

THE HESPERIAN TREE



An Annual of The Ohio Valley  
1903

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Hesperian Tree

*An Annual of the Ohio Valley—1903*

*Edited by John James Piatt*

*Author of "Idyls and Lyrics  
of the Ohio Valley," etc.*



"The Hesperides,  
The land where golden apples grow."—LONGFELLOW

COLUMBUS, OHIO  
S. F. HARRIMAN  
1903

*To Mr. Piatt  
John James Piatt*

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**ORIGINAL TOMB OF GENERAL HARRISON AT NORTH BEND, OHIO**



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## THE OHIO RIVER IN ROMANCE



VOLUME might be written about the romance of rivers. The ancients loved the rivers of their native lands. The Ganges was holy to the Hindoo; the Nile was the life of Egypt; Jordan the joy of the Hebrew. When Naaman, the Syrian, was told to wash in Jordan that he might be healed of his leprosy, he replied, "Are not Abana and Parpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?" In song and story were the great streams celebrated; and the same is true to-day. German poets have written of the Rhine; Maxim Gorky has portrayed life along the Volga in Russia; and, in America, Irving and Bryant have celebrated the Hudson, Mark Twain the Mississippi, and Edward Eggleston the Ohio.

I have always believed in the literary value of Ohio Valley life; and though I am sure the instinct to write would crop out in any clime or environment; while even the exiled Hebrew, lamenting the loss of his beloved Jordan, will hang his harp on the weeping willow along the murmuring waters of Babylonia; it is my faith that the Ohio will one day be made immortal by both minstrel and novelist born in her beautiful vale. And to sustain such an assertion, I will relate the tale of my love for her, proving that if over my childhood she exercised such an influence, what must be the inspiration she will bring to the true poet that shall yet celebrate her?

My earliest recollection of the Ohio is a mingling of the comic and tragic. I was about three years old, and had swallowed a nickel. Mother and I wondered what would be the consequence. She was not like the good old German matron, who, when her child swallowed a coin, said, "O neffer mind; it vos koundterfeit!"

Not she. We were both excited. But in the gathering twilight I heard the sound of a great steamboat wafted across the intervening hills, impressing me profoundly even in the midst of my anxiety about the nickel. It was the Louisville and Cincinnati mail-liner, going up on her daily trip. I listened till the "chug! chug!" died away, and still I wondered. My love for the Ohio was awakened then and there; nor has it diminished with the lapse of time.

When I was ten years old came my first steamboat trip, and only a provincial can realize what an event that was in the life of a timid urchin, the son of a plain country preacher who could not afford to take his family on pleasure excursions very often.

It was July 28, 1882. I shall never forget the date. The *Ben Franklin* was the name of the mail steamer which was to stop for us at five o'clock in the afternoon at Harmony Landing, about fourteen miles above Louisville, on the Kentucky side. There were four of us boys, ranging from five to fourteen years of age. My mother and father completed the party. So fearful was I that our trip might be interrupted by rainfall, that I watched the clouds with anxious eyes, predicting a terrible storm—a habit of mine, looking for things I never want to come about.

But we got ready, and reached the landing in the family buggy and afoot without accident. The majestic steamer "hove in sight," and my father hailed her with his handkerchief. We boys had heard stories of mischievous rascals who hailed steamboats for fun, and then were chased into the bushes by irate officials; and it was with considerable nervous anxiety that I heard the *Ben Franklin's* three shrill whistles and saw her swing in toward the shore. My childish awe increased as the activity on board became more apparent at her (or *his?*) approach. The great, tall smokestacks, from which the black smoke poured, the puffs from the steampipes, the pilot on high at his wheel, the deck crowded with curious passengers, the rough, bossy mate, and the roustabouts at the gang-plank, amazed me.

And I am sure that our party was quite as much a source of

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interest to the inhabitants of the floating palace, which, for the first time, I was permitted to board as a passenger. When I was five or six years old my father had taken me to see one at the wharf in Louisville, and, though I was thrilled with what I beheld, a fear that she would "pull out" before we got off restrained my enjoyment. Now I did not care, for I was aboard the boat named in honor of the great statesman, philosopher, and electrician whose "Life" I had at home.

We went upstairs, where my father registered us, and purchased tickets, which seemed to me singularly unlike railroad tickets, being merely little books with "ads" of Louisville and Cincinnati business houses in them. Then we found seats out on deck. Familiar farmhouses along the hills of home faded from view as the majestic boat bore us along on the bosom of the beautiful river.

Suddenly my nerves were shocked by the terrible racket raised by a man beating a big dishpan, as I thought. It was the gong for supper, and as we passed Westport, the only little town along the Ohio that I had ever visited, we went into the cabin, where greater things awaited my vision. I had never eaten with such a crowd except at a Sunday-school picnic and country parties; but there I knew the folk, while here they were all strangers; and, for a few moments, my appetite fled. It returned, however, when the dainties were brought on the table.

But my first meal was destined to be sadly interrupted. The boat was crowded with passengers, and the head waiter whispered to my father that we boys would have to wait till the second table in order to make room for our elders. I was in no mood for procrastination, as my appetite was whetted by the sight of some cookies, and I frowned and fretted. But we were marched out till the next round, by which time I was ravenous. The small individual dishes were quite novel to me, as I was not familiar with the table etiquette of public-houses and I felt somewhat like the rustic in the old joke who said to the waiter after devouring the contents of these little dishes: "Your samples is mighty good. Bring on your reg'lar meal."

After satisfying my hunger, I found courage to follow my bolder brothers about the boat, and we wandered wonderingly over it, peering into every possible place. We studied the pilot at his wheel, touched with our hands the great, warm smoke-stacks, watched the whirling waters below from the hurricane deck, and felt the almost uncontrollable impulse to leap over the railing into the river. Then we went down into the engine-room.

From earliest childhood I had conceived a singular horror of steam-engines. It was, of course, occasioned by my nervous, sensitive temperament; but they were monsters to me, bad as bears, more terrible than roaring lions. On the old farm one day, when I was about five years old, they were threshing. I had no fear of the old-fashioned horsepower outfit; but this time it was a real live steam-engine, and I could not for the life of me summon courage to approach within a hundred yards. I watched the busy laborers, heard their shouts of jest and laughter, and studied the whole fascinating scene from afar. Suddenly the whistle shrieked, and I ran for my very life, sobbing and screaming as though the engine were after me.

The engineer blew all the louder, and I ran all the faster till I was well out of reach. After that I kept a good distance from the engine till I was seven or eight years old; and even then I could not approach the monster without fear of his boiler bursting. When I was nine years old the engineer let me blow the whistle for dinner one day, and I felt like a raw recruit of an artillery company firing off his first cannon. But I controlled my nerves, and experienced quite a sensation of triumph, though that triumph was won only by a long training of myself to stand still at a distance while others sounded the awful shrieker which, till then, I dared not even listen to with unstopped ears.

It may readily be imagined, then, what a state of nervous anxiety I was in when night settled over the river; when the hour of retiring came, and I was assigned a stateroom over the boiler with my two older brothers. Mother and father, with my smaller brother, occupied a room farther down the cabin.

The boys fell asleep; but I was wide awake, looking for that boiler to burst and throw me skyward. Father had explained to us the mechanism of the "life-preserver," and showed us how to use it in case we had to leap overboard. Accordingly, to an inexperienced voyager like myself, this intended kindness had all the force of reality, as though I must indeed put it on and plunge into the dark, boiling flood. I could swim in the creek at home, and also very well in the Ohio close to shore; but the ocean in a storm has no greater terrors for the nervous sailor than the Ohio had for me that night.

Father was tired, and went to bed; but my dear mother remained with me to alleviate my needless anxieties. She recommended me to God, whose watchful care is over all; but, though I had repeated, "Now I lay me down to sleep," I was not slumbering, and felt very much like a child I recently read of whose father called up the stair, "Go to sleep, Johnny; God is up there with you." "Yes, papa," answered he; "but I wisht you'd come up here and stay with God, an' lem me come downstairs with mamma!"

About midnight I fell into a troubled, dreamy sleep, and mother slipped away, though I think she peeped in on me again about 3 A. M., when I was more confident and comfortable. Like St. Paul and the shipwrecked sailors of old, I longed for the day, which came, with a damp, foggy dawn, amid strange hills and valleys some distance below the Queen City.

We boys were up and dressed early, and out on deck watching the new scenes surrounding. Rising Sun, Aurora, Lawrenceburg, and other towns typical of Edward Eggleston's novels, were passed in rapid succession; and then, soon after breakfast, the straggling outskirts of lower Cincinnati came into view. Small steamers and tugs, black little boats and big barges, surrounded us, amid which the *Ben Franklin* moved majestically, like a big dog among small ones, or an aristocratic lord among laborers, recognizing with the whistle only those deemed worthy of notice. And I felt very proud of him (or her).

A few moments after eight we came in sight of the great



Suspension Bridge, and soon, with prolonged whistle, which reverberated among the hills, we approached the wharf. There was bustle aboard, and the mate cursed the roustabouts more roughly:

"Get a move on you there, you — scoundrel! Pick up that sack, and stand out of the way there, you — snail!"

The first glimpse of Liverpool to one who has crossed the Atlantic could not be more memorable than was this approach to the Cincinnati wharf to me. The baggage-men represented custom-house officers, and the new State and big metropolis at which we had arrived were quite as immense, to my imagination, as the Old World would be now.

Having checked our valise and parcels, we went ashore with the crowd, prepared to view the city and visit the Zoological Gardens out on Walnut Hills. Louisville seemed insignificantly small to me in comparison with the Queen City, though I was a patriotic provincial, and only acknowledged this silently to myself. Fountain Square was wonderfully beautiful, and the tall buildings and rushing crowds of people bethought a place fully twice as large as the city near which I was born, and where I had attended the circus and exposition.

We took the street-car for the Gardens, and, after what was to me a famous ride through wonderland, reached our destination. The inclined plane up Walnut Hills took my nerve away nearly as badly as the steamboat boiler; but this was in broad daylight, and I did not raise a disturbance. My brothers were not cursed with the timid, poetic temperament, and they laughed at my anxieties all the while.

The Zoological Gardens surpassed the only circus I had attended up to that time, and, altogether, it was a day of continual charm and amaze with me. Nor shall I soon forget the view of the great city, garmented in smoke, as we were returning, late in the afternoon, to the boat. The scene from the heights thrilled me.

At five o'clock we left the wharf on our return down the river; and it was with a sensation of joy, which had in it a mingling of homesickness.

I heard the newsboys crying their papers, "All about the burning of Alexandria!" and I was eager to get a copy with the latest report of the British war in Egypt; but that five cents was deemed a superfluous expenditure, and I practiced the self-denial for the sake of economy, consoling myself that maybe the fire was not such a big thing after all.

The boiler did not disturb my slumber on that voyage, and I walked about the vessel with much more confidence, though I got terribly mixed up on the meaning of fore and aft. I could not realize that we were descending stream, and whenever I wanted to come down in front from the hurricane deck I invariably struck the back stairs, and *vice versa*. Once, when I was wound up in such a puzzle, a fellow called out to me, "Oh, say!" and then turned his head as though he had not spoken. The joke did not "set well" on my sensitive organism, and I remembered him with humiliation long afterward.

We were to land from the boat at Harmony about four the next morning, and I do not think any of us, except my two older, phlegmatic brothers, who hated to get up early at home, slumbered very soundly after 3 A. M. The boat "hung up" in a dense fog, and I was excited because I thought we were at the landing, and I had n't my trousers on yet. Nor had my brothers awakened; and great was my relief when father came in to say we were many miles from home, and not making very rapid headway. Then my anxiety was aroused lest we collide with another boat; and I was glad when the whistle sounded and we moved down stream in the dim dawn.

It was after five o'clock when we stepped ashore, and I was so intoxicated with motion that, as I walked along, I felt as if some one was pulling the earth from under my feet. But we reached home, had breakfast, took a nap all around, and then resumed the old life.

The trip cost just a little over twenty-five dollars. A few days later I got some yellow wrapping-paper and a lead pencil, and wrote my first book, the title of which was printed in a most alluringly alliterative manner thus: "A TRIP TO CIN-CINNATI."

Since then I have been a realist as well as an idealist, and when, about eighteen months later, I first read Edward Eggleston's "Hoosier School-boy," the charm of Ohio Valley life was deeply and permanently impressed upon my mind and heart. I can not adequately express my gratitude to the author of the series of immortal stories which taught me to reverence the scenes, character, and incident of my native section of country; and since becoming his disciple I have not cared much for any sort of fiction except that inspired by genuine experience. I am ready to admit that great romancers like Scott and Hawthorne possessed the imagination to conceive and reproduce other times and manners than those with which they were personally familiar; but we must remember that both Scott and Hawthorne were literally saturated with tradition, and labored most conscientiously to create aright local color and character and incident. And in my subsequent study of home material for the poet and novelist, I was convinced beyond peradventure that the great artists of all times and climes succeeded only as they told that with which they were familiar, and which they loved with all their heart. For these reasons I have never ceased to delight in the stories of Edward Eggleston, James Lane Allen, John Uri Lloyd, and the unique poetry of James Whitcomb Riley. My boyhood was heavenly happy because Mr. Eggleston taught me the charm of its innocent pleasures, and my manhood has been, at least, enthusiastically devoted to describing life as I see it around me every day. Mr. Eggleston's one lasting thought was this: "Be yourself, whatever and wherever you are;" and, though I imitated his characters in my early school stories, I put my own impressions and experiences upon every page. And I am sure every native-born Ohio Valley writer will agree with me that the future of its literature will surpass even its splendid record already made in the annals of American letters.

LUCIEN V. RULE.