



Arcadian Journey

THIS is the chronicle of my first and most fabulous voyage.

My father blended hard work as a builder of bridges with sporadic and quite spontaneous excursions in quest of adventure, shook them well, and usually came up with something that kept the family agog for weeks. On this occasion the proposal was that we take a steamer down the Mississippi to the city of Dubuque, in order to see no less a hero than Buffalo Bill, due to appear in person with a troupe of hard-riding, gun-toting, feather-wearing Indians. I shall confess that at the age of seven I was more than a little terrified of Crees, Sioux and their confreres; but the thought that Buffalo Bill could cope with the lot of them in the twinkling of an eye, if need be, reduced the chill on my spine to the dimensions of a mild drop in temperature. While my father had admittedly never been a boon companion of Buffalo Bill, he had in the days of his youth known another guardian of virtue, the incomparable Wild Bill Hickok, and regaled us with tales of how this gentleman had slain two desperadoes at the same instant with the help of a brace of deringers, one held in each hand.

Mother gently demurred, being a woman who held the whole of the Wild West in abhorrence as a particularly opprobrious storm center of iniquity. But in the end she gave in, we went to bed before the chickens, arose at three in the morning, climbed into a carriage behind two horses sleepier still than we, and drove off to the village where the boat was expected to dock. My sister, of whom I took all the advantage accruing from a difference of sex and a

year in age, sat blinking her blue eyes at the stars. In due course I became the author of a series of queries from which my father eventually escaped by singing ballads both grave and gay, of which he apparently knew no end.

Then the dawn came and with it, from the brow of a hill, our first glimpse of the mighty River. The sun was upon it and the mists had partly risen, so that the flood of rushing water, sprinkled with little tree-laden islands and hemmed in by forested crags, lay before us so breathtakingly beautiful that I shouted as if I were a Greek going to a wedding with "Evoc" on his lips. Certain it is that not even Homer greeted the blue Mediterranean more jubilantly than did I this stream, overpowered by the glory of what lay below. The vista was of silver, turquoise and emerald, scintillant by reason of movement, and yet still as the wilderness, the heart of the wilderness, alone can be. Only once was I later on to experience to the same fullness exquisite, absolute beauty. This was when, having ridden a train all night in my soldier's uniform, I got off with two friends at Chartres and found before me, against an early morning sky, the spires of the Cathedral. Then, however, it seemed as if this were the incarnation of all man had conceived of in his history when he dreamed of beauty and holiness together. The Mississippi was the sea, girdling the world and yet leaving it gloriously unstable, was a gateway to unending mystery, was even so quiet, strangely quiet as are the eyes of the woman one loves when she is happy. To be sure, I did not think of any of these things at the time. My father drove

quietly down the hill with a twinkle in his eye. I know that he was proud of my joy, the joy he had given me. And assuredly man cannot give to his child any treasure, either gold or fame or learning, which is as good as the joy that has in its breast the symbols in which he will later on weigh the world.

THERE was the vessel, waterwheel and everything else one saw in pictures, notable for the clanking and banging that seem to go with loading of ships. From this point onward my mother took over the reins for a while. The River was quite different now, was an expanse of eerie, muddy wetness lapping about us, and it was time for breakfast. I do not recall what we ate, but while we were doing so mother said that when we got to the great, wicked city we were please to stay close to her, because if anything happened to us she would immediately die. The thought of her going off peremptorily to Heaven was distressing; and I forthwith resolved to do whatever was possible to sunder her temporarily from immortal bliss. Meanwhile my father was trading remarks with everybody who wished to deal in that commodity, and inquiring diligently into the present conditions of Dubuque. The only thing I knew about this city was that a citizen hailing from there and leading a not too edifying life in our town was known to utter the mysterious word *parbleu* upon innumerable occasions. I had not the faintest idea of what it meant, but it sufficed to make the place we were to visit as strange as Namadu.

And in all truth this is what it was. The street up which we proceeded at a leisurely pace was cramful of wagons and horses, so that what impressed me were the tails and haunches of countless steeds so much more enormous than myself that I might well have been Tom Thumb walking down Wall Street. Temptations to pursue adventures of my own were therefore suppressed without difficulty. Since ours was a frugal family, advantage was taken of the opportunity to make purchases. I was initiated into the very center of the secret of woman, which is not her loveliness or her intuitions, but her uncanny ability to examine without weariness every article in a store before she buys so much as a safety pin. But I shall admit that the discovery was skindeep at the time. I took refuge in the pretense that I was a merchant and sold my sister quantities of merchandise, so that she went so hugely into hypothetical debt that it is utterly impossible that she could ever subsequently have extricated herself.

Then came the tent, an oval of ground surrounded by tiers of seats, and Buffalo Bill. My father applauded him as if he were an old friend,

and I am quite certain he responded by bowing slightly in our direction. He looked, I thought, very much like my grandfather, except that his beard was longer and more pointed and that he rode horseback extremely well. My grandfather in a saddle always reminded me of a kernel of popcorn in a popper. I was genuinely afraid, however, that Buffalo Bill would suddenly swing his horse around and shoot some malefactor on the spot; and since the nature of the show business had not dawned on me, I was certain that the Indians, dashing round and round on ponies, yelling at what my mother said was a stagecoach, and firing blank cartridges galore were a congeries of hardened villains. It was all no doubt gay and exciting in its Wild West way, but the sigh of relief which escaped from my innermost soul when the time came to descend intact from the plank on which we were seated had at least the magnitude, in psychical terms, of an eruption of Mt. Vesuvius after a sleep of centuries.

Back on the boat we were again, and this chugged ahead doggedly against the stream. Then I discovered something about my father which I had not previously suspected — something that made me feel quite as if I had found a box of caramels under my pillow. He was walking about telling people he had never seen before all about Buffalo Bill, just as if the two of them had been friends since the dawn of time. Let me say frankly, since confession is good for the soul, that this is the only kind of embroidery I have ever appreciated or understood. To it all males are, secretly or overtly, consciously or unconsciously, addicted, even as my several aunts were to knitting sweaters and afghans. My father, I knew now, was a magnificent, half-unconscious weaver of yarns.

SUDDENLY a storm arose, as storms can rise so spectacularly only in that River valley. The sky was black as the juice of walnut hulls, the thunder rolled, lightning cut bloody gashes yards wide in the world. Little ripples on the stream bloated themselves into the respectability of waves. My sister was terrorized into absolute frigidity. Therefore it became necessary to heighten her torment with fiendish glee. I explained to her without hesitation that she would never reach shore — that the lightning would strike the ship and engulf her in the wild waters, and that as a consequence she would soon be in another world. The prospect of being thus abruptly transported from where she was unnerved her quite, and she clung to me as if I were the last great hope of earth. Just then, however, something came out of the sky with a bang, quite as

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if all the fireworks at the county fair had gone off at one time. The boat was rimmed with flame. It shook like the rear end of an empty hay wagon. And it dawned on me instantly that I, with all my bragging and my cruelty on my conscience, might myself be sent off to the other world without further advance notice. Perhaps all my hairs were not standing upright, but they certainly seemed to be. It was a most salutary experience. When later on I read Burke on the subject of the sublime and the beautiful, it was with the conviction that all of it had been spelled out for me on the Mississippi. Now I clung to my sister and she to me, as man and raft might cluster on a stormy sea. Literally nothing I have ever encountered was more welcome than the land, now that the thunder rumbled in the distance.

We were back in the carriage again, the sun was going down, everything was beautifully green, and the horses released from the livery stable, pranced in their harness with manifest delight. My father and mother sat strangely silent for a time. After a while stars sat, bright as ever-burning matches, in the sky. Then my father said, "Those Indians were not as spry as they might have been, it seems to me. But perhaps it is only because times have changed." My mother replied fervently, "I thank God for the fact that I shall never again have to watch so many Redskins making fools of themselves." And I, thinking only of the storm, added, "I'm very glad I'm not in Heaven." My mother was silent. My father said, "When we get there, we'll have dinner some time with Buffalo Bill."

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