

# VAGABOND ADVENTURES.

BY

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### WILD LIFE.

I OBTAINED my first view of the great Mississippi and of the practical working of Lynch law at the same time. The night of our advent at Cairo was lit up by the fires of an execution.

A negro, it seems, was the owner or lessee of an old wharf-boat, which had been moored to the levee of that town, and which he had turned to the uses of a gambling-saloon. People who had been enticed into it had never been seen or heard of afterward. The vigilance committee, then governing Cairo, had frequently endeavored to lay hold of the negro and bring him to trial ; but he had secret passages from one part of the wharf-boat to the other, by which he always eluded his pursuers.

Having no doubt that he was guilty of several murders, the *vigilantes*, on the night of our ar-

rival, had come down to the levee, two or three hundred strong, armed, equipped, and determined to make the wretch surrender. In answer to their summons they received nothing but insults from the negro, still out of sight and secure in one of his hiding-places.

At a given signal the wharf-boat was set on fire and cut adrift, and as it floated out into the current the *vigilantes* surrounded it in small boats, with their rifles ready and pointed to prevent the escape of their victim.

When the wharf-boat was well into the stream the negro appeared boldly at the place which, in the middle of all river-craft of that kind, is left open for the reception and discharge of freight. And now a scene occurred, so sensationally dramatic, so easily adaptable to the stage of these latter days, that I would not dare to relate it for truth if I had not witnessed it with my own eyes.

The negro was not discovered till he had rolled a large keg of powder into the middle of the open space just mentioned. As he stood in the light of his burning craft, it could be seen by the people in the small boats in the river that he had a cocked musket with the muzzle plunged into

the keg of powder. Then the negro dared them to come on and take him, pouring upon them at the same time such horrible oaths and curses as have rarely come from the lips of man.

The small boats kept a proper distance now, their occupants caring only to prevent his escape into the water. As the flames grew thicker around him there the negro stood, floating down into the darkness that enveloped the majestic river, with his cocked musket still in the keg of powder, and cursing and defying his executioners. He was game to the last. We heard the explosion down the stream, and saw the wharf-boat sink.

The next day I spoke with the leader of the band in the small boats, — a short, wiry little man, with a piercing eye. He said that he had not the heart to shoot the "nigger," because he showed such pluck. He even confessed that, for the same reason, he felt almost sorry for the victim, after the explosion had blown him into eternity.

We saw, indeed, a great deal of wild life in the country we visited, for we steamed thousands of

miles on the Western and Southern rivers. We went, for instance, the entire navigable lengths of the Cumberland and Tennessee. Our advertising agent had a little boat of his own, in which he preceded us. The Palace and Raymond would sometimes run their noses upon the banks of some of these rivers where there was not a habitation in view, and by the hour of the exhibition the boats and shore would be thronged with people. In some places on the Mississippi, especially in Arkansas, men would come in with pistols sticking out of their coat-pockets, or with long bowie-knives protruding from the legs of their boots.

The manager had provided for these savage people ; for every member of the company was armed, and, at a given signal, stood on the defensive. We had a giant for a doorkeeper, who was known in one evening to kick down stairs as many as five of these bushwhackers, with drawn knives in their hands. There were two other persons, employed ostensibly as ushers, but really to fight the wild men of the rivers. These two gentlemen were members of the New York prize ring, — one of whom, I believe, went to England

with Heenan at the time of the international "mill," and whose name I saw in a New York paper, the other day, as the trainer of a pugilistic celebrity of the present time.

The honest fellows scorned to use anything but their fists in preserving order; and it is strange, considering the number of deadly weapons drawn on them, that they never received anything worse than a few scratches. Nor did they, indeed, ever leave their antagonists with anything worse than a broken head; except in a solitary case, which befell at a backwoods landing on the Upper Mississippi, where a person who had made an unprovoked attack on the boats was left for dead upon the bank, as we pushed out into the stream. We never heard whether he lived or died.

Besides these pugilists, we had in our company other celebrities; for instance, the amiable and gentlemanly David Reed, whose character-song of "Sally come up" made such a *furor*, not long ago, in New York, and, I believe, throughout the country. His picture is to be seen at all the music-stores.

One other of our company has since had his name and exploits telegraphed to the remotest

ends of the earth ; I remember to have read of him myself, in a little German newspaper, on the banks of the Danube. This was Professor Lowe, the balloonist, late of the Army of the Potomac. I doubt much whether the Professor had dipped very deeply into aeronautics at that time. He was an ingenious, odd sort of Yankee, with his long hair braided and hanging in two tails down his back.

His wife, formerly a Paris *danseuse*, was my instructor in the Terpsichorean art. By the aid of a little whip, which she insisted was essential to success, she taught me to go through all the posturings and pirouettes of the operatic ballet-girls. I was forced often to remonstrate against the ardor with which she applied her whip to a toe or finger of mine that would get perversely out of the line of beauty.

Professor Lowe and Madame, his wife, conducted the performances of the "Invisible Lady," a contrivance that may not be familiar to all my readers. A hollow brass ball with four trumpets protruding from it is suspended inside of a hollow railing. Questions put by the by-standers are answered through a tube by a person in the apart-

ment beneath. The imaginations of the spectators make the sounds seem to issue from the brass ball. It used to be amusing to stand by and listen to the answers of the "Invisible Lady," *alias* Madame Lowe, whose English was drolly mixed up with her own vernacular. But if the responses were sometimes unintelligible, this only added to the mystery and success of the brazen oracle.

The Professor was passionately fond of game. He was struck with the abundance of turkeys in one of the Southern States where we chanced to be, and, throwing his gun across his shoulder, sallied forth to bring some of them down. He returned shortly with two large black birds, which he exhibited about the decks, amid the grins and suppressed laughter of the crew. It was not till the Professor took his game into the kitchen to have it dressed for dinner that he was informed, not only that his birds were not turkeys at all, but that he had been breaking one of the statutes of the State, which prohibits, under a pecuniary penalty, the killing of turkey-buzzards.

The Professor had a young bear which he bought for twenty dollars at some one of our stopping-places. Now this was the most mis-



chievous cub that I ever happened to see. To say nothing of the number of stuffed snakes and pelicans which he devoured or tore to pieces, the degree of havoc he could make in a trunk of wigs and stage wardrobe was something just simply astounding. I have known him to eat up, or at least cause to vanish, in the space of a single riotous hour, all that was necessary to the artistic "make-up" of three old men, a half-dozen plantation darkies, and I know not how many Shaker women. That was the time when he plundered a large property-box.

That bear was chained and whipped, and made sick by the necessary poisons of taxidermy, but he bore all with perfect cheerfulness. Three days after a contest with a stuffed animal he was always more playful than ever.

There was something very ludicrous in the good-natured leer he put on when the Professor was experimenting upon some new way of confining him. As soon as the people were well asleep, if the bear chanced to have any curiosity about the contents of a lady's bandbox in some remote state-room, or about the quality of the pantryman's supply of sugar, he was always sure to break loose,

and confiscate on his return any odd pair of pantaloons or boots that a sleeper had unconsciously exposed before retiring. Thus it happened that young Bruin had his enemies.

He had his friends, too, and I was one of them. For there was something very lovable about that bear, after all : he was so rollicking, and his black hide, from the burnished peak of his jolly nose to the end of the stub of his syncopated tail, did so seem to gleam in the light of hearty good-fellowship!

He was especially irresistible when any one took notice of him in his penal exile, away off in the dim region of the gas-machine. Then he would lie over on his young back and invite his friend to a romp, in a manner that showed hospitality in every movement of his chubby paws. Or if in the mood to receive his visitor open-armed, he would rise courteously on his hind feet, his tongue hanging lackadaisically out of one side of his mouth; and his roguish eyes assisting the smile which spread from ear to ear ; and he would, in short, look as amiably foolish and sheepish as people are said to look who are about to indulge in a hug.

If his chain interfered with him at these receptions — and it often did — he would turn his droll orbs askant upon it, apparently in the same sort of playful humor that human prisoners so often indulge in at the expense and to the ridicule of their bolts and bars. Indeed, the young rascal always carried a human sympathy with him.

By his admirers, at least, some ameliorating circumstance was sure to be found in all his most daring and damaging exploits. There were some, I believe, who tried to excuse even what I shall now have to mention as the crowning atrocity of his life.

The plea of his apologists was his manifest freedom from any shade of theological bias, as proved by the calmly ludicrous deliberation of the deed itself. I will not express an opinion, although there is not the least doubt in my mind that the doors of the wax-work cases should have been more securely fastened. I will merely say that there *was* something very grave and candid withal in his manner, when caught in the very act of scalping one of the Twelve Apostles.

This feat aroused his enemies to the highest pitch of indignation, and they clamored for ven-

geance on Professor Lowe's bear. The cub's friends, however, did not desert him in the hour of his evil report. And so, at last, a Guelph and Ghibelline division ran through the whole company.

The manager, treasurer, cook, pantryman, such gentlemen as had been left to make their breakfast toilets without boots or other more necessary articles of apparel, and all the ladies even to Madame Lowe herself, were of the anti-bear party.

All the performers, except those who had been ravished of wigs and tights or other miscellaneous pieces of wardrobe, the engineer of the gas-machine which furnished light for the whole establishment, all the prize-fighters, and, in a word, all the reckless characters of the two boats, headed by the determined Professor himself, marched, as I may say, figuratively, under the banner of the bear.

The factions were about equally divided, and equally impressed with the merit of their respective causes. We of the bear party, however, had one manifest advantage. The captain of the boats, jolly old William McCracken — as fat as he was jolly, and as honest as he was fat — was on our side.

Such a state of feeling could not, as may be well imagined, exist for any long time among so many people, and in the narrow limits of those two boats, without some act of aggression from one side or the other. And it came.

One of the prize-fighters, perhaps in simple defiance to the opposition, and perhaps in a burst of honest sympathy with the cub himself — I cannot say which, for he was of my party — purloined from the dressing-room and presented to young Bruin, in his durance, a pair of cast-off pantaloons in which a certain minstrel was in the habit of performing his great act of the “comb solo.”

Of course, the actor was indignant; and, whether in bodily fear of the prize-fighter, or believing what he said, maintained that the infernal bear had been loose again, and vowed that he would have his life. The act of the prize-fighter was certainly ill-advised and hazardous, not merely to the pantaloons, but to the bear himself. I mention it as only one more instance of the danger in which one stands from his own friends, especially if he chance to be at all prominent in times of great partisan strife.

The cub's enemies now clamored more loudly

than ever against him, stoutly asserting that chains and gas-rooms were not strong enough to hold him ; and the ladies were still more sure that he would bite. One young mother, I remember, related that she had heard of a well-authenticated instance wherein a single bear, I think she said, had come out of the woods and massacred and devoured forty children.

In the middle of the night after the presentation of the pantaloons, a disguised band, headed, it was afterwards supposed, by the comb-soloist himself, stealthily gained the prison of the bear, broke his chain, and threw him overboard. The next morning triumph was in the faces of the opposition, and surprise and grief in the hearts of Professor Lowe and his liegemen.

Of course, no one knew how or when the bear had disappeared. Gradually the grins of the anti-bears widened into laughter ; then they spoke to one another for our benefit, in those peculiar gibing tones which may be called audible grins ; then their asides became soliloquy, and finally straight dialogue addressed by victorious Montagues to aggrieved Capulets. Our side manifestly having the worst of it, our feeble retorts were soon

drowned in the *Io Triumphe* torrent of our enemies and the bear's.

At last, when the exulting taunts of the opposition were at their height, the Professor discovered his bear, sitting very quietly and philosophically on the rudder of the Palace, to which he had swum and up which he had clambered, when thrown into the river in the night. A boat was sent after him straightway ; and, for a time, the thunderstruck anti-bear party were crushed. Bruin's receptions that day were more popular with his friends, if possible, than they had ever been before. He was more than a hero, now ; he was a martyr.

A ponderous padlock was found and placed upon the door of the gas-room, and the real leader of our party was considered safe. Yet there was something ominously silent about the opposition for the next week. They made very few threats, but there was plainly murder in their thoughts. I make, of course, no account of those ignoble attempts of his foes to prove that the cub, notwithstanding our defensive vigilance, had once more got into the cases.

These tentative frauds defeated themselves

from the very wantonness in which they were conceived. It was out of all reason to suppose that a bear would have placed the hat of the inebriate Tam O'Shanter upon the head of the noble Helen Mar; and it was still more out of reason and unnatural to think him guilty of so arranging the waxen "father of his country," George Washington, that he should be discovered the next morning astride the stuffed alligator, in the exact plight of that famous traveller, Captain Waterman.

These things were, in truth, too preposterous to be entertained for a moment. If the Lady Helen had been robbed of her back hair, it was argued, or if the hilarious reptile had been rent limb from limb, or the meditative George Washington had been jerked out of his top-boots and left prostrate in his case, with bald head and torn garments, there would have been a smack of probability and of ursine humor and prowess in the deeds.

No,—there was something too absurd and human about these frauds; and it was a minor triumph for us when they were traced shortly afterward, by the irate manager, to a party of



late wassailers in the drinking-saloon of the museum.

I suppose we grew careless in our manifest ascendancy, for one morning at a landing in a wild, thick-wooded country a hunter came on board with bear-meat to sell, and, by a strange fatality, almost the first man he accosted as a probable purchaser was Professor Lowe himself. This reminded the great aeronaut of his own animal, which he had not yet visited that morning. While the Professor was absent at the gas-room one of the opposition came up and purchased what the hunter had to sell, and bore it to the kitchen,—exchanging, by the by, very significant glances with those of his party he met on the way.

In a moment more the Professor was back, in earnest conversation with the hunter, and it spread like wildfire over the two boats that the cub was gone for good this time,—or, rather, that he was cooking for dinner. The hunter told his honest story, of how he had been awakened by his dogs in the middle of the night, and had pursued and shot the bear. There were a dozen different traces going to show that the prisoner

of the gas-room had been released by human hands, and pursued on the shore with sticks and clubs.

It never transpired exactly who were the perpetrators of the foul deed. Our party, I need scarcely add, were utterly nonplussed and demoralized, while the opposition were correspondingly elate. And these latter, bent upon the additional cannibalism of devouring their arch enemy, had him served up at table before our face and eyes.

But when each of our party had scornfully refused to partake of our deceased friend, and when the plates of the opposition were helped bountifully, even to those of the ladies, — to whose credit be it said, that they turned their faces while they passed their plates, — a partisan of the late cub arose from his seat and made a few remarks. In a quiet but forcibly specific way, he called the attention of the banqueters to the amount of stuffed specimens they were about to entertain with their bear-meat, and ended by congratulating them upon the intimate knowledge of taxidermy and natural history which would likely be the result.

I think I never knew a speech to make so

powerful an effect. The opposition party, almost to a man, and certainly to each individual woman, left the table; the remains of the unfortunate bear were removed, and tenderly consigned to the river; and his faithful friends ate their dinners in a final triumph that was half assured and all melancholy.