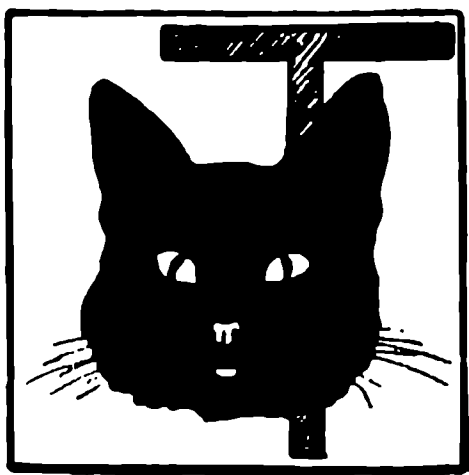


Stateroom Six.

BY WILLIAM ALBERT LEWIS.



THINGS have changed greatly on the river. There are no open bars, no card playing, no shooting; much less travel, for that matter.

We were a half dozen at supper. I sat opposite a gray-bearded man, who, when he had completed his meal, closely scrutinized a modest-appearing young woman quietly supping at another table. She finished and departed. When she was gone my neighbor leaned across and said:

“Perhaps you thought it funny I watched that lady so closely? But that’s ‘Sis.’ I remember her twenty years back, on this very boat. My! but what a look at her brings to my mind!”

He leaned back, his eyes on the table, a grim smile broadening a kindly countenance, and pushed both hands deeply into his pockets.

The man had something he wanted to tell.

“A romance, I suppose? I’d like to hear it.”

“It was twenty years ago, and on this boat, the Hester Hale. Professional gamblers were always aboard, looking for victims. None were more daring nor more lucky than ‘Ready’ Rankin. A handsome fellow, of good family, with a heart big and manly, if he was a cut-throat gambler and a bad man all around. Down at that landing we left before sundown, — Kellyville, — an old man was waiting, one night, with a wee tot of a girl. He brought her aboard. You know how natural it is to consign children to the care of some person? The child was the old man’s granddaughter. She was to get off at Low Water Landing, which is the next stop we’ll make, a few minutes from now. He happened to put the child in ‘Ready’ Rankin’s care. He agreed to see her safely ashore and to deliver her to her ma. ‘Ready’ got a stateroom, put the child in one of the berths, and gave her a bag

of candy to keep her from crying. Then he went below for a game. The play chanced to be tolerable heavy that night, with Rankin an eight-thousand-dollar winner. But it ended in a row; and Rankin, seeing trouble ahead, rolled his pile in a newspaper and laid it beside the sleeping child in the stateroom. The boat was then a half hour from the landing. 'Ready' got into a fight with the man he beat at the table, and was badly shot. His last words were confused. He said something about:

“ ‘ Stateroom six — little one — Low Water Landing — money.’ ”

“ The boat made the landing. They woke the child up, put all the bundles into her arms, and turned her over to her ma.

“ Sis's mother soon discovered the package of money, and met the boat at the landing on her down trip next night, to make inquiries of the captain. But he knew nothing. Rankin had been buried that day up river. Nobody knew anything about any money. So Sis's mother kept it, trying all the time to get some knowledge of Rankin's family. That she could not do. They had disowned him.

“ About three years ago a party of young men came up the river hunting. They stopped off at Low Water Landing and boarded with Sis's ma. One of the young fellows was teller in a bank down in Natchez. He fell head over ears in love with Sis. You can't much blame him, can you? She's awfully handsome. Naturally enough, they got to comparing notes; and the story of the money came out. Do you know, sir, it turned out that the young bank teller was Rankin's son? Fact! He and his mother and step-father lived together, and all they'd ever heard was that 'Ready' had been killed in a fight on the river. They didn't mourn overmuch, although 'Ready' wasn't the worst chap that ever lived.

“ There! We're just blowing for Low Water now. Let's go on deck and see Sis land. Up to visit her ma, I reckon.”

“ Rankin's son is going to marry her, I suppose? ”

“ Married, man! Year ago, last Christmas. They live as cozy as you please down in Natchez. He's cashier of that bank now.”

We stood by the rail as the boat made fast. The young lady tripped lightly ashore and greeted a white-haired old lady.

The Hester Hale resumed her way.

“Step this way. I’ll show you where ‘Ready’ was killed.”

We strolled to the gangway. He pointed to a little bullet hole in the casement.

“There were three shots fired. ‘Ready’ fired one and I—”

I looked up quickly into his patriarchal face. He paled, and fixed his eyes on me.

“I didn’t mean to say so much, friend; but I believe you are a square man. This spot has a fascination for me. And it is twenty years ago, twenty — years — ago.”

His head drooped. He seemed to be thinking of something beside what he uttered.

“I understand you,” I said.

I pressed his hand, and went to bed.

