At Kawsmouth Station

by

Henry King

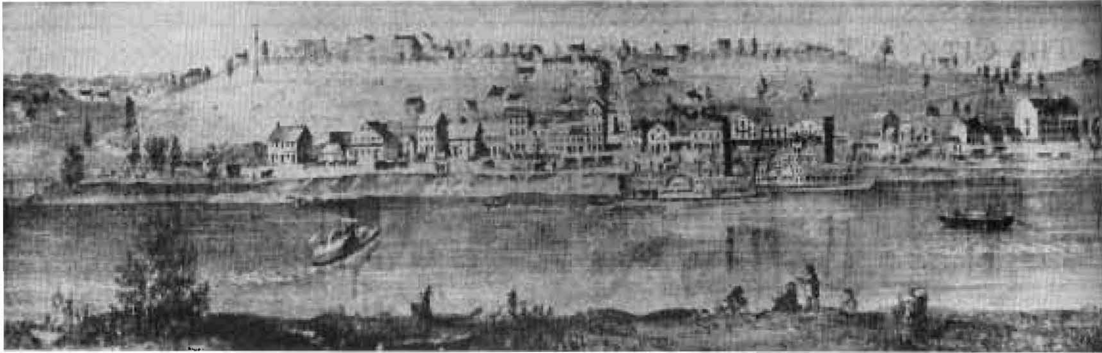
"From Indiana, did you say? My dear sir, you have my warmest sympathy."

He grasped my friend's hand with a cordial gripe, and there was a persuasive, proselyting look in his face as he continued:–

"I used to live in Hoosierdom, and I know how it is myself, so to speak. You're going to Kansas, of course. Correct, sir, correct. Let me congratulate you. That's Kansas, just across the river there."

We were at the Kawsmouth railway station, waiting for a train to Topeka, and this chance acquaintance was like a whiff of fresh air to us, in the sultry strangeness of the place. He had an assuring countenance, slightly abated by an equivocal little twitching at the corners of the mouth; his bearing was easily familiar without being offensive; and his voice had in it something of the sparkle of the April sunshine that was making gold of the cracked and dingy station windows. Moreover, he was quite intelligent in his way, and uniquely original at times; and if he presumed upon our credulity, as I fear he did to some extent, it was done so adroitly and so graciously that no chance was left for detection.

"You'll like Kansas," he went on; "it's the very perfection of a prairie country,–not flat, nor boggy, but gently swelling, with rich valleys, and sloping everywhere. Eden sloped, you remember,–'beautiful as the gardens of the angels upon the slopes in Eden.' And the climate is simply



The present location of the Kansas City metropolitan area was formerly the jumping-off place for exploring expeditions and emigrant trains. The old City of Kansas City developed on the site where in 1843 Wyandotte Indians from Ohio made the first permanent settlement.

celestial, if I may be allowed the word. Do you know, the average temperature of Kansas at the present day is very nearly the same that Greece enjoyed when she was at the pinnacle of her greatness? Fact, gentlemen, sure's my name's Markley."

So saying, he took from his pocket a roll of papers, some printed and some written; and, leaving my friend to the study of what I took to be unassailable proofs of "the glory that was Greece" in the weather of Kansas, I turned my own attention to the young man who had been furtively passing back and forth in front of us as we talked, and who now stood gazing out through the dusty east window, a few steps away, with his elbow against the wall and his hand to his cheek,—silent, listening, and absorbed.

He was wholesome, honest-looking fellow, this young man, with frank blue eyes and limbs of a gladiator. Evidently he was unused to the glossy black clothes he wore, for he wriggled about in them now and then as if with a haunting sense of their illogicalness; and in various noticeable ways he betrayed that confessing flutter of the heart which marks a man at once for a lover thinking of his mistress, or a criminal apprehensive of pursuing officers,—it is often hard to tell which, the two are so much alike. But he did not leave me long in doubt on this point, for as I walked near him he faced about, and said, pleasantly, in answer to a question concerning his destination,—

"I'm not going anywhere,—that is, on the cars. I'm waiting for a young woman. She's to be here this morning, and I'm mightily afraid she's got left at St. Louis. She had to change cars there, coming from Macoupin County, Illinois. One train's in from St. Louis, you know—the one you came on,—and she wasn't on that. There's another one due at 10:30 though. I reckon she'll be on that; but I don't feel easy about it at all."

He went to the door, and looked eagerly out along the railroad track eastward; and then, returning, he added,—

"We're to be married to-night, that's the truth of it; and we've fifteen miles to ride into the country after she comes. It would be too bad if we didn't get there in time, with the license bought, and the preacher all ready, and the folks waiting and notioning about us. It would take us down so, you know. Is it much trouble for a woman to change cars by herself at St. Louis?"

"Not much," I assured him. "No doubt her ticket was over the other road, and she'll be here, all right, when the train gets in."

"Yes," he replied, in a dubious tone, "if she didn't get left, or if there hasn't been an accident on the way. It's foolish, I suppose, but do you know I can't help being shaky about it? And the nearer the time comes for the train, the shakier I feel; I do, really. Things are so uncertain, you know, 'specially railroads;" and he tried to laugh, but it was a hollow mockery.

Glancing towards the man Markley, I saw that he had spread out before him various documents, full of queer parallel lines and plentifully sprinkled with figures, from which he was interpreting to my friend, "Mr. Wabash," as he had named him, the marvelous growth of Kansas,—"a growth which nobody would credit," he remarked, "were it not for the records, which I have here in black and white.

"The population of Kansas," he went on to say, "grew from one hundred thousand in 1860 to over three hundred and sixty thousand in 1870, a gain of nearly two hundred and forty percent, in ten years, against an average increase of less than twenty-two per cent in the whole country; and more than four fifths of it came during the latter five of those ten years. It doesn't seem possible, does it? And now, in 1878, the population is certainly three fourths of a million, at least. More than doubled, you see, since 1870."

He paused a minute, in an exultant way; and then, adjusting his documents, resumed:—

"There are now over five million acres of cultivated land in the State. More than three million of it was raw prairie eight years ago and in 1860 less than half a million acres had been 'broken.' And then, you must remember, the war had to be fought meantime, and Kansas was in the red-hot of it all the while. You may have forgotten that at one time she had twenty thousand men in the army out of a voting population of less than twenty-two thousand, and she actually gave more lives to the Union, in proportion to the number of troops engaged, than any other State."

These were indeed striking figures, we readily agreed; and I sought with the best intentions in the world, to win the young man waiting for his sweetheart to an interested notice of them. But the effort was provokingly futile. He was not looking for land. He had a home,—in Kansas,

too. He was telling the pale little lady in black alpaca, who sat near him, all about it; how he had preempted it five years before, and paid for it with two years' crops, and built a snug house of three rooms and 'a beauty of a buttery'; and how the front yard was sodded, and evergreens put out, and wisterias planted by the south porch. He was telling her, also, of the young woman who was to be queen of all this, and who was coming that morning to claim her crown, "if she hadn't got left, or the cars didn't run off the track, or something else didn't happen to her.

"May be you saw her at St. Louis. Did you notice a young woman there in a drab gown cut goring, and a sleeveless jacket, and a brown hat with two red roses and a bunch of wheat-heads on it,—artificial, you know? That's the way she wrote me she was going to dress."

"A smallish young woman, with large hazel eyes?" asked the little lady in alpaca.

"Yes, yes," he replied, quickly and fondly.

"I did see such a person looking among the baggage," returned the little lady in alpaca. "I remarked her, I remember, on account of her elegant little feet. Are your young woman's feet very small and trim, about twos, I should say?"

He dropped his head, blushing, and said in a kind of hesitating undertone,—the big, bashful, simple-thoughted fellow,—"I never noticed Clara's feet." No, indeed. For aught he knew, or cared, her drapery might have concealed the finny wonder of a mermaid. He worshiped her, that he knew; and she was unspeakable sacred to him; and of course he had never noticed her feet.

"She gave some one a letter to mail for her"—

"Yes," he interrupted, "that was for me. No, it couldn't have been for me, either; she wouldn't have sent me a letter when she was coming right on herself. No, it wasn't for me," and he appeared lost in a puzzle of thought. Then, directly, he looked up again, and remarked, with quiet earnestness, "I don't think that was Clara."

"But to drop generalities, and come down to details," I heard Markley saying, "in these six counties with the red marks around them there were in 1870 only about a hundred settlers, and there was little of anything raised but the hair of casual immigrants who fell into the hands of the Indians. Now there are more than thirty-five thousand people living there, and they have in cultivation over three hundred thousand acres of land, and own good houses, with books and pianos in them and the women folks wear pull-backs, and all that sort of thing." Just here, a jaded, pinched, and calico-clad old woman came in with a basket of apples, and this afforded Markley an excuse briefly to commend the rare advantages of Kansas as a fruit country. "You know we have already taken several first-class premiums in the pomological line; and I'm sure you saw our fruit display at the Centennial Exhibition,—everybody saw it. And we

haven't hardly begun yet. Wait a few years, and we'll astound you; it's a mere question of time." Then he purchased a half dozen of the old woman's apples,—carefully choosing the larger ones, I could see,—and divided them among his auditors; and he said to her very kindly, as she made change for him, "My good woman, you ought to go out into Kansas, to a higher, drier latitude; you look aguish."

"Thank you," she answered, "I'm as well as common. It's kind o' warm, and I'm a little down-hearted like; that's all, I guess."

"Speaking of ague," Markley went on, without further notice of the shrinking old apple-woman,—"speaking of ague, I don't see how anybody can stay where it is, when it's so easy to go to Kansas."

"But you have ague in Kansas, the same as in every other new country, don't you?" inquired Mr. Wabash.

"Only as it is brought in, temporarily, from other States," Markley politely responded. "It is not indigenous. We have no malaria. Our atmosphere is rich in ozone; and ozone is nature's own purifer. Homer mentions it in the Odyssey, you recollect, where he speaks of the atmosphere being 'quite full of sulphurous odor.' That's ozone."

"I presume the atmosphere of the infernal regions is also 'quite full of sulphurous odor,'—or ozone," said Mr. Wabash, with a chuckle.

"Yes, I suppose so," Markley retorted, promptly; "put there, no doubt, to tantalize the fellows with suggestions of Kansas. 'Sorrow's crown of sorrow,' you know, 'is remembering happier things.' But as I was about to say, ozone dispels malaria, and keeps the climate free from bilious conditions. Besides, the ague is really a matter of morals rather than of physics, you understand." But we did not so understand it, and he therefore graciously proceeded to enlarge upon the statement for our benefit. "The ague always hovers about low, flat lands, where the soil is thin and jaundiced-looking, and where the inhabitants go on voting for General Jackson for president. Take those quinine river-bottoms in some of the Western States,—I shan't call names,—where the men gather at the saw-mill every Sunday to pitch horseshoes and shoot at a mark; there's where you'll find ague every time. Then move out on the high, open lands, where they have Sabbath-schools and debating societies and collars to their shirts, and you'll see very little of it, usually none at all; the sickness there, when they have any, runs in the nervous way." Mr. Wabash laughed good-humoredly, and ventured some light remark about finding out more the longer we live; but Markley kept on in a solemn and impressive manner, as if charged with a special mission on the ague question: "It's considerably due to our school system, our free press, and our numerous churches, I tell you,—added to the abundant ozone,—that we are so little bothered with the thing in Kansas. We have four million dollars' worth of school-houses, and nearly two hundred newspapers, and churches till you can't rest. There's no foot-hold for the ague among such things,—and a sky

full of ozone hanging over them. It's very much a matter of civilization, this ague business. It's the difference between the sallow squirrel hunter, with his rifle on his shoulder and a gaunt hound at his heels, and the clear-complexioned, grammar-respecting man of the new era, with books and papers on the table and a canary-bird swinging in the window. They had no ague in Athens, you may be sure; they have none in Boston—to speak of."

These notions were so novel, and presented so earnestly, that everybody in the room was obliged to listen. Even the young man waiting for his sweetheart forgot himself a few moments, and gave surprised heed. Only for a few moments, however. Then he took up his dropped conversation again with the little lady in alpaca, who seemed to be humoring his worship of the coming wife as if it had been a religion,—and who shall say it was not?

"This is Clara's profile," he said, timidly, reaching out a little morocco picture-case. "I don't want to brag about her, but, honestly, I think she's awful nice."

"It's a real sweet face," remarked the little lady in alpaca.

"I'll never quit wondering how it came about," he continued. "I haven't the least idea what makes her like me; I know I ain't good enough for her. She does like me though. Her leaving a good home and coming so far, all alone, to marry me is enough itself to make that certain. I'd ought to have gone after her, I know; and I offered to, but she said it wasn't any use to go to that expense. I do wish I had gone as far as St. Louis to meet her, though. But I reckon she'll surely be here on the other train. One train's in from St. Louis, and she didn't come on that. I suppose it's silly to borrow trouble over it, but I can't help feeling shaky about her, to save my life. If anything should have happened to her"—

"Perhaps she's given you the grand bounce," Markley suggested, with a teasing pretense of alarm.

The young man drew himself up as if his very existence had been challenged. The color came and went in his cheeks, and his lips were set in a rigid scorn.

"Bounce nothin'!" he said, haughtily, and walked away.

"You'll notice," Markley made haste to urge, "that the average yield of corn per acre in Kansas last year exceeded that of any other State. But we don't want to make Kansas a corn State. We have a higher ambition. Our bright, particular thing is wheat. Last year we raised more of it to the acre than any State between us and the Alleghanies. And we've only just started. When we get to working to our full capacity, making wheat our main crop and corn a mere side issue, Kansas will be the rainbow of the Union."

Wabash and I both laughed, in spite of ourselves; and Markley himself let his face relax into a broad smile as he proceeded:—

"You don't see the point, do you? Very well," recovering his earnestness of manner; "what constitutes a State? Men,—high-minded, tough-sinewed men. And what makes such men? Wheat bread, gentlemen,—wheat bread. Corn does for 'roughness,' so to speak,—hogs thrive on it,—but it takes wheat to win in the long run. Now, I have no doubt that the North finally triumphed in the rebellion because her soldiers lived on wheat bread. The soldiers of the South were brave enough, but they were loose-jointed, and lacking in that finer, conquering strength of muscle and brain that comes from wheat: they lived on corn bread, sometimes on the raw corn, you see. Granting all other things to have been equal, this difference in diet alone was sufficient to turn the scale. Mind what I tell you: there's destiny in wheat. And look what an abundance of it we'll be able to produce a few years from now! There are over forty-seven million acres of land yet unused in Kansas,—first-class wheat land, all of it. A perfect empire! Now, taking the present average,—about fifteen bushels to the acre,—look how many bushels this land will yield in the aggregate every year, when it all comes to be cultivated."

He sharpened his pencil to make the calculation; but, much to his chagrin, he had to defer it, for a locomotive whistle uttered its warning scream down under the river-bluff, and a quivering, widening belt of steam, glittering in the sunlight, shot up like a comet's tail among the branches of the trees. The station waiting-room was vacated with a rush. The St. Louis train was coming.

It was curious to watch the young man waiting for his sweetheart. He stood apart from the rest of us, at the extreme eastern end of the station platform, oblivious of everything but the slowly-approaching locomotive. Very likely the world stood still, in his tense thoughts, while that great puffing, hoarse-throated thing drew itself towards him over the creaking rails; for was not she coming with it, to make life a long, glad song to him? It was not strictly a happy look he had, however. It seemed rather to indicate that sharp sense of joy which has a touch of fear in it, and so becomes in part a pain. And when, at length, the train reached the platform and stopped, we noticed that he did not hasten to the cars, as we had supposed he would, but walked doubtfully along the outer edge of the crowd of alighting passengers, with a strange stare in his countenance. At last, though, she stepped out of the rear coach, and stood there with her head slightly inclined, and smiling. We all knew her at a glance. And the next moment he was by her side, and she had put her hand in his, and they were both blushing to their very ears.

"Why, Seth!" she said.

"How d'y' do, Clara!"

That was all there was of it; and it was disappointing,—to the spectators, I mean. No doubt the parties in interest were satisfied with it, however; and how could we know what warmer greetings they would ex-

change in the shade of their road through yonder forest?

They had a little whispered consultation that we did not hear, but we could surmise that it related to her trunk; for presently they sought it out and claimed it, and she opened it and took from it certain neatly-folded and mysterious articles, which she put together in a little bundle and pinned what looked to be an apron around them. Then the trunk was handed over to the station-agent, apparently to be kept until sent for, and they walked briskly across the zigzag complexity of railway tracks to where the horses were impatiently waiting to carry them to the wedding.

We stood gazing after them from the station, as they mounted their horses and rode up the green and inviting valley,—he on the high-stepping bay with the flowing mane, and she on the brisk, sidling chestnut sorrel, that wore the new saddle, and the bridle gaudy with blue and white ribbons. Behind them and about them was the bland April sunshine; in front of them, just over the river, in the shadow of the bluff, glowed the pink miracle of the peach-blossoms. Somehow the scene recalled to my mind Scott's young Lochinvar "from out of the west," and the fair Ellen of Netherby Hall; and I found myself repeating, under my breath,—

> "They'll have fleet steeds that follow, quoth young Lochinvar."

A vein of similar fancy must have reached the heart of my friend Wabash, too; for as the happy couple crossed the river-bridge, and sped past the pink orchard, and cantered up the bluff and in among the concealing foliage, he observed, with an admirable smile,—

"It looks like the last chapter of some old romance!"

"Heaven bless 'em!" said Markley.

Then the bell sounded, and we hastened aboard the train. A few minutes later we turned our backs on Kawsmouth, and set our expectant faces towards the land of ozone and wheat,—the verdurous, agueless slopes and the odors that Homer sang,—the land where the sun is in league with fate, and the fruits of the soil are for the healing of the nation.