up until midnight; read the lurid yellow-backed novels found in the cabins of the women of the company; went to school but rarely; caught catfish; drank river water out of the river itself; roamed the streets of strange towns alone; learned to strut and shuffle and buck-and-wing from the Negroes whose black faces dotted the boards of the Southern wharves as thickly as grace notes sprinkle a bar of lively music. And all this despite constant watchfulness, nagging, and admonition from her spinster-like mother; for Parthy Ann Hawks, matron though she was, still was one of those women who, confined as favourite wife in the harem of a lascivious Turk, would have remained a spinster at heart and in manner. And though she lived on her husband's show boat season after season, and tried to rule it from pilot house to cook's galley, she was always an incongruous figure in the gay, careless vagabond life of this band of floating players. The very fact of her presence on the boat was a paradox. Life, for Parthy Ann Hawks, was meant to be made up of crisp white dimity curtains at kitchen windows; of bi-weekly bread bakings; of Sunday morning service and Wednesday night prayer meeting; of small gossip rolled evilly under the tongue. The male biped, to her, was a two-footed animal who tracked up a clean kitchen floor just after it was scoured and smoked a pipe in defiance of decency. Yet here she was—and had been for ten years—leading an existence which would have made that of the Stratford strollers seem orderly and prim by comparison.

She had been a Massachusetts school teacher, living with a henpecked fisherman father, and keeping house expertly for him with one hand while she taught school with the other. The villagers held her up as an example of all the feminine virtues, but the young males of the village were to be seen walking home from church with this or that plump twitterer who might be a notoriously bad cook but who had an undeniable way of tying a blue sash about a tempting waist. Parthenia Ann, prayer book clasped in mitted hands, walked sedately home with her father. The vivacious little Andy Hawks, drifting up into

Massachusetts one summer, on a visit to fishermen kin, had encountered the father, and, through him, the daughter. He had eaten her light flaky biscuit, her golden-brown fries; her ruddy jell; her succulent pickles; her juicy pies. He had stood in her kitchen doorway, shyly yet boldly watching her as she moved briskly from table to stove, from stove to pantry. The sleeves of her crisp print dress were rolled to the elbow, and if those elbows were not dimpled they were undeniably expert in batter-beating, dough-kneading, pan-scouring. Her sallow cheeks were usually a little flushed with the heat of the kitchen and the energy of her movements, and, perhaps, with the consciousness of the unaccustomed masculine eye so warmly turned upon her. She looked her bustling best, and to little impulsive warm-hearted Andy she represented all he had ever known and dreamed, in his roving life, of order, womanliness, comfort. She was some years older than he. The intolerance with which women of Parthenia Ann's type regard all men was heightened by this fact to something resembling contempt. Even before their marriage, she bossed him about much as she did her old father, but while she nagged she also fed them toothsome viands, and the balm of bland, well-cooked food counteracted the acid of her words. Then, too, Nature, the old witch-wanton, had set the yeast to working in the flabby dough of Parthy Ann's organism. Andy told her that his real name was André and that he was descended, through his mother, from a long line of Basque fisher folk who had lived in the vicinity of St. Jean-de-Luz, Basses-Pyrénées. It probably was true, and certainly accounted for his swarthy skin, his bright brown eyes, his impulsiveness, his vivacious manner. The first time he kissed this tall, raw-boned New England woman he was startled at the robustness with which she met and returned the caress. They were married and went to Illinois to live in the little town of Thebes, on the Mississippi. In the village from which she had married it was said that, after she left, her old father, naturally neat and trained through years of nagging to super-neatness, indulged in an orgy of disorder that lasted days. As other men turn to strong drink in time of exuberance or relief from strain, so the tidy old septuagenarian strewed the kitchen with dirty dishes and scummy pots and pans; slept for a week in an unmade bed; padded in stocking feet; chewed tobacco and spat where he pleased; smoked the lace curtains brown; was even reported by a spying neighbour to have been seen seated at the reedy old cottage organ whose palsied pipes had always quavered to hymn tunes, picking out with one gnarled forefinger the chorus of a bawdy song. He lived one free, blissful year and died of his own cooking.

As pilot, river captain, and finally, as they thrived, owner and captain of a steamer accommodating both passengers and freight, Captain Andy was seldom in a position to be guilty of tracking the white-scoured kitchen floor or discolouring with pipe smoke the stiff folds of the

window curtains. The prim little Illinois cottage saw him but rarely during the season when river navigation was at its height. For many months in the year Parthy Ann Hawks was free to lead the spinsterish existence for which nature had so evidently planned her. Her window panes glittered, her linen was immaculate, her floors unsullied. When Captain Andy came home there was constant friction between them. Sometimes her gay, capering little husband used to look at this woman as at a stranger. Perhaps his nervous habit of clawing at his mutton-chop whiskers had started as a gesture of puzzlement or despair.

The child Magnolia was not born until seven years after their marriage. That Parthy Ann Hawks could produce actual offspring was a miracle to give one renewed faith in certain disputed incidents recorded in the New Testament. The child was all Andy—manner, temperament, colouring. Between father and daughter there sprang up such a bond of love and understanding as to make their relation a perfect thing, and so sturdy as successfully to defy even the destructive forces bent upon it by Mrs. Hawks. Now the little captain came home whenever it was physically possible, sacrificing time, sleep, money—everything but the safety of his boat and its passengers—for a glimpse of the child's piquant face, her gay vivacious manner, her smile that wrung you even then.

It was years before Captain Andy could persuade his wife to take a river trip with him on his steamer down to New Orleans and back again, bringing the child. It was, of course, only a ruse for having the girl with him. River captains' wives were not popular on the steamers their husbands commanded. And Parthy Ann, from that first trip, proved a terror. It was due only to tireless threats, pleadings, blandishments, and actual bribes on the part of Andy that his crew did not mutiny daily. Half an hour after embarking on that first trip, Parthy Ann poked her head into the cook's galley and told him the place was a disgrace. The cook was a woolly-headed black with a rolling protuberant eye and the quick temper of his calling.

Furthermore, though a capable craftsman, and in good standing on the river boats, he had come aboard drunk, according to time-honoured custom; not drunk to the point of being quarrelsome or incompetent, but entertaining delusions of grandeur, varied by ominous spells of sullen silence. In another twelve hours, and for the remainder of the trip, he would be sober and himself. Captain Andy knew this, understood him, was satisfied with him.

Now one of his minions was seated on an upturned pail just outside the door, peeling a great boiler full of potatoes with almost magic celerity and very little economy.

Parthy Ann's gimlet eye noted the plump peelings as they fell in long spirals under the sharp blade. She lost no time.

"Well, I declare! Of all the shameful waste I ever clapped my eyes on, that's the worst."

The black at the stove turned to face her, startled and uncomprehending. Visitors were not welcome in the cook's galley. He surveyed without enthusiasm the lean figure with the long finger pointing accusingly at a quite innocent pan of potato parings.

"Wha' that you say, missy?"

"Don't you missy me!" snapped Parthy Ann Hawks. "And what I said was that I never saw such criminal waste as those potato parings. An inch thick if they're a speck, and no decent cook would allow it."

A simple, ignorant soul, the black man, and a somewhat savage; as mighty in his small domain as Captain Andy in his larger one. All about him now were his helpers, black men like himself, with rolling eyes and great lips all too ready to gash into grins if this hard-visaged female intruder were to worst him.

"Yo-all passenger on this boat, missy?"

Parthy Ann surveyed disdainfully the galley's interior, cluttered with the disorder attendant on the preparation of the noonday meal.

"Passenger! H'mph! No, I'm not. And passenger or no passenger, a filthier hole I never saw in my born days. I'll let you know that I shall make it my business to report this state of things to the Captain. Good food going to waste——"

A red light seemed to leap then from the big Negro's eyeballs. His lips parted in a kind of savage and mirthless grin, so that you saw his great square gleaming teeth and the blue gums above them. Quick as a panther he reached down with one great black paw into the pan of parings, straightened, and threw the mass, wet and slimy as it was, full at her. The spirals clung and curled about her—on her shoulders, around her neck, in the folds of her gown, on her head, Medusa-like.

"They's something for you take to the Captain to show him, missy."

He turned sombrely back to his stove. The other blacks were little less grave than he. They sensed something sinister in the fury with which this garbage-hung figure ran screaming to the upper deck. The scene above decks must have been a harrowing one.

They put him off at Memphis and shipped another cook there, and the big Negro, thoroughly sobered now, went quite meekly down the gangplank and up the levee, his carpet bag in hand. In fact, it was said that, when he had learned it was the Captain's wife whom he had treated thus, he had turned a sort of ashen gray and had tried to jump overboard and swim ashore. The gay little Captain Andy was a prime favourite with his crew. Shamefaced though the Negro was, there appeared something akin to pity in the look he turned on Captain Andy as he was put ashore. If that was true, then the look on the little captain's face as he regarded the miscreant was certainly born of an inward and badly concealed admiration. It was said, too, but never verified, that something round and gold and gleaming was seen to pass from the Captain's hairy little brown hand to the big black paw.

For the remainder of the trip Mrs. Hawks constituted herself a sort of nightmarish housekeeper, prowling from corridor to cabins, from dining saloon to pantry. She made life wretched for the pert yellow wenches who performed the cabin chamber-work. She pounced upon them when they gathered in little whispering groups, gossiping. Thin-lipped and baleful of eye, she withered the very words they were about to utter to a waiter or deck-hand, so that the flowers of coquetry became ashes on their tongues. She regarded the female passengers with suspicion and the males with contempt. This was the latter '70s, and gambling was as much a part of river-boat life as eating and drinking. Professional gamblers often infested the boats. It was no uncommon sight to see a poker game that had started in the saloon in the early evening still in progress when sunrise reddened the river. It was the day of the flowing moustache, the broad-brimmed hat, the open-faced collar, and the diamond stud. It constituted masculine America's last feeble flicker of the picturesque before he sank for ever into the drab ashes of uniformity. A Southern gentleman, particularly, clad thus, took on a dashing and dangerous aspect. The rakish angle of the hat with its curling brim, the flowing ends of the string tie, the movement of the slender virile fingers as they stroked the moustache, all were things to thrill the feminine beholder. Even that frigid female, Parthenia Ann Hawks, must have known a little flutter of the senses as she beheld these romantic and—according to her standards—dissolute passengers seated, silent, wary, pale, about the gaming table. But in her stern code, that which thrilled was wicked. She belonged to the tribe of the Knitting Women; of the Salem Witch Burners; of all fanatics who count nature as an enemy to be suppressed; and in whose veins the wine of life runs vinegar. If the deep seepage of Parthy Ann's mind could have been brought to the surface, it would have analyzed chemically thus: "I find these men beautiful, stirring, desirable. But that is an abomination. I must not admit to myself that I am affected thus. Therefore I think and I say that they are disgusting, ridiculous, contemptible."

Her attitude was somewhat complicated by the fact that, as wife of the steamer's captain, she was treated with a courtly deference on the part of these very gentlemen whom she affected to despise; and with a gracious cordiality by their ladies. The Southern men, especially, gave an actual effect of plumes on their wide-brimmed soft hats as they bowed and addressed her in their soft drawling vernacular.

"Well, ma'am, and how are you enjoying your trip on your good husband's magnificent boat?" It sounded much richer and more flattering as they actually said it. ". . . Yo' trip on yo' good husband's ma-a-a-yg-nif'cent . . ." They gave one the feeling that they were really garbed in satin, sword, red heels, lace ruffles.

Parthenia Ann, whose stays always seemed, somehow, to support her form more stiffly than did those of any other female, would regard her

inquirers with a cold and fishy eye.

"The boat's well enough, I suppose. But what with the carousing by night and the waste by day, a Christian soul can hardly look on at it without feeling that some dreadful punishment will overtake us all before we arrive at the end of our journey." From her tone you would almost have gathered that she hoped it.

He of the broad-brimmed hat, and his bustled, basqued alpaca lady, would perhaps exchange a glance not altogether amused. Collisions, explosions, snag-founderings were all too common in the river traffic of the day to risk this deliberate calling down of wrath.

Moving away, the soft-tongued Southern voices would be found to be as effective in vituperation as in flattery. "Pole cat!" he of the phantom plumes would say, aside, to his lady.

Fortunately, Parthy Ann's dour misgivings did not materialize. The trip downstream proved a delightful one, and as tranquil as might be with Mrs. Hawks on board. Captain Andy's steamer, though by no means as large as some of the so-called floating palaces that plied the Mississippi, was known for the excellence of its table, the comfort of its appointments, and the affability of its crew. So now the passengers endured the irritation of Mrs. Hawks' presence under the balm of appetizing food and good-natured service. The crew suffered her nagging for the sake of the little captain, whom they liked and respected; and for his wages, which were generous.

Though Parthenia Ann Hawks regarded the great river—if, indeed, she noticed it at all—merely as a moist highway down which one travelled with ease to New Orleans; untouched by its mystery, unmoved by its majesty, unsubdued by its sinister power, she must still, in spite of herself, have come, however faintly and remotely, under the spell of its enchantment. For this trip proved, for her, to be the first of many, and led, finally, to her spending seven months out of the twelve, not only on the Mississippi, but on the Ohio, the Missouri, the Kanawha, the Big Sandy. Indeed, her liking for the river life, together with her zeal for reforming it, became so marked that in time river travellers began to show a preference for steamers other than Captain Andy's, excellently though they fared thereon.

Perhaps the attitude of the lady passengers toward the little captain and the manner of the little captain as he addressed the lady passengers did much to feed the flame of Parthy Ann's belligerence. Until the coming of Andy Hawks she had found favour in no man's eyes. Cut in the very pattern of spinsterhood, she must actually have had moments of surprise and even incredulity at finding herself a wife and mother. The art of coquetry was unknown to her; because the soft blandishments of love had early been denied her she now repudiated them as sinful; did her hair in a knob; eschewed flounces; assumed a severe demeanour; and would have been the last to understand that any one of these