

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, May 30, 1891 to February 6, 1892)

The Accident

Every male on board of the Arkansas Belle had capitulated to our one lady passenger and would beat a hasty retreat upon the slightest evidence of an attack from her ponderous ladyship.

As junior clerk I became her legitimate prey- so between Parrot, Canary, Pug Dog and myself she did kill time and nearly killed me.

After entering the Arkansas River- fresh milk became a luxury we were forced to dispense with; her pug suffered in consequence- she declared was an outrage- as I was the only one whose ear she could reach she insisted, that when we arrived at Pine Bluff I must make an effort to procure milk. In vain I told her it would be impossible- as the boat tied up only an hour, and that I had but little time, She insisted that if I made the effort and was unsuccessful, she would then consider the pugs demise an act of Providence- I told Captain Pat Clebourne of the proposed forage, asking him if he would hold the boat for a few minutes in the event of my being late. Hold Hell; have a cabin boy thro the informal (brutal) pup overboard and don't make a damn fool of yourself.

Upon reaching the landing I scurried up the bank- without coat and in old shoes-after considerable wild rushing, I bought the only quart of milk in town for my only dollar- then reached the wharf in time to see the Belle steadying herself in the middle of the river with her nose against the current.

I sat down on a box- watched her until she was well underway, then I walked slowly uptown holding convulsively to that tin pail containing the precious milk. The hitching frames on Pine Bluff's one street, were this time supporting a large number of poorly fed and scrawny

horses whose owners were on the other side of the road trying their luck against Sweat Mustang Monte or Stud poker- these games being opened on the outer edge of the plank walk which separated them from the one story shanties that served for Slave Hotels-Shops-Churches and Residences.

Walking to the end of the town entering the restaurant where the milk was purchased I swapped it for a sandwich and the information that Little Rock was only 82 miles away-which place could be reached by boat - secondly- a tramp over a lonesome piney woods road and lastly by engaging a sear in the mail coach. The first proposition was out of the question- no boat being due for two weeks- the last offered no encouragement for being penniless- a three day interval before the starting of the mail wagon left the tramp- the logical conclusion.

I will not trouble this Club with a description of the Piney woods road that burdened the bank of the Arkansas River.

Suffice it to say that if I had no sand in my craw when I started more than enough was in my old shoes before I succeeded it losing myself which feat was accomplished about eleven o'clock by straying into a swamp. Although I turned to the four quarters of the globe, I kept getting in deeper and deeper.

When the water had nearly reached my hips I found a log and straddled it, trying to make myself comfortable while thinking of home- pug dogs- and fat old women and a swearing captain. I heard cowbells near at hand but my experience in the Milky Way had been sufficient unto the night- so I remained on the log.

Even the frogs would hit me now and then as hey jumped that way in the regular route not expecting any such obstruction.

My position was one that would have excited the envy of Henry D. Thoreau who wished he could remain in a swamp up to his neck, so that he could listen to the converse and study the manners of its numerous animal life.

As my ambition was not climbing that ladder, I would gladly have exchanged places with him, for the animal that was touching my keenest feelings was the mosquito- however everything has an end.

Morning broke and revealed the other end of the log on which I rested imbedded in the sand of the road which I had lost five hours before. After running about a mile to start my blood in to circulation I saw an ox team coming out of a crossroad. Waiting I found to my joy, it was coming my way. Solid wooden wheels-bed about 12 feet- long studded with poles 8 feet high holding about twelve bales of cotton surmounted by a darky with a whip long enough to reach the leading yoke of four pair of wing oxen- I asked him "where he was going to? To Griffins he answered- Will you let me ride Uncle? Dunno Mas'm (My shirt was still white) kin yo drive? I told him that was my business and then climbed up to the top of the cotton.

The handle of the whip was 3 feet- the plaited leather about twenty feet long. He used it with both hands and with such consummate skill that he could hit either of the lead oxen on the ear if he chose- Spot was on the right- Stan was the off lead. One understood See- the other Haw- the whole outfit-whoa.

He explained the angle of the whip stack to me and then went to sleep. I hoped Griffins was not far away and wondered if they would offer me something to eat when I got there. I looked at the whip curiously and began to practice with it in a sly way, so that I should be ready in case of an emergency.

Things progressed favorably for about three hours. Then we came to a creek over which was a bridge. I wanted the oxen to go over the bridge but they wanted to go down to the water. In excitement I forgot which was Stan and which was Spot. Seeing that I must make use of the whip- grasping the stock firmly in both hands, I began to swing it above my head judging when the proper speed had been attained. I took aim at one of the oxen's ears- shut my eyes and let drive with all the force I possessed. A crack like a rifle- a howl of intense pain and poor uncle rolled to the ground showing a clean two foot cut in the back of his old shirt as he turned in the air. I did not wait but leaping from the front started up the road as my legs would carry me, running for the better part of an hour.

Then through the trees I saw the even piles of wood on the bank of the river, knowing this to be a wood yard landing and trusting that the residence of the proprietor was not far away I hurried through the trees. Fortune favored me. I saw a man standing with his gun on the ground looking at the fowl he had just shot. He said his name was Burrill the owner of the wood yard.

I told him my story as we walked toward his cabin. He said the Belle had stopped for wood the night before and Captain Clebourne had told him to be ready with a plentiful supply on their way back, He advised me against attempting to reach the Rock on foot and said, only 13 miles had been covered notwithstanding all my trouble, and he would try to fix a place for me so that I could await the coming of the Belle. Ma, he said musingly, would be all right but he was afraid of Joe.

We reached his cabin which was in a clearing overlooking the river and entered without ceremony. There was but one occupant and she sat rocking in the front of a large fireplace, her chin on her hands, her elbows on her knees. She did not look around as we entered.

Ma, where's Joe?

Dun-no

Whar you reckon?

Oh! Reckon with the chillum

Ma?

Wall

Kin yer feed the lad?

She turned slowly around looked at me and then without a word she began to prepare something for me to eat. During its progress, she spoke once or twice at jerky intervals

You a Yank?

Yes ma'am

"I'm a Cracker."

Indeed?

Joe won't like you

Still wondering who in the devil Joe was, I answered, I'm sorry Ma'am.

Dad tote me in some knots-

Which being done and the fire being enlivened he went out to look for Joe and the children. I hungrily watched the preparation for this meal. She dipped and the first step was to take the snuff bottle from off the high mantel- dip her wood brush in it and then rub her teeth, until her gums bled-leaving the dipper in her mouth like a toothpick. She took a three legged skillet that had a top, this she pushed into the hot coals and covered it over. Then procuring a pan she went to a sack- put three or four handfuls of cornmeal from the sack into the pan adding a little water and a teaspoon of salt.

Sitting on a stool in front of the fire she began to knead. I noticed that she was very sallow- her eyes very yellow- and teeth very black. She was barely 30 years of age but looked as though she had outlived all of lifes joys and might care but little, how soon the end would come.

She must have been a handsome girl in her old Georgia home. I also noticed that the drippings from the dipper in her mouth, would every now and then fall into the pan, without attracting her attention. In fact nothing seemed to attract her attention.

At last she began to mold in a skillful mechanical way- taking a mass of dough about as large as an egg, she placed it in the palm of her left hand and with an odd spinning motion of her right, she whipped it into shape until she had a cone. She made a dozen of these, stopping every now and then to throw a charred knot which had popped back into the fire and forgetting to wipe her hands. Now she pulled out the heated skillet, and as she lifted off the top I saw the familiar name of Chamberlain and Co- Cin - O in raised iron letters and it made my heart warm as though I had met a comrade.

She put in the cones- replaced the cover- piled on the hot embers and pushed it back into the fire. Then rising she ground a teaspoon of fresh coffee, which she placed with the pint of old grounds, filling the vessel with water. This she put on the fire. She next tool the stool, mounting it, she cut two or three slices from a flitch of bacon that hung to the rafters overhead. When the ponies were done she emptied them into a tin plate and putting the bacon in their place, shoved the oven back again. This meal was placed before me and I must acknowledge that I ate very heartily and very thankfully.

As she showed no inclination to talk to me, I went out- wandered into the woods a short distance and sat down on a fallen tree to muse and to think it all over.

Who be yer?

She had approached me noiselessly- a tall brown girl, not twenty- holding a two year old child by the hand. Her eyes were dark and very large and impressed me in a manner impossible to describe with any degree of lucidity. I told her my name. Yer a river man? I nodded- Cabin man? I said I was a clerk. Whar you from? Cincinnati- Yer know lots of clerks? I told her I knew every river clerk who lived in Cincinnati and many more besides.

Dropping the child's hand without any ceremony she gathered her loose blue calico gown closely around her and sat down on the tree trunk near me. Does yer know Bill Adamson? I said I did. She drew a few deep breaths and then asked- Is Bill married? I told her he had been married about two years. She caught one of her knees with her clasped hands, rocked back and forth a few moments, nodding her head in unison with her rocking. Her healthy young blood was making a desperate effort to show itself through the clean brown skin of her cheeks. Her whole poise was artlessly graceful. Showing her to be a magnificent specimen of physical womanhood and causing one to feel that far more power was repressed than was exhibited.

After an unusually deep breath which coming from her could hardly be called a sigh- she threw the words at me- Whar id he? He is on the Belle with me I answered and further Mr Burrill told me, that the Belle would stop here for wood on her way back which will be in about 10 days. This wife and he are willing that I should remain here and await the coming of the boat-But he told me it all depended on Joe whom he has gone to find. She got up took the child by the hand moved away a step or two-stopped turned and looking me full in the face said- Yer kin stay- I'm Joe. Then she left quickly and noiselessly as she had come. One room, four children- Ma-Dave and Joe seemed to me that night the principal reason why Joe might object to my remaining as she was an unmarried woman. But we got along very well together. Joe never asked again about Bill Adamson.

I did a number of the chores, hunted once or twice in the woods with Joe who by the way was a capital shot- I only made one attempt to refer to our introductory conversation. I asked her if she had ever met Bill Adamson. No! She answered me in a manner that convinced me I was treading on dangerous ground.

On the afternoon of the day before the arrival of the Belle, I had been more than ordinarily useful around the house and I took the liberty of questioning Mrs Burrill.

Ma, I said, You told me Joe would dislike me. Why did you say so? Wall yer see- yer a Yank. Is that the only reason? Yer a river man and she don't like yo'uns, Why Ma? I reckon I can tell, Yer know the Straeder? Yes-

She stopped there nigh unto three years back- a sick Yank the water was a killen on him was left with we'uns. Joe missed him- he was kind o' sweet on her. Straeder came back. He went away and Joe aint never heard on him since. She's a changed gal. I knew Adamson had been on the Staeder about that time. So I described him to her.

That's him! That's him! She said and then I was convinced in my own mind that Joe had lied. Two of the children were not near enough of an age to be twins and yet they were near enough of an age to be sisters. I drew my own conclusion.

It was about four in the afternoon, when the Belle pulled into the landing, which was about half a mile from the cabin. We started when we heard her whistle. As we were leaving the house Joe said to Burrell, Brother take yer gun- you might shoot something on the way.

My kind hosts came on board with me. I wished them to meet Captain Clebourne consequently I took them up to the hurricane deck, where he was standing well forward near the rail. After introducing them I told him how kind they had all been to me. He growled and said, It was more than I deserved. While we were talking Adamson came from the Texas and started

down the larboard companionway between us and the shore. We were out of sight, because in the mean time we had moved just aft of the smoke stack.

Joe suddenly reached and took the gun from Mr Burrill exclaiming and pointing- Dave, Thars a skunk on the wood pile. Taking rapid aim, she fired. Dave took the smoking gun away from her, angrily saying, You shouldn't burn powder on sick critters.

Captain Clebourne laughed as he said, Burrill's right Young Miss. A commotion on the lower deck caused us to hurry towards the stairs (to the scene) A quick glance at Joe, as I ran, showed a set face, with compressed lips and eyes that pierced me with their vengeful stare as she gazed intently at the companion way. Adamson was lying doubled up at the bottom of the steps- dead.

His head perforated by that load of buckshot-Great God! What a calamity explained Captain Clebourne. Bill had a presentiment that some time or the other he would meet with an accident at Burrills Landing.

Dr. L.C. Carr

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