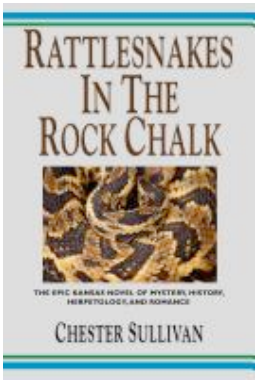
Rattlesnakes In The Rock Chalk

THE EPIC KANSAS NOVEL OF MYSTERY, HISTORY, HERPETOLOGY, AND ROMANCE

Chester Sullivan



This Kansas epic spans one hundred and fifty years from the steamboat adventure of a fourteen-year-old girl, told in the manner of Mark Twain, to the present day. It mingles mystery, history, herpetology, and romance until quiet meditation erupts in violent action threatening the lives of these resilient people, all scrabbling to find their emotional toehold in the layered limestone - early settlers called it rock chalk.

RATTLESNAKES IN THE ROCK CHALK

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A NOVEL

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Cover illustration: photograph of keeled dorsal scales of *Crotalus Horridus* by Kathleen Chute.

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For
John Graves

first teacher, then friend,
then teacher and friend, again
and again

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FOREWORD

The realtor tells her client in the Range Rover, "When we get to the top of this hill you'll see the property that's for sale. It has a lot of history, if history interests you."

"It does."

"I'm a founding member of the Lawrence History Club. That's where Josh Mohler pulled a boulder down atop his hay wagon. Quite a jolly ride he gave that rock! And that's where Professor Burleigh hosted rattlesnake barbecues for his science club, on that rocky ledge overlooking the valley. And that's where Professor Burleigh's mansion and tower stood. He built the mansion for his fiancée twenty years after the Indians were sent to Oklahoma.

"Down in the valley you see bends of the river marked by cottonwood trees. Steamboats ran up the Kaw past Topeka all the way to Fort Riley, and beyond. Oh, you doubt it? You're thinking there's no way steamboats could travel up and down that narrow stream? During the Colorado gold rush steamboats took prospectors from Kansas City to within a hundred miles of Pike's Peak. There were no dams to hold back spring floods, no Perry Lake, no Tuttle Creek Lake, no Milford Lake, so the Kaw ran wide until summer droughts uncovered sandbars. There's Lawrence, and there's the university on the hill, and those bluffs on the horizon mark the southern limit of the glacier. Right here is where his bride's tower stood, said to be haunted by her ghost, the Woman Who Tried to Fly."

DOLORES DRILLING

The steamboat *Mittie Lea* was several days overdue when word went around town she'd been sighted three miles downstream stuck on a sandbar. People began gathering at the wharf to meet her and Mr. Arley set up his sign: *Arley's General Store Welcomes the Mittie Lea.* Boys took over the wharf. Some sat with their feet in the water, others wrestled themselves into the river. Fishermen moved to a quieter place but an hour later with no steamboat in sight most of the people gave her up and drifted away. The afternoon dragged on.

The sun low on the horizon dipped into a cloudbank and shafts of sunlight broke through illuminating a bend half a mile downstream. A spot of sun lit a gray smudge that otherwise would have gone unnoticed and then, shrouded by her smoky veil, the old boat hauled herself into sight and before long her gray smoke changed to black telling people they were being saluted with pitch pine, and then they were rewarded with a jet of white steam as a whistle blast shot up through the smoke and dissolved. Moments later its sound arrived as a wavering moan. Another steam column rose, dissolved, and in time gave its moan. Mr. Arley, owner of the general store and a former schoolmaster from someplace back east, declaimed that by timing the lag between sight of the steam and arrival of its sound he could calculate how far away the boat was, but nobody paid him any mind because they could all see how far away the boat was. He followed his observation with a poetic recitation, "This river does not see the naked sky 'till it begins to progress silverly around the western border of the wood, whence, from a certain spot its winding flood seems at the distance like a crescent moon. John Keats."

The *Mittie Lea* advanced in her own sweet time and when she'd halved the distance some people heard the thud of her engine and before long everyone heard it and then they heard

the thrashing churn of her paddlewheel. She walked steadily up the channel picking her way around sandbars until she entered the pool of the falls. Needing paint, and her deck loaded with large wooden crates, she strode into the counterclockwise current of the pool and turned her bows across it letting it press her onto the wharf. Her paddlewheel churning now at one-third gave enough push to hold her steady to the wharf while deckhands dropped hawsers over the mooring posts. The engineer shut her down, her stage-plank was lowered, and as soon as it was in place passengers ran across it carrying every stick and stitch of their possessions, no thought of looking back to make sure they'd left nothing behind. Nor did a one of them tip his hat to the captain. In fact one passenger, an Englishman, spat at the captain, "Bloody chickens in the river! Bloody ham in the river! Aren't you the pretty one!" The young captain shrugged and ordered the wheel locked down. This was late August, 1868.

The Mississippi River had been closed to commercial traffic due to the war, but now it was open and the *Mittie Lea* had reached the end of her voyage up from New Orleans having stopped to unload general-store cargo in Natchez, Vicksburg, Helena, New Madrid, St. Genevieve, and Kansas City.

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An hour later twilight had enveloped the boat. Her bow hawser groaned taking strain from the current. Resin-coated, the hawser sawed its mooring post like a violin bow while beneath the wharf a bullfrog groaned an octave lower than the hawser. Eddies pressed the boat hard onto the wharf shifting its shallow-footed pilings and squeaking its deck boards. Recently a cottonwood tree, the deck boards hadn't yet agreed to lie quiet. An observer of give-and-take between old boat and new wharf would have sensed impermanence in their marriage.

The boat was owned by a triumvirate of Clays. They were Mittie Clay, her sister-in-law Lea Clay, and Mittie's brother

James Clay. They each owned a third. Mittie's married name was Bradley for a while, but she reclaimed her maiden name when Jerome Wayne B. went native up the Red River. He captained the *Mittie* as far as Jefferson, Texas but sent her home by his mate, and in time the story percolated down to New Orleans that he'd accumulated a band of polygamists and set himself up as a king on a swampy island in Caddo Lake. In later life he returned to New Orleans, made money as a restauranteur, and became a powerful ward politician.

The *Mittie Lea* was pretty well used up. Her owners decided to let this be her last trip, commanded by a young man on his first run as captain. She was shallow drafted and stern-wheeled, but even those advantages didn't keep her from running aground numerous times between Kansas City and Lawrence.

The bullfrog, startled by a girl's footfall, sprang into the water leaving a ring of ripples and a watery *plump!* like the sound you never hear from a "minister." Black silk stockings of the sort favored by ministers served as blackjacks for river ruffians. A silk stocking took up little space in a pocket and when filled with sand one slap of it behind an ear would put a man down long enough to rifle his pockets, or cut his throat. A popular saying was, *A minister puts you to sleep, if not on a Saturday night, on a Sunday morning.*

The barefoot girl would have been seen as a slim full-haired shape if there had been a watchman to observe her staring at the dark water. With the onset of night the water had turned from green-brown to black. A watchman would've imagined suicide rocks in her pockets, but there was no watchman because the rough-sawn cargo crates of Mr. Arley's merchandise weighed tons and were much too heavy for sneak thieves.

The fourteen-year-old girl didn't know the word *elegy*. But she'd come to the place where her father drowned to dance his. She didn't know the word *totem* either, but bullfrogs were her totem because tadpoles grow legs and become pollywogs and pollywogs absorb their tails and climb out of the water as frogs. So if a tadpole could become a frog, the girl reasoned,

there was hope for her. And she liked it that bullfrogs ate clean things. No worms. No leeches or slugs. Nor any other rotten thing that might be swirling deep down in the pool. With a shudder in the night air she imagined herself a bullfrog. She'd practiced being a bullfrog by eating flies, but not wasps. And she'd eaten grasshoppers. Both kinds: the brown ones with tobacco mouths and the green ones that bleed green. And what other animal could make such deep music? She admired their strong legs and the way they sat green and unseen ready to jump over danger be it a snake, heron, or turtle. When they jumped to water they went head first, their hands clasping their white bellies, parting the water clean like a cleaver on beefsteak—*plump!* When they jumped to mud they cushioned the landing with webbed feet. She liked how their eyes were set high for seeing in all directions. She tensed her legs, lifted her chin, and pulled strength up from the pit of her stomach. Her mother's white dress, held out by a petticoat, billowed in the night air.

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The *Mittie Lea* consumed a cord of wood per hour and her crew were burnt out from cutting her wood and pushing her off sandbars. Penniless and hungry they roamed up to the town, found a porch off the back side of the hotel, and sprawled in its shadow.

The moon came up lighting rooftops. The captain spoke to his crew when he passed by them on his way to Arley's General Store, "There's some rice on the boat, Boys. You got no business here. Town people don't like steamboaters." He called them boys by river custom but here in town his "boys" sounded hollow because most were older than him, and his mate, Scrappy Jones, was twice his age.

Scrappy waited for his captain to enter Arley's store before saying, "It's chickens' bedtime. I'll nose out grease and a frying pan. You do know how to steal chickens, don't you?"

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The boat nudged the wharf hard like a calf bumping up for milk. The wharf shifted its pilings. The girl ought not to be on it. She ought to go home to the woman she called Aunt Turpentine. *Mittie Lea*, in a slackened eddy, wandered out until her hawsers went taut. The girl relished its movement under her bare feet. The fresh-cut cottonwood boards reflected moonshine. She bowed to the pool and with somber grace rose on her toes, lifted her arms, and swept her arms against the sky, swimming. Her long black hair undulated like windblown rushes and the watchman, if there had been one, would've been moved by the sight of this girl wearing her dead mother's dress swimming through air with unselfconscious grace. Looking as if supported by air, she ran the length of the wharf, turned, sprang, swam, and sank to her knees breathless. The moon illuminated her kneeling form rendering the scene insubstantial, as if it were seen through a gauze curtain.

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The captain indulged a gloat of satisfaction for having hauled twenty-seven tons of shoes and boots and knives and hats and salt pork and pickles and buttons and thread and spices and cups *et cetera* up from New Orleans. Evaluating storekeeper Arley he said, "Five days the trip cost me from Kansas City. I took on passengers in Kansas City and bought chickens to feed them, but we brushed a willow tree and it smashed the chickens' coop. Them chickens tried to fly for the bank but being wing-clipped they couldn't fetch it. And they couldn't swim either. It was quite a spectacle of drowning chickens. Perhaps I should've bought ducks."

"Yes, ducks." Mr. Arley eyed the captain, sizing him up.

"The passengers burnt out on rice. The crew burnt out on sandbars. You owe me three days crew wages, three days my time, and three days boat time."

The merchant worked his pencil on the tabletop. He shook his head. "You ask too much, Captain."

The captain mock-scraped his pipe, wiped his blade on his trousers, and cut tobacco from a plug. He made a show of packing his pipe. Dealing with merchants was the despicable part of his job. Merchants, like spiders, know the value of flies. Raising his bid in face of Arley's balk, the captain said, "And twenty dollars advance for my next trip. With the river this low it will take me six days."

"It wouldn't take you six days if you knew the river."

"I know every crossing from New Orleans to Cincinnati, both ways!"

"This isn't the Mississippi, Captain. I should think you'd know that by now." The merchant removed a bottle from a locked cabinet. "Let's have a drink and take supper at the boarding house."

The captain lit his pipe. "About my money—"

"Yes, yes." Pouring. "Money, money, money. I paid for the cargo and I paid for its haulage. I even paid for the wharf you'll land it on. Money, money, money. Sometimes I detest money. There are more things in life than money, Captain!"

"Name them."

"Poetry. Friendship. Beauty. Charity."

"You think I got rich off them passengers? They paid me five dollars a head in Saint Louis, and I had the bother of their presence. Your shacky wharf will float off in high water. And I did not need a sign to tell me I'd found your burned out town."

The merchant smiled, confident he could manipulate the young captain. "I'll pay three days for you and three for your crew—but not the boat. It belongs to Miss Clay."

"Miss Clay ain't here."

"Not a penny."

The captain drew on his pipe, a meerschaum he'd bought the day before he left New Orleans. Not yet nicotined it was pristine white and carved in the shape of a full-breasted mermaid. He wore a captain's hat like the one worn by the captain of the *City of Baton Rouge.* Lest there be any mistaking his authority, *CAPTAIN* was embroidered across its peak in gold thread. "You'll pay my advance?"

The merchant folded his arms in defiance, and the captain read his gesture as acquiescence. He raised his glass and looked through it. The curved amber magnified the merchant's eye to the size of a pullet egg. The eyelid sagged beige-blue like the frilly edge of a raw oyster. The merchant then took a ledger from his cabinet. Its spine was reinforced with Moroccan goatskin. "My welcome sign was not meant for you, Captain. It was meant to advertise my store. What transpires between you and me is strictly business, but why can't it be friendly business? I'll buy your dinner, but first let me read you a poem." He tapped the ledger. "I'll not ask you how many whales you've killed or how many mermaids you've kissed or where you bought that shiny new hat. I'll not ask you to yarn to me about how many days you spent adrift and bit your arm to beg a Portuguee for water! This poem will be tame by your standards, Neptune!" He rapped his ledger with his knuckles, dominating it. He opened the ledger to a page decorated with spiders of florid black ink, wet his lips, and read, "A mouth formed less to speak than quiver, less to quiver than kiss."

"Stow it!"

Arley closed the ledger as if to keep his poetry from leaking out. "If you prefer prose, I'll tell you a story. Two days ago Steffen Cimrman drowned in that pool where your boat's tied up. His daughter was named after his twin sister who wears a cotton wig and cooks at the boarding house. Steffen didn't plan to drown, nor did he plan to leave his two Dolores Cimrmans in poverty. I give money to the girl, charity, there being no orphan houses west of the Mississippi."

"I never kissed no damned mermaid and my name is not Neptune!" The captain had no qualms about gouging the merchant for a twenty-dollar advance, but his self-esteem didn't allow for kissing mermaids. The closest his mouth ever came to a mermaid was his meerschaum pipe. His only passion was steamboats and everything to do with steamboats. He drained the glass.

The merchant said, "You missed a jolly sight in Steffen Cimrman, ugly little man. Bald like his sister. Apelike. Twins they were, and cruelly ugly both of them whereas the girl's

mother was Walking Beauty. *Too Beautiful to live— chained to a Beast— She Died and we the Bachelors wept— ah me, I wept not the least!* to quote from my poem, that you have not the patience to hear. Judging by Walking Beauty's features and coloring one would think her a gypsy but I believe her to have been Italian due to her singing voice. I can't imagine why she married a man so ugly, and I cannot imagine how apelike Cimrman sired such a beautiful child.

"They arrived one night in an ox wagon. It was the fall of 1854 and Emigrant Aid people and all kinds of others were moving in. Steffen and old Dolores rode side-by-side up on the bench. Walking Beauty we didn't see because she lay under the cover. She gave birth to the girl that night and lay weakened by labor, near death, and no wet woman in town would suckle her baby. Steffen carried the baby from house to house begging milk. Such a sight he was. Him so beastly and carrying his bundle of newborn like it was the most precious thing in the world. In his way of talking, rough English, you had to listen close to make it out, he asked every wet woman to give his baby suck but none would, him holding it out at them and babbling stuff they couldn't understand. To convey his request he made sucking sounds. Maybe the women feared him. At any rate their refusals set him forever against this town, where he ultimately made his living by selling fish. Nobody who bought his fish ever thanked him, and he never said you're welcome. Eventually an Indian woman suckled the baby, otherwise it would've died. He cut sod and stacked up a house. The Indians slaughtered one ox and took the hide and some meat for payment and they showed him how to smoke the rest. The four of them, counting the baby, made it to December. Then Steffen gave the Indians his other ox and they kept him and his wife and sister and the baby alive until the river thawed. Then they showed him how to fish and make basket boats with raw hide. You wouldn't want to go on the river in one of Steffen's boats, unless you can swim pretty good. His ugly sister hired out to cook at the hotel. In time she bought a cow and now she sells milk at the hotel. I find it amusing that on his night of arrival Steffen was begging for

milk, now he's dead, and now his sister milks the town. He sold fish the year round. Kept them hidden in submerged wicker pens. If someone overheard him telling his daughter to go get such-and-such fish out of such-and-such pen and bring it to him they wouldn't know where the pen was, therefore they couldn't rob it, because he put fanciful names to all parts of the river.

"Walking Beauty must've had a steamer trunk full of dresses. Sometimes I heard her singing as she picked wildflowers. This was in the spring before she died. I never knew what she did with the flowers, but I'm rather sure she was an Italian opera singer. That would account for her singing and beautiful dresses."

"Walking Beauty, huh!" The captain had heard all he wanted from Arley.

"It's a poetic term, Captain, a poetic term. We town bachelors tried to steal her away from Steffen because we couldn't believe such a beautiful woman would stay with such an ugly man. But ugly or not, Steffen was strong! Could have been a blacksmith except for being lazy." He refilled the glasses. "Only lazy man I ever knew who didn't drink. The mystery was, why would a beautiful woman marry an ugly man and the answer is, he was her trapeze partner. High in the air, she grew to trust him with her life. The other mystery is, how did such an ugly man sire such a beautiful daughter. Well, nature will sometimes throw up a sport in a rather unexplainable fashion."

"Mr. Arley, you certainly can spew a string of tripe."

"Tripe? Maybe Old Dolores does steal ripe tripes from the boarding house. Concealed in her petticoat." He smiled at his witticism.

"Hotel or boarding house? Which is it?"

"Same thing. Old Dolores cooked, and Walking Beauty picked flowers. An unequal relationship to be sure, so to make peace between his two women Stephan named the baby Dolores. Walking Beauty died when the baby was maybe two years old.

"Steffen would fish, but that's all he would do. No manner of ordinary work touched him. He set traps and trotlines and strapped a grapnel hook to his wrist and dove under the falls to drag out catfish. He was short-legged and big-chested. Could hold his breath five minutes. Could've swum the English Channel if he'd had any way to get there."

The captain groaned from boredom.

"Steffen looked like a catfish with his moustache hanging down wet. Shall I tell you how he died?" Arley chuckled. "The little bastard hooked into a catfish too big for him and strong as he was, it drowned him. When he bloated he pulled up the fish. Boys found him floating face down keeping an eye on his fish while it towed him around and around the pool. But that's death, not poetry. Little does his daughter know," Arley rubbed his ledger, "the depths of poetry she does inspire in me!"

The captain downed his second drink. Confident he'd get the twenty dollars, he said sarcastically, "You'll buy your pleasure with an orphan girl?" He closed his eyes letting the whiskey loosen the muscles of his neck and shoulders.

"Nobody buried Steffen. Too much work for nothing, so they pushed him down the river, and then there was quite some disagreement about what to do with the catfish. Some said it outfought Steffen and deserved to be released. Others said it was the girl's inheritance and they cut it up for sale, but nobody bought any—it having held such close company with Steffen."

The exhausted captain, hard hit by the whiskey, slumped. Arley opened his ledger and read a poem set in Ancient Greece, not caring that his audience was half asleep. It told of a boy, Arley's image of himself, who fled his father to live a shepherd's life. The boy played sweet music on reed pipes, so sweet it lulled a shepherdess asleep. Arley described the shepherdess as olive-skinned, raven-haired, almond-eyed, rosebud-mouthed, and honey-scented. To prove his poem took place in Ancient Greece he larded it with candied apple, quince, plum, gourd, grapevines, olive trees, pomegranate trees, brooks babbling silvery water, earthen jugs of wine,

grazing sheep, sly wolves, randy goats, goat cheese, fig trees, quiet clouds, and soft breeze, working his lecherous way to the naked shepherdess anointed with Venus' love oils lying narcoleptic in a shepherd's cave adorned with sea pearls, opal stalactites, alabaster walls. The shepherd's bed was thistle silk, lambs' wool, and swans' down.

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Dolores arose from kneeling, the moon lighting her. Her mother's dress was damp. The dew had dampened the petticoat. The frenzy that compelled her to dance had passed. She walked the length of the wharf expecting to hear a frog jump but instead of *plump!* all she heard was rats scurrying among the cargo crates. She stepped onto the boat and ran her fingertips over Arley's splintery packing crates. They vibrated when the boat snubbed on its hawser. The *Mittie* rocked up and down and sideways. Steffen Cimrman kept his basket boats hidden up and down the river, and she'd paddled them for him, but those cockleshells never awakened the notion of voyage in her. Now the steamboat's momentum made her feel the river's surging downstream imperative. The bullfrog uttered a tentative wavering whoop as the boat bumped Arley's wharf begging to be unburdened of its cooking pots, jars, bedpans, quilting needles, glue, crockery, textiles, dried beans, books, bootblack, cod liver oil, tooth extractors, tea, hernia braces, breast pumps, laundry blue, merry widows, black funeral bows, stove pipes, horse and mule bits, and countless other dreary things, more things than Dolores' mind could encompass, dreary things waiting to be hauled up to Arley's store on mule wagons and unpacked from the big crates and shelved, but no sooner would they be shelved than Arley would tell her to fetch items down. For that she had to climb a ladder that rolled on an iron trolley rail. Her feet would be bare, her toes and ankles exposed to men who whistled a little two-note descending tune. What did it mean, that tune? Add to the tune the indignity of Arley gazing at her moist-eyed while writing things about her in his ledger.

She walked between his crates until she found a shadowed ladder under the superstructure. Its dull brass handrail caught a penetrating moonbeam, beckoning. She touched it, surprisingly cool, and gripped it feeling the spongy give of deck boards underfoot. She climbed the ladder to emerge in a glassed pilothouse lit uncertainly by the moon and stars. She stood among moonlit machinery, a brass bell, a speaking trumpet, mysterious oiled leather straps, a flat-coiled fire hose. The paraphernalia was dominated by a wooden wheel of eighteen spokes each terminating in a smooth grip. She put her hands on the grips and rose on tiptoe to look out over the bows. In moonlight's gleam she saw town buildings not visible from the wharf. The river was at low stage. The waterfall dropped six feet, but its foaming cascade looked tiny from the pilothouse. She tried the wheel. It was locked. She put both hands on a grip and pulled down hard. A half inch was all the slack before she felt the distinct steel-on-steel stop of the wheel lock. Memories of other wheels ran through her mind. Wagon wheels. The wheels in Arley's store clock, the lazy susan heavy with bowls of creamed corn and mashed potatoes and gravy and fried chicken and pickled pigs' feet, all cooked by Aunt Turpentine, rotating on the boarding house table. The greasy iron wheels on the feet of Arley's rolling ladder. Again she pulled mightily feeling for the click at the end of free play. She released tension and heard the wheel meet its stop. By tracing the feel of the click with her fingertips she found the wheel-locking knob and loosened it and the big wheel sprang from her grip and turned fiercely two revolutions. The locked-down rudders had been holding her stern to shore but now they gave way to the force of the river and no sooner did the wheel stop turning one way than it reversed and pulled by the rudders spun hard in the opposite direction. The *Mittie* was set free to wallow. Like flapping window shutters in a windstorm her rudders whipped left and right and with every swing they let the *Mittie* lurch out into the full strength of the current and yaw back hard onto the wharf. She hit and bounced off, each time jerking hard her bow hawser. The full force of her weight and cargo pulled the wharf

aslant when she yawed out, and with her return crash she squeezed the wharf back together making the sappy boards squeal like wet accordions.

Dolores grabbed the locking knob, waiting her chance. She caught the wheel at the end of an inbound spin and locked it down and the boat again obeyed her rudders settling into a rhythm of holding off on taut hawser and when the eddy eased drifting in to nudge the wharf. Breathing hard, her heart beating fast, Dolores mounted to the high bench. While the boat was lurching wildly she'd felt no fear whatsoever. Now she felt an unaccustomed sense of mastery. The leaping steamboat hell-bent on splintering the wharf had somehow calmed her. Sitting on the high bench with her knees tucked up and the soles of her bare feet damp on the cracked leather, she forgot Aunt Turpentine and the wheel-footed rolling ladder of Mr. Arley's General Store.

Her breath regained, she advanced with a swagger to stand square behind the wheel. Gripping two knobs at shoulder height she stared fixedly down into the pool of circling water pretending to drive the steamboat.

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"Now, Sir. If you will count out them dollars in two piles, three dollars a day for three days for me, that will be nine, and one dollar each for my crew, that will be nine also. I'll thank you and bid you farewell. If I'm overdue on my next trip, blame the sandbars."

"What did you think of my poem?"

"I didn't fathom it."

The merchant counted out two stacks of silver dollars wetting his lips with each number he spoke. He pushed them the captain.

"Where's my twenty-dollar advance?"

From an inside pocket the merchant drew a double eagle, turning it in the light to catch its golden glint before dropping it aslant. It rattled down the unmistakable clear tone of gold. "Twenty dollars, Captain. Pick them up and you're my man."

Steamboat crews were usually paid at the end of the week, but the captain was schooled by his captain: *keep them broke to keep them sober.* He put nine silver dollars in one trousers pocket, nine in the other. He didn't touch the twenty-dollar gold piece, eyeing it disdainfully. Arley's words ran in his mind, *pick them up and you're my man*. He'd seen enough railroad bridges to know one would soon span this river making it unnavigable. And the Clays were selling the *Mittie Lea*, so he would never see Arley again. He put on his hat, wobbly from whiskey on an empty stomach.

"Join me for supper at the hotel?" Arley invited.

"No. I've left *Mittie* too alone." The captain lifted the double eagle and with exaggerated nonchalance tucked it into his waistband watch pocket.

Arley said, "You're my man. You'll unload my goods at daylight."

"Yes, Sir. I'm your man."

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Dolores made her way down the ladder gripping the brass handrail and stepping cautiously because the thrill of riding the bounding steamboat had passed. Her thoughts ran to visions of file-tail rats lurking in the shadows. She stepped off the boat. The sprung wharf had reconstituted itself and the scene assumed its serene nocturnal aspect. The bullfrog spoke. The stern hawser lay slack, the bow hawser sawed a dirge counterpoint to the frog. There was no dance left in Dolores. She'd been purged of dancing in one intense moment of frenzy when she'd seen Steffen Cimrman not dwarfish and twisted but tall and handsome. She would never lose that vision of him. The stern hawser felt purposeful in her hands. Even slack, it required all her strength to lift it off its post. She dropped it to the wharf and went up to the bow hawser. She waited for the eddy to bring it slack and lifted it setting the boat free. With the carefree slouch of a deck hand she walked to the space between boat and wharf. That space yawned open like scissors widening and she stepped across it onto the *Mittie,* but she didn't climb to the pilothouse. In the manner of

a deck hand she strolled up to stand in the bows, her elbows on the rail and her shoulders hunched forward, looking down at the water.

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Arley, having revealed his fixation on the girl Dolores, suddenly felt threatened by the young captain. He resolved to feed the captain more whiskey until his memory of the erotic poem faded into a smudge of alcoholic haze. When the captain sobered his memory of the randy shepherd and somnolent shepherdess, naked on swans' down in an opal cave, anointed with Venus' oils, would have dissolved like steam in summer air. Arley said, "Don't be put off by her cotton wig and greasy dress, she's a clean cook. One more drink and we'll go to supper."

The captain, dizzy with drink, shrugged Arley off and made his heavy-footed way down the length of the store. The front part of the store had been rebuilt and the empty basement underfoot awaited his boatload of goods. The wooden floorboards resonated under his footsteps. He bumped out the door and emerged into a calm starry night. A western cloudbank flashed the staccato lightning of a summer storm too distant to be heard. He staggered to the hotel overhang and peered into darkness looking for his crew. They'd gone. He stood a while, increasingly wobbly as the night air sharpened the effects of whiskey. He searched the sky to find north. *There. That way's the river. Mermaids. Shipwreck. To hell with Egg Eye. He had to pay me if he wanted his dry goods dry. Twenty dollars gold and I'm his man. He don't know a railroad's coming!* He looked at the Big Dipper. *That way's north, the river. Because the town's south of the river.* Somewhere a dog barked. The moon and stars were out and the sky was clear. To the west the cloudbank flashed. The dog barked again. Then everything went black and the young captain fell unconscious in the dust of the street.

An hour later he awoke. The stars had moved. His head throbbed. His mind wobbled as his senses returned in painful jerks like the chain drive of his doctor engine. The doctor

engine, so called because it tended the main engine, pumped water to the reserve tank that fed *Mittie's* boiler. It had become his temperamental pet. He wouldn't let himself love a dog or cat, much less a woman, but he unaccountably loved *Mittie's* cranky doctor engine. Its affirmation brought back his wits and he realized he'd been put down by a minister. No whiskey could've hit him that hard. He reached up to loosen his cap and found he had no cap. Where was it? The barking dog took it. No, he didn't kiss no mermaid. He checked his pockets. The silver dollars were gone. If he could get to his knees maybe he could get to his feet and if he could get to his feet he could stand and stumble down to his boat.

***

The *Mittie* drifted stern first until her rudders drove into the mud bank and stuck there giving her a fulcrum to pivot on, and her prow came around with the current.

With the boat's pirouette Dolores felt herself swept in a hypnotic arc of centrifugal force. She'd bobbed in her father's boats hours on end, but the force of swinging with the steamboat's momentum sent a new thrill up to her heart and lungs, on up to her head. Then the rudders pulled loose and *Mittie* was adrift. Rocking now, drifting downstream. For Dolores' maiden departure there were no shouts of command or ringing of bells—no portentous, incomprehensible boatmen's commands echoing fore and aft. No whistle to warn visitors ashore, no high-pressure steam shrieking through safety valves, no groaning clank of the walking beam and splash of the paddlewheel, no nervous passengers recounting the fate of steamboats that blew their boilers, live steam scalding lungs. *The explosion flung people in the river.* Talk of steamboat fires. Talk of mid-river collisions. Reminiscences of the *Arabia* holed on a snag and sunk. Dolores didn't hear the regimented turmoil of a steamboat's departure. She only heard wavelets slapping the bow, and she only saw reflections of the turning moon and stars. She rode the boat as it drifted and did not question the why, the what, or the wherefore of her deed nor did she feel any sense of possession over this boat.

She did not grasp the concept of possession because in her innocence she owned everything—the water of the river and the mud of the banks and the sandbars in the bends and the underwater rocky shoals and the frogs and crickets and fish and crawfish and starry sky, and even the moon.

Mittie touched a sandbar but having no driving engine to push her aground she merely paused while the flow of water under her keel washed out enough sand to free her. The press of current turned her off the sandbar, and she made her way on downriver following the bends of the channel.

Time and again she struck sand but turned free with the current and her waltz of getting stuck and floating free went on without Dolores' ken or care. For all Dolores knew *Mittie's* ghost pilot was steering her away from Aunt Turpentine, away from Mr. Arley, down to the Mississippi, on down to New Orleans.

But in time the boat came square on a snag and rode it. Miles upstream, years before this night, an undercut tree fell into the river and the river tumbled it downstream breaking off its limbs until nothing remained but its strong trunk and roots. The tree then replanted itself mid-river with its trunk pointing downstream. *Mittie* rode up it and caught between water's force and the snag's restraint, she hobbyhorsed.

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The captain's mind was clear when he reached the trees of the bluff above the river. Again in the west he saw continuous silent flashes of lightning. He paused under trees wishing for the pistol he kept locked in his cabin because he sensed he was being followed by his assailant. Down at the wharf he saw a blazing bonfire and a riverbank scene, men sprawled around it. Thinking, *they've set out their lines* it didn't occur to him the men were his crew. Thinking, *the merchant followed me. He ministered me and took back his money. That's why he kept filling my glass.* Again he patted his pockets to assure himself the silver dollars were indeed gone. He then remembered the double eagle and crooked a finger in his waistband watch pocket. It was there. He called himself a fool. Hadn't he been

warned of town dangers? Why did he stand boozy in a dark street to let an egg-eyed merchant sock him? His mind, mired in blame and doubt, turned until one cogwheel meshed with another bringing his wits back in the jerky mechanical way of *Mittie's* doctor engine on low steam. He remembered the twenty-dollar double eagle. *Ain't I ever learned nothing? It wasn't Egg Eye hit me because he knew I had this gold. Merchants take gold.* The captain couldn't afford a watch and in fact didn't need one because boats like his ran on no schedule other than the time it takes to load or unload and the rise and fall of the river. Now that he'd eliminated the merchant as his assailant he knew it was his crew. They'd seen him go to his meeting with the merchant. They knew he would get money from the merchant. Again he crooked a finger in his watch pocket clicking his fingernail down the ribbed edge of the gold coin. The crew knew he carried no watch, that's why they didn't bother checking his waistband pocket. Paranoid now, thinking, *I don't want them fishermen to see me. I'll circle around their fire and gain the boat.* He stumbled over rocks the size of cannonballs as he worked his way downhill toward the sound of the waterfall. When he neared the bonfire he heard the voice of Scrappy Jones, "Our cub of a captain slipped cable on us, Boys. He left us marooned in the Great Nowhere."

Grunts of agreement came from men sprawled at the fire.

"He's a thief," one said.

Another offered his opinion, "He'll drift her downstream. Mr. Arley won't know he's gone till tomorrow."

"I propose he had a crew disguised here, waiting for him."

"Sure, he had a skeleton crew. He knew we'd leave the boat and go to town. Anything but stay on his damned boat."

"You suppose he *would* go down the Missouri?"

"He would go *up* it to fool 'em."

"Shave his beard and black his yellow hair."

"Hell, you're telling me what you would do!"

"They'll hang him for a thief."

"What about these chicken feathers?"

"They don't hang chicken thieves."

Scrappy Jones said, "I want no truck with you boys. My guts ache from chicken burned black outside and bloody at the bone. No potatoes. No cabbage. That's no supper for a gentleman. From now on I'll be taking my meals at the hotel."

From the shadows the captain observed his crew. He saw Scrappy wearing his cap. He then turned to the blackness looking for *Mittie,* but all he saw was the merchant's wharf. Wondering if it might actually be true, the things they said about him, he asked himself, *I stole my boat? Why did I?*

***

With the rising river *Mittie Lea* rode up her snag, slipped over it, and the strengthening current pushed her to the north bank pinning her there with her port quarter overhanging a mud flat. Dolores was in no danger of *Mittie* sinking because boats being driven upstream by powerful engines impale themselves on snags—which generally point downstream. *Mittie* was in an easy drift when she rode up her snag.

In time Dolores realized the voyage was over. She studied her surroundings and cast an appreciative gaze at *Mittie's* black smokestacks sharp against the night sky and the pilothouse glass windows shining in the starlight like hotel windows.

She put her legs over the rail and sat facing the Big Dipper. Then she jumped and sank knee deep in mud not knowing where she was because the visible surrounding didn't tell her how far downstream she'd drifted. She only knew if she followed the riverbank it would take her home. But then the moon brightened and she recognized the place as Alligator Bend. Now knowing where she was, she confidently set out walking barefoot across the mud flat. When she came to a place of slack water she waded along the bank trying not to think about bears. When she got to the pool of the falls she could paddle across in one of her father's boats, and she needn't worry about waking Aunt Turpentine because she would be up milking. Nothing now worried her and nothing would ever worry her, but no sooner had she thought that than she was frightened by the tricky moonlight shadowing

the clay bank into figures that seemed to be watching her. The shapes were like monsters, and they turned to keep watching her as she passed them. She picked up rocks for defense. No, nothing would worry her ever again because now that cold fear had penetrated her bones it drove out worry, which is nothing more than an accumulation of ideas of all the bad things a girl can imagine. Worry was rainwater let down from clouds of blame emanating from her aunt. Worry was the sneer of townspeople calling Steffen Cimrman lazy. When they found him dead they didn't care, they merely joked about his catfish. They cut it up for sale but nobody bought. They did it in her presence as a show of charity. Fear was preferable to worry, because fear was free of shame. She slogged on fortified by fear, disdainful of charity.

A swarm of mosquitoes tormented her ears and tickled her eyelashes. She slipped out of her petticoat and turbaned it letting its tails veil her face. She could see well enough through the open weave to keep the river bank on her right and the river water on her left. Anyone seeing her slim dark figure in the moonlight with her head wrapped in white would think they'd seen a ghost. She would know the pool by the sound of its falls. She slipped and fell. She got up and walked on whistling the two-note drawn-out descending tune. She daydreamed a garden of pansies and peanuts and peaches and pears and potatoes and peas and other pleasant things to eat. There were peacocks in the trees and horses and pigs and a white donkey and two blue dogs and any number of pretty cats and some ducks, one goose, a Jersey milk cow, a spring of sweet water, a fig tree—and honeybees.

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Scrappy Jones hitched his trousers. The gesture told his fellows he was leaving their company. None of them got up from their sprawl because he'd said he wanted no part of them. The captain watched this scene from darkness, his mind cloudy, fuzzy, and he puzzled over Scrappy's words, *Our cub captain slipped cable. He calls me a cub? Why did I slip cable? Do these men have the silver dollars? If so they would be*

drunk by now. Ah—but not clever Scrappy. I'm the captain. I can order Scrappy to empty his pockets. But without a pistol he would laugh at me. A captain with no pistol, no captain's cap, ain't a captain. A captain with no steamboat is no captain.

Scrappy said, "I'm off, Boys. See you in the funny papers." He squared the captain's cap, turned, and walked out of the bonfire glow, his drooping trousers pulled down by silver dollars.

Scrappy was competent in all aspects of steamboating: taking on cargo, unloading cargo, firing a boiler, priming pumps, bullying crews, stopping leaks—but he had never been hired as a captain because of his ruffian manner. There was an unknowable kink in him like the kink that stops a fully wound watch be it a warped balance wheel, a burr on the mainspring, an error in the escapement. The men at the bonfire didn't like Scrappy, but they knew he was competent. And he was wearing the captain's cap. His swagger on the boat enabled him to kick them and insult their cub captain. It added to his aura of infallibility as happened when they were a day up from Kansas City. The *Mittie* lay stuck on a sandbar. The captain sent everyone ashore to cut firewood. Scrappy did not ask his captain's permission to venture off alone with an axe on his shoulder. He returned two hours later—after the wood had been cut and loaded and was burning in the firebox and a head of steam was up and the crew and passengers had crabbed *Mittie* off the sandbar and the captain had ordered the whistle blown twice—which he'd said at the outset was all he would do before leaving any man, and there came Scrappy staggering under a heavy load of red meat. He'd left the ax at his scene of butchery. His face was bloody. A pig's leg hung by the skein of its own skin from his shoulder, and he carried in his arms the back loin he'd hacked out with his axe. He didn't say how he got close enough to kill the pig, but they knew a man with an axe couldn't run down a wild pig. So the pig was in somebody's pen. The passengers went ashore and built a fire and barbecued the back loin, leaving the captain alone on the boat. He couldn't run her singlehanded, so he held his peace until they came aboard smug and well fed. Then when

Mittie was under way he told Scrappy he owed for the axe. Scrappy replied sarcastically, "Take it out of my wages, Cap'n! Not the price of that worn-out axe, but the price of a new one!"

"I will do that," the captain said. "And you will throw that there pig's leg overboard. I don't haul stolen goods."

Scrappy replied to his order with a stony stare, and the English passenger protested that due to the loss of the chickens he and the other paying passengers deserved the pig's leg. The captain nodded, turned, and walked to his cabin. He used his smooth brass key to open the cabin door and he came back holding his cap-and-ball pistol low alongside his leg. He spoke softly, "Throw that pig's leg overboard, Mr. Jones, or I'll put you off on the next sandbar we touch. I'll let you be walking to New Orleans. And if you do not choose to get off my boat I shall shoot you between the eyes." Turning to the Englishman he said, "And you, Sir, if you wish to jump overboard after the pig's leg, when he throws it in the water, I will lend you the fire to cook it."

Even though he was out of the men's sight Scrappy's magnetism tugged at them. Those who had flattened out lowest when he announced his departure sat up. The engineer and fireman hadn't sunk as low as the others. They stood, then the engineer took off at a shuffle trot and after a moment the fireman followed him, running. And then those who remained on the ground stood up. One kicked the fire log as if it had offended him. Sparks flew skyward. Like milling cattle, the men departed walking fast but reluctant to run, following the engineer and fireman who in the distance where it was slow going because of round rocks underfoot could be heard crying out, "Scrappy! Scrappy!"

From this scene the captain knew his crew would not return. The boat was gone. They thought he'd stolen it for the crates of cargo that would fetch money on any market. They would tell Arley he'd stolen it. He went to the wharf and clasped his hands behind his back striking a naval commander pose, staring into the water where *Mittie* was moored when he last saw her. He ran combinations of ideas through his mind ending with one sure thing—he was a

captain without a boat. He couldn't shake the absurdity of the crew saying he'd sweated her up this twisty river only to turn around and steal her back down it. Then the little doctor steam engine in his head engaged a cog and the logic of the crew's supposition came clear to him. If he'd stolen the boat in Kansas City everyone in civilization would know it was stolen. Word spreads fast on the river. But if he stole it up here he could drift it down past Kansas City at night and run fast on down to St. Louis and sell the cargo there.

He heard the dip of a paddle. He saw a fuzzy kind of boat coming toward him pressing hard across the current. It made slow progress. It was paddled by a woman, her head wrapped in white cloth.

The boat resembled an oversized birds' nest, and the woman looked up and saw him striding toward her, his golden hair backlit by the bonfire. She'd been overcome by the cold fear of snakes and bears, and now this looming specter of a man with flaming hair was a new threat. She thrust out her paddle fending off the wharf. Her petticoat slipped down letting the fire illuminate her eyes. He'd never seen such eyes. He grabbed her paddle and pulled her in by it and grabbed her arm and lifted her onto the wharf saying, "It's halfway past midnight. What are you doing on the river?"

She jerked away from him.

"What are you doing here? Don't you know the alligators will get you?"

"You leave me alone. There's no alligators in this river! You leave me alone, my boat's loose!"

"It ain't quite gone yet." He released her and sat on the lip of the wharf to catch the boat with his heels. He pulled it in, lifted it up, and set it dripping on the wharf. While he was saving her boat she retreated beyond the fire and stood breathing hard, free from his grip, but unwilling to abandon her boat to him. "That's my boat!"

He went toward her carrying the lopsided boat in one hand, her paddle in the other. "Here's your playtoy boat. Don't fear me. I'm a steamboat captain. Steamboat captains are river police. We enforce law on the river."

"You're not a captain."

"Oh yes, Lady. If I had my cap'n cap you'd see I am. It says Captain in gold thread. And if I had my *Mittie Lea* you'd for damn sure know I'm a captain! One hundred and thirty-two foot. Twenty-four foot beam. Floats in eighteen inches of water."

"Your boat?"

"Hell yes, what do you think I'm captain of, a privy?"

"Where's your captain's cap?"

"I was peacefully walking the main street of your friendly town and got ministered, robbed of my cap and eighteen silver dollars."

Reassured, she came closer to the fire. Her muddy dress was wet up to the waist.

"Sit on that log there and warm up," he said. He unbuttoned his double-breasted serge jacket and draped it over her shoulders. "Now you tell me why you're here on the river way after midnight?"

"None of your business."

"You'll address me politely as Captain if you expect to be treated like a lady. Now please reach in that coat pocket and pull out my pipe and tobacco plug."

She did as he'd requested and he said, "See. Only a captain can smoke a mermaid pipe!" He packed it and lit it with a coal from the fire. "I'm the master of the *Mittie Lea*, a boat I left moored at this shacky wharf. I suppose the Englishman slipped her downstream where she no doubt run aground. I'll get to her at daybreak. Now who are you?"

She warmed to him, perhaps due to his golden hair, the wreath of tobacco smoke enveloping his face, and the jaunty-breasted mermaid on the prow of his pipe, a figure he unconsciously smoothed with his thumb. She said, "I am the daughter of circus people, raised on Indian milk, and I know everything about this river. My father could bend iron bars with his teeth. He climbed the pole hand-over-hand and walked the high wire. My mother was the Circus Queen. She rode two resin backs, that's horses if you don't know, and she flew a trapeze. No net."

"You are with a circus?"

"We were. My aunt worked the shooting gallery and sold taffy from a false-bottomed box. She's an accomplished pickpocket. When they got tangled in the taffy she lifted their wallet and stashed it in the false bottom."

"You say that like you're proud. You think it's good to be a thief?"

She looked into the fire reprimanded by his remark, perhaps recalling his statement that steamboat captains are like police. Or maybe she was wondering why he said an Englishman stole his boat. Deliberately she stated, "My father was cheated. So he told me to get what I can when I can and don't trust nobody."

The captain considered his question—*you think it's good to be a thief*?" He was thinking of the double eagle he wrung out of the merchant for a trip he would never make. In effect he'd stolen the double eagle. Again he caressed the mermaid's breasts with his thumb. Memory of the merchant's story joined this girl's story in his mind. Then everything came together and he realized her father was the ugly man found dead floating in the pool hooked to a catfish. So her aunt was the ugly man's ugly sister. So her mother was the Walking Beauty, rhapsodized by Egg Eye. Feigning ignorance, he remarked, "There's no circus in this town."

"They sold one elephant in Kansas City after the other one died. My father traded my mother's resin backs for oxen and we headed out for Oregon to start a new circus, but when we got to here I was borned. My mother couldn't let down milk for me so my father got an Indian to feed me, but she didn't want to go to Oregon so we settled in for the winter."

"I see. Well, My Lady, you'd better get on home. You can keep the jacket. I have another one on the boat. At sunup I'll find the sheriff and tell him the Englishman stole my boat."

"What Englishman?"

"A nasty stranger. He got cross because I made him cut wood, him a paying passenger. No Englishman would come this far in Kansas, if not to steal something."

"No Englishman stole your boat."

The captain recalled the merchant's story about a catfish man who could hold his breath five minutes. This girl was his daughter. No wonder she was tough. She was the daughter of the Circus Queen, a woman so beautiful the merchant called her Walking Beauty. What did Walking Beauty look like? Surely she looked like this girl. He took a long draw from his pipe and held it gazing at her mud-caked legs stretched toward the fire. He recalled the merchant's story imagining people of the town undervalued her. Familiarity blinded them to the girl's beauty because she'd grown up among them, ragged enough to be overlooked, and they'd not seen the defiance in her wild black teary eyes now glittering in firelight. The townspeople had not seen her legs as they were now exposed to him. The townspeople didn't see her on the dark river when she looked up at him, the petticoat slipped aside like a Spanish dancer's fan. It took him, inspired by this convergence of events, to see her properly. A burning log shifted and rolled out of the fire sending up smoke. Dolores' face and her stained dress and her mud-caked legs half visible through a veil of smoke overwhelmed him. He struggled to remember her father's name. Then it came to him.

"Steffen Cimrman," he said. The realization of her identity and her presence and an inward force he'd never felt before inspired him to say, "Steffen Cimrman was a good man."

She looked hard at him, the firelight full in her face.

He responded to her look with, "I'm sorry Steffen Cimrman drowned." He had no reason to think Steffen Cimrman was a good man, but he had reason to be sorry he'd drowned. Until he said it he hadn't cared that Steffen was dead. Now he was heartbroken by the fact. He needed time to think. Why did the words *good* and *sorry* surface in his mind? Because he realized this girl was an orphan? Because she'd pulled her wet dress above her scraped knees to warm her legs caked with mud? Because of his overwhelming desire to touch her?

No one in the town had given her condolence for Steffen Cimrman's death, so it's no surprise the captain's scant, *I'm sorry Steffen Cimrman drowned,* brought a flow of tears to her eyes. The town had ignored her, caught up in its eagerness to

enshrine Steffen Cimrman's catfish drowning as a comic anecdote.

"Why are you on the river at night," he finished his question with the name he remembered only because the merchant had repeated it many times, "Dolores?"

"How do you know my name?"

He lied, "Steffen told me."

His lie brought her shoulder-heaving sobs. She buried her face in the sleeve of his coat jacket and her tears enlarged his lie.

"I met him my first time up this river. He came aboard downstream and piloted me past sandbars. Saved me from running aground, and while we steamed up river he told me about his daughter Dolores, a right smart girl, he said. She helped him fish."

"He told you my name?"

"A man will tell what he's proud of," the captain said, "when he shares a confidence on the river. The purling water brings it out. A man will tell a stranger things he wouldn't tell his own daughter. Beautiful, he said you are. He said you will grow into a beautiful woman, like your mother.

She said, "Captain, your boat—"

"I am a captain. Yes, I am. You would see I'm a captain but Mr. Jones stole my cap. The Englishman stole my boat."

"No." She pointed downstream. "Your boat is down at Alligator Bend."

"There's no alligators on this river."

"My father named it Alligator Bend to fool people. I took your boat down there."

"How?"

"It was easy."

And easy it would've been, he realized, for this girl to cast off the hawsers and step aboard. His questions brought out the fullness of her adventure. She told him of the silent, enchanting downstream voyage that in her innocence she'd thought would take her to New Orleans. And she told him about riding up hobbyhorse on a snag, and she told him how

the boat drifted off the snag to the north side of the river and stuck on a mud flat.

The eastern sky lightened to seashell pink-over-blue blending with the firelight and overpowering it. He gazed at her entirely, from her shapely head to her bare feet in a way he'd never before dared look at a girl or woman, and in her innocence she felt his gaze and didn't turn from it. No one had ever looked at her the way he looked at her. She didn't think it unusual, because she was looking back at him the same way and falling in love with him.

"I can't blame you," he said, nodding his approval of her adventure. "I stole boats when I was your age. Skiffs and canoes, but never a steamboat! You're ahead of me there!"

She smiled through her tears, proud of her accomplishment, basking in his approval.

"My crew turned rotten. They'll tell the merchant I stole his cargo. But I'm no thief. I'm honest. I'll shift *Mittie* over to the south bank and tie her to a tree and get that merchant to bring wagons and load up his damned dry goods. I'm the captain, and Mr. Jones will damned well know it! Do you believe me? I'm the captain!"

She nodded.

Having convinced himself he was the captain he assumed a stern tone. "Dolores Cimrman, don't you ever enter that man's store again. He's no damned good!"

She sensed the gravity of his pronouncement. She didn't question how he knew with such certainty a thing nobody else in town seemed to know, Mr. Arley was no damned good.

"It would be legal for me to take your boat, considering you took mine." He stood. "But I'll pay you for it. Does it leak?"

She shrugged. "Some."

"All boats leak, some. Is a dollar a fair price? Would you accept a dollar in payment for it?"

She nodded. He crooked his finger in his watch pocket, fished out the double eagle, and placed it in her hand. It was near the size of a silver dollar and didn't show its yellow color in the dawning light. She put it in a pocket. He offered his

hand to seal the deal and as she'd seen Steffen do when making deals, she spit in her palm before shaking hands.

He kicked the cockleshell boat off the wharf, stepped down in it, and took a grip on the paddle feeling her warm spittle on his palm against the handle. The boat rode higher to the dock than before, but he was so caught up in the girl's presence and the strangeness of his feeling for her that the significance of rising water didn't yet speak to him.

She stood mute on the wharf. To herself she said, *Take me with you!*

With his pipe drawing nicely he paddled hard holding the boat against the stream. It was a tiny boat, but he'd never felt more a captain. She raised a beckoning hand. *Take me!* He struggled to hold against the current, reluctant to lose sight of her.

Her lips parted. She was speechless, but her eyes pleaded, *Take me with you!*

He waved a jaunty salute. The sun broke behind him lighting Dolores and the wharf and the pool, and with that splash of daylight he saw chunks of driftwood telling him the river had put on a sudden rise from a thunderstorm upstream. It would soon overflow its twisty low-water channel and fill its flood channel from tree bank to tree bank with a smooth, straight, unceasing abundance of water. That flood of water would lift his steamboat off the mud flat and sweep it away. He spoke to Dolores around his pipe stem, "If I paddle like the devil maybe I can catch her—she's got a head start!"

She rose on her toes offering herself. *Take me with you!*

He was drifting fast now paddling with the current and she launched herself in an arching leap. "Take me with you!" she yelled.

He looked back over his shoulder. The clinch of his teeth bit through the pipe stem, and his mermaid bowl fell into the water.

She had not asked him thrice to take her, she told herself. Only once had she yelled out for him to take her—but he couldn't stop for her now if he wanted to. The current was too strong. He hadn't refused to take her, she took comfort in

that. She knew he would catch his steamboat and tie it up and come back to tell Arley to bring wagons. He dipped out of sight. She looked across the pool. The rising water had shortened the waterfall to rapids. This river was her crib. Its rushes and reeds were her cushionings and its bullfrogs her playmates. She knew what the floating chunks of driftwood were saying. As if to prove its power the river then overswept the wharf. She stood in water knee deep, and the wharf under her feet surged like a drowning animal struggling up for air. With a heave and shudder it uprooted its pilings and bounded. It shed water and floated free momentarily headed downstream, taking her to the captain! But it floated only a little way before tripping on its pilings. It stopped abruptly and anyone less agile would've been thrown into the swirling water. She was stuck twenty yards from the shore. Unlike *Mittie Lea* the wharf didn't dip and glide but like a sullen beast it waited for the water to hit it full broadside. She ran three leaping steps, all the room there was to run, and leapt neither head first nor feet first but flung herself bodily into the flood and she swam holding her own against the current until it eddied her to slack water, and she clawed handfuls of mud. She pulled herself ashore.

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Brownie lifted her head from the hay trough, chewing, and turned to look over her shoulder at Dolores the way cows look when they're being milked. Aunt Turpentine crouched on a three-legged milking stool, the top of her bald head pressing Brownie's flank. Brownie's calf tugged its rope trying to help with the milking. The accomplished pickpocket had strong hands for pulling streams of milk that hit the tin pail alternately, *tsingh, tsingh!* She was in her rhythm and refused to break it until she'd finished even though Brownie's head swing told her a silent someone was behind her. Finally she released the teats, moved her pail so the calf couldn't get his nose in it, and turned around.

There stood her namesake wet from head to foot, her black hair plastered flat to her head, her eyes downcast, her

mother's muddy dress clinging close to her shoulders, sides, and thighs. She reached into her pocket and drew out the gold coin and handed it to her aunt. "You can have this here dollar. I sold one of Daddy's boats. I'll do the milking or anything else you tell me to do, but I ain't going back to work in Arley's store."

She hadn't seen the color of the coin. The woman she called Aunt Turpentine didn't need to see it. Her filching fingers knew by touch it was gold. Nevertheless she instinctively clapped it to her mouth, biting for brass. Then she said, "You've been out all night. You come back like a drowned witch saying you sold a boat for twenty dollars. Who did you sell it to?"

"A captain."

"Why did a captain pay you twenty dollars for a boat?"

Dolores did not reply. In her innocence she by no measure understood the woman's question.

"You have sold yourself for twenty dollars, Girl."

But the one standing before Aunt Turpentine wearing no petticoat, her mother's dress clinging to her slender form, was no longer a girl.

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The mystery of *Mittie Lea's* disappearance took its place in folklore alongside the grim comedy of Steffen Cimrman's catfish, and Arley never recovered from the loss of his cargo. Stories of Cimrman's catfish and the stolen steamboat *Mittie Lea* were kept alive by a pair of liars. They were Mr. Arley, former schoolmaster and self-named poet laureate, and Scrappy Jones who by evidence of his cap declared himself a steamboat historian. He changed his name to Steamboat Jones and his oft-repeated litany ran: "In 1859 the *Silver Lake* hauled the first shipment of corn down the Kaw. Her captain, Willoughby, was noted for profanity and distrust of his crew. He refused to allow his clerk to touch the ship's money, preferring to stow it in his clothes, and when last heard of he was down in Memphis catching catfish for a living. Other steamboats running the Kaw were the *Colonel Gus Linn*, the

Bee, the *Emma Harmon*, and the *Financier*." Steamboat Jones would go on talking steamboats as long as anyone would listen to yarns such as, "The *Arabia* sank in 1856 loaded with stuff such as Mr. Arley lost on the *Mittie Lea*. Captain Beasley was running the *Colonel Gus Linn* upriver in low water and he went aground above Rising Star, a shack town across from Lecompton. He unloaded fifteen hundred sacks of flour in a paw paw patch and left a deck hand to guard them. The deck hand went over to the saloons and a herd of razorback hogs belonging to some Delaware Indians had at the flour. Them paw paw bushes looked like they'd been whitewashed." But Steamboat's best story was his embellished account of his last trip up the Kaw on the *Mittie Lea*.

Dolores disobeyed the captain's order. This happened on a winter's evening a year and a half after their parting on the river. Mr. Arley and Steamboat had melded their poverty squatting like crows in the defunct store cawing desultory comments at the passing world. Dolores entered the store that winter's evening. There was no one at the door to greet her as was Mr. Arley's requirement of his clerks: *Every customer must be greeted at the door! You with a helping hand and a smile on your face!* She saw in the shadows two humped hulks, Arley and Steamboat, slumped at an oak table. A whiskey bottle down to its last inch and two glasses were on the table. An oil lamp in gimbals cast a circle of light on the table, but the corners of the cavernous room were dark. The sales counter was cluttered with worthless objects. Trash on the floor repeated itself in shadows and the rolling ladder cast its skinny skeletal shadow. By a trick of perspective its shadows splayed into diverging lines like the radiating threads of a spider web. The bloated outlines of Arley and Steamboat could've been dry-sucked beetles caught in a web whose spider had long since departed. That ladder was supposed to remain at the back end of its trolley rail until needed, not abandoned halfway up the store where customers could trip over it, but there were no customers.

Behind the ladder tall shelves and cubbyholes stood empty except for such dusty items as nobody wanted. She

walked toward the table acutely aware she was disobeying the captain's order that had kept her out of this place for a year and a half, but on this winter's day she chose to disobey it. She'd come to ask Mr. Arley a question.

"There's no work here for you, Girl." Gone was his former honeyed tone.

To herself she repeated her question—as she'd done all day. She'd resolved to ask it in as few words as possible. But those few words eluded her. Her lips trembled. She stood mute. Steamboat Jones pulled down the visor of his captain's cap to shut off the sight of her.

Dolores finally blurted, "What is the captain's name?"

Arley stared at her. He worked his mouth as if rephrasing her question. Maybe he was remembering the first time he saw her when the covered wagon sat overnight in front of his store and Steffen Cimrman brought her out to the world, begging for milk.

She waited while he came back to his senses.

"His name?" Arley pointed to his companion. "His name is Steamboat Jones."

"Not him! The captain! What was the captain's name?"

Arley looked dully at Jones, reading the lettering on his cap. "Captain?"

Dolores said, "The captain of *Mittie Lea*."

Arley had passed few days without cursing the *Mittie Lea* and her captain. Scrappy Jones came to him that night with a fabulous story—Scrappy said the captain stole the boat. On the strength of Scrappy's story Arley went to Kansas City and scoured the River Quay looking for his wooden crates of household goods. Finding no trace of *Mittie Lea* in Kansas City, he took passage downriver stopping at every landing along the way to repeat his inquiry. He found nothing. In New Orleans he called on Miss Mittie Clay who informed him she had not exchanged friendly words with her sister-in-law in several years. The business of their boats was handled by her brother James who was taking the cure in Saratoga. She'd heard nothing of her namesake steamboat, furthermore it was used up and she was not inclined to care much about it. Then

in a dreamy way she recalled, "Such a beautiful boy he was. Fresh. He bought himself a new captain's cap and a new pipe and steamed out on the river in that old hulk with the whole world before him, firmly believing it was all his."

In his brief dealings with the captain Arley had not thought of the young man having any name other than Captain. During his downriver pursuit of the Captain he'd repeatedly said, *I don't know his name. He's young. His hair is yellow. He smokes a white meerschaum and claims to know the Mississippi.*

Steamboat lifted his head as if awaking from a trance. He came up with the name and said, "Sebastian. That's his name. I don't know if it's his first or last name but it don't matter because he's changed it by now. He stole my wages and he bankrupted Mr. Arley." He pointed to the merchant without looking at Dolores and continued his recitation, addressing his remarks to dark corners of the store, "I would make two of that cub. He claimed to know the Mississippi, but he don't know this Kaw. He found every sandbar she has to offer."

"Sebastian," she spoke the name letting it echo throughout the darkened store. *Sebastian is not a thief. Sebastian will come back!* She said it in her mind, refuting the man whose eyes were shaded by the black visor of a cap with *CAPTAIN* stitched in gold. She recalled Captain Sebastian saying, *Some dog stole my hat.* There sat the dog who stole Sebastian's cap.

He knew it was gold, not silver, she'd yearned to tell Aunt Turpentine at their dawn meeting in the cow shed. She turned and ran from the store her heels hammering the wooden floor like a drum head. Outside, breathless, she looked up at the stars and spoke Sebastian's name loud into the night for anyone to hear.

"Who is that girl?" Steamboat asked.

"Daughter of the Catfish Man. Her mother was beautiful, and she inherited it. I'm consistently puzzled why such a beautiful woman married such an ugly man, and how such an ugly man could sire such a beautiful child. You've eaten after his sister. Don't look too close in your butter if you like to

think it clean. She picks out the cat hairs. Now imagine her dirty fingers squishing through your butter for cat hairs, but not her own, because in that respect she's as clean as a dog-licked bone. That gnome, yes, you have eaten after her, she's the girl's aunt. She and the Catfish Man were twins. One day he stood there at the counter toying with a box of my hammers. He tossed one in the air, then another, and another until he had four hammers twirling in the air, shiny steel heads and hickory handles flashing like pinwheels. Putting them up and catching them and throwing them up again—until he got bored and looked me in the eye and said they weren't worth a dime. He walked out of the store and the four hammers came down on the counter, wham! wham! wham!"

"Wham!"

"There's strangeness in circus people."

"Why did she want to know the captain's name?"

Arley shrugged. "She never even saw the sonofabitch. He came up from his boat and twisted money out of me, wobbled out of here pretending to be drunk, and then he slipped off downriver. The gnome sent that girl to find out his name because she's trying to find out where his money is buried. The rise on the river was stout enough to push him far downstream. He sold my cargo and scuttled the boat. No doubt he buried the money."

Steamboat stood, his cap brushing the hanging lamp. His face was as black as the darkest corner of the cold store. He hitched his trousers the way purposeful skinny men do and strode out with a go-to-hell swagger the way he did when he put an axe on his shoulder and went off looking for a penned hog. He caught up to Dolores and said, "Where is that captain?"

She turned away from him.

He softened his tone to repeat, "Where's that captain? You don't owe him nothing!"

Dolores' heart hammered. A chained dog commenced barking. The white captain's cap glowed in the starlight. The gold thread looked black.

Steamboat said, “You’re looking for him? I’m his mate. Where is he?”

The dog barked again, the sustained, choking bark of a chained dog. Loose dogs free to advance as far as their courage takes them bark in triplets. Between barks they stare, semi-crouched. Caged dogs protected by a barrier fling against it with frenzied yelping. But chained dogs are the truly dangerous ones because with a lunge their chain might break, loosing them on you with pent-up momentum. That was the pitch of this chained dog’s crescendo.

Dolores tensed to spring. The dog was barking close by. It’s toothy, frothy, barking was not a snarl or bluff or threat but a hot-blooded overwhelming eagerness to break bones. Could she imitate the dog? Would she lunge for this man’s throat, or would she dash past him? The chained dog stopped barking as suddenly as it had begun and in that timeless instant of silence Dolores swept past Scrappy Jones and ran like a deer through the night. Nothing could’ve caught her because she was a strong runner, the strongest in town, and she knew every rock and tree and curbstone and post and mud rut and blade of grass along the way.

Her aunt, having finished churning, sat at the hearth. By the light of the fireplace she spooned butter into crockery bowls. Dolores sank on the floor beside her, breathing too hard to speak, scrambling to make sense of what she’d been told. She stared at a blue flame of vaporized sap spewing out the end of a log. Under the log coals were red and alongside them ashes were black and gray and the mouth of the fireplace was sooty black with the outer flames enfolding the log flicking up yellow, sometimes orange. Many times she’d looked deep into that fire, but she’d never seen it so meaningful and vibrant. All parts of it, taken together, recalled Sebastian’s gold. Maybe he caught up to his boat and, already accused of stealing it, maybe he decided to go ahead and steal it. Or maybe it sank before he got to it. But most likely the tiny boat swamped and he drowned in the river surge. In time her breath returned. After a hesitant start she told Aunt Turpentine the events of the night she spent on the river. She

told how she let the steamboat loose and rode it down to Alligator Bend and made her way back up to the pool and rowed across and encountered the captain and confessed she'd stolen his boat. He said, *here's a dollar for your boat*, and he rowed away in it. But she didn't tell Aunt Turpentine she'd fallen in love with him. And she didn't tell Aunt Turpentine his name because she held it always as her deepest and most personal treasure. She watched the woman pack butter in squat blue crockery bowls. The woman covered each bowl with paper stuck to the butter, sealing it against flies. She put her spatula on the floor for the cat. She did not believe Dolores' story about setting a steamboat free and floating downriver on it. She did not think that's the way Dolores got the twenty dollar gold piece. She looked hard at the Circus Queen's daughter and said flatly, as if she were reading the girl's obituary, "Steffen was not your father. Your father owned the circus. He was the ringmaster. The circus went bust in Kansas City, down to two elephants. One elephant died and your father ordered the men to cut it up and haul off the pieces so he wouldn't be jailed for carcassing. He sold what equipment he could find quick buyers for, and he ran off with the money. Steffen used our money to buy oxen and a wagon. Your mother was Steffen's trapeze partner, so he let her come with us. If not for you, we'd be in Oregon, and he would be alive."

The bald woman stared at the flames, her lower lip hanging. She was thinking Dolores, fourteen, having gotten her first twenty-dollar gold piece at night from a man on the river now knew how to get more. But she did not foresee this girl's future. She did not know Dolores would grow old in Oklahoma the mother of three sons, the grandmother of seventeen grandchildren.

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By 1868 it was clear to everyone the Kansas River wouldn't provide enough year-round water for steamboating so investments in rail transportation were promoted and several companies were formed. One company extended its track west

from Kansas City to Lawrence where it established a base camp in a cottonwood grove north of the river for crossties, spikes, rails, food supplies, spare parts, coal, a paymaster, and every other thing large or small required to build roadbed and lay track. Track was then pushed west, and somewhere in the Flint Hills grassland beyond Junction City the workmen encountered a buffalo bull, a mean-looking loner. By the 1860's buffalo were uncommon in Kansas, and this straggler was a big one. The engineer blew his steam whistle. Its shriek sent the old bull running but when the workmen arrived at end-of-track the next day the buffalo bull had come back to the railhead, and this time when the engineer blew his whistle the buffalo pawed and snorted and stood his ground, eyeing the engine. All that day and all the next day the shaggy buffalo followed the railroad builders. They named him Bismarck for his resemblance to the grizzled German Chancellor. For days Bismarck the Buffalo kept pace with the track layers grazing prairie grass and eyeing the engine. Some of the romantic-spirited men said he'd fallen in love with it. Others thought he was biding his time to charge the steamy, stinky, relentless intruder to his domain. Others said he was the ghost of the slaughtered herds. Insofar as Bismarck might've fallen in love with the steam engine, the engineer fell in love with Bismarck and every night at quitting time he drained off a tub of water for him.

When news of Bismarck filtered back to Kansas City a railroad investor, Dick Truelson, bought a big hat and a Sharps rifle. He rode the work engine out to the end-of-track. By the time he got there Bismarck had grown quite chummy with the steam engine and limped along sore footed from day to day, managing to keep up. At night when the work engine chuffed back to the temporary camp he lay down and waited for its return. Truelson's first sight of Bismarck was quite unheroic. The shaggy bull lay breathing heavily, his head on the ground. Truelson couldn't shoot him lying down, it wouldn't be sporting, so he paid two men a dollar to be divided among them, and they prodded old Bismarck up. One twisted his tail, else he wouldn't have gotten up, and they beat him

with sticks and drove him off to proper shooting distance. He kept turning his head back to look at the engine.

Truelson dropped him with his fourth shot, skinned him, cut off his head, and brought those shaggy trophies back to the Lawrence base camp where he wedged Bismarck's head in the fork of a cottonwood tree. Townspeople came to look at it, and its novelty named the cottonwood trees Bismarck Grove. Over time the hair and skin rotted off. The skull bleached out. And in the fullness of time the white skull fell to the ground and became overgrown with prairie grass. Truelson took his trophy hide to Kansas City but neglected to soak it in brine. Maggots ate it full of holes.

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In 1886, twenty-three years after Quantrill's raid, the town had been rebuilt and was prospering. Townspeople called their college The Hill because of the promontory it commanded. Money for a natural history building was appropriated, and the new building would be named Snow Hall to honor Professor Francis Snow. A printer turned up having come from St. Louis looking for work. His name was Ansel Drucker and he found no printing or typesetting work, so he hired out as a common laborer helping dig the hole for Snow Hall that would provide space for a basement and foundation. As a byproduct of the digging, limestone blocks were hauled out and dressed to serve as building stone for the above-ground walls. Freshly unearthed limestone, called rock chalk by the workmen, smelled mysteriously sweet to Ansel. Damp and fresh from the earth, it glowed soft and creamy, greenish white, and he became enamored of it. When its overburden of topsoil and clay was removed the limestone lay in strata that could be broken off in chunks and with minimal dressing the chunks made good building material.

Drucker's first job was drilling holes. Spreader-wedges were driven into the holes to break blocks off the strata. Chains were then fitted around the blocks and they were hauled out of the hole to be dressed. Then the long-awaited dynamite arrived and Ansel was promoted from drilling holes

to the dangerous job of setting dynamite charges in the holes. His affinity for the limestone soon enabled him to determine the exact length of dynamite stick to insert in each hole, perhaps because his work as a typesetter had sharpened his touch and concentration and given him a knack for delicate work. As if he possessed X-ray vision, he could peer into the virgin stone and know how thick the ledge ran. His gift enabled him to blast the rock out in workable chunks with little waste. In fact he disdained the word *blast* preferring *nudge,* and he became so proficient at nudging he picked up the moniker Dynamite Drucker. He was a small soft-spoken man whose preferred mode of expression was a dynamite rumbling nudge that did no more than break the stone free and move it an inch or two so men could encircle it with chains.

When the Snow Hall excavation was finished Drucker didn't seek work elsewhere as a dynamiter. He'd washed up here in Lawrence, and here is where he stayed—on a patch of rough-gullied free land north of the river. All that land, except the Indian holdings, was open to homesteading. He staked out a tract of it and pitched his tent on the bluffs where a buffalo trail mounted the escarpment.

He then set about digging an excavation at the edge of the bluff. The site afforded a magnificent view of the winding river, the valley, and the distant rise of the southern escarpment. When Drucker paused in his digging he watched the walls of Snow Hall rise a foot or two each day. As those walls rose he deepened his excavation using mules and a slip to cut away overburden. He then nudged the stone into blocks and paid Delaware Indians to drag the blocks out and stack them. When he wasn't nudging and tugging he worked odd jobs to buy dynamite and pay the Indians. All-in-all it took him three years to dig his hole down twelve feet deep and square out its corners. The hole was scaled to half the size of the Snow Hall excavation, which was one hundred and ten feet by ninety feet. His accumulation of stone, stacked in quires, aged over time taking on the look of a toy village, and jokers who traveled the buffalo trail nicknamed his tidy piles of rock

Drucker's College. They said he was out to build his own institution of higher learning with himself as dean, his Indian helpers as faculty, and his mules as students. He ignored their catcalls and jokes apparently satisfied with having dug a stately hole. He sold one mule and kept the other, Belle, to ride to town where in his last years he worked at the barbed wire factory. That factory, like other establishments in the town, took its power off the river.

In time a mischievous trespasser found the dynamite cache and blew it up for sport. When Drucker saw the mess he sat down and cried, not for the mangled rock, but for the loss of the dynamite. Until that moment he hadn't realized the depth of his love of the powerful substance. He loved it for its kinetic silence, and he fixated on it the way other misers fix their attention on gold, horseshoes, peacock feathers, glass jars, buttons, or animal skins. He began working double shifts, invested all his money in dynamite, and to foil pranksters he dug a secret cave in one side of his excavated hole. In the process of digging it he penetrated a labyrinth of mouse and ground squirrel tunnels running between the limestone strata. Then he dug his way into a rattlesnake den. *It's me or them snakes,* he declared. *And I'll bet they don't very much like dynamite!* So he nudged them along their way and his nudgings enlarged the rodent tunnels letting in enough air to make the cave inviting, so he moved in. At night he concealed his slit entrance, so narrow he had to turn sideways to squeeze through it, with a crafty arrangement of stones leaving his tent pitched up where it would be seen from the buffalo trail. A lantern in his tent made passersby think he was there at night, and anyone who might look in to tease him for his folly found him gone. They assumed he was off fetching water or jacklighting a rabbit. Why did Ansel Drucker value dynamite? Perhaps he thought a war would come and the price would skyrocket. But more likely he planned to contract the work of digging the next basement for the college. Or perhaps he was addicted to the heart-thumping nitroglycerine rush. At any rate he amassed many crates of his commodity and stacked them around the walls of his cave. He slept there

on a cot and cooked his meals on a salvaged door that served as his bookkeeping desk.

One evening he passed through Bismarck Grove and found the old buffalo's skull. He fetched it to his cave and placed it on his table to serve him as a candle holder. Over time wax from his candles flowed down into Bismarck's eye hole. Amused by the meandering flows of melted wax, Drucker teased them into rivulets until he'd built up a white lump that obliterated the entire skull save for one black horn curving up like an accusing finger.

A typical miser, at night Drucker opened his ledger to add and re-add his possessions, gloating over his dynamite. Then he died. Above ground his lantern burned until it ran out of coal oil. Below ground his candle sputtered. He sat upright at his table where stroke or heart attack or aneurysm had taken him, and in death he looked very much as he'd looked in life. The candle light was gone. Darkness regained the cave. Over time the nitric acid fumes vaporizing off the dynamite mummified his flesh. His jaw sagged, the skin of his face dried to leather. Mice climbed his gallows straps and chewed his hat brim for nesting material, leaving him no more than a fez. In time rattlesnakes returned to prey on the mouse population.

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By 1900 a ragged wagon road replaced the buffalo trail up the escarpment at Drucker's College. A shortcut to Leavenworth, it become heavily traveled, and halfway up the incline it jogged around the glacial boulder Josh Mohler pulled down. That boulder is the twin to the one found in the Shunganunga Creek and brought to Robinson Park in 1929 celebrating the city's seventy-fifth birthday. Lewis Dobbs, a historian who figures in this story, was fascinated by those two egg-shaped boulders standing face-to-face like sentinels of opposing armies staring at one another across the Kaw valley. He whimsically named them Legless, Armless, Veterans of the Glacial Invasion. Dobbs won a National Book Award for his *Vedi Napoli,* See Naples*,* a history of the Italian campaign in World War II, and he met his Italian wife when he was working

in Italy as a Bogliasco Fellow. Newcomers to town, Lewis and Clelia Dobbs looked for housing. They saw an ad for a "tidy cottage on a small acreage adjoining the Burleigh Natural History Preserve." They went out there, and Clelia fell in love with a stone tower that could be seen from the cottage porch. It reminded her of Tuscany.

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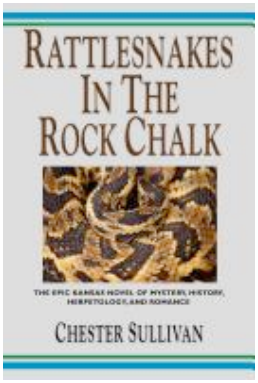
But back to an earlier time— It was a hard winter in 1872 and Josh Mohler made good money hauling hay down the wagon road. At that time the boulder rested on the lip of the escarpment and by happenstance it turned runoff water to either side. Its deflection dissipated the force of the water and kept the slope from becoming a stream bed. At other places along the escarpment runoff water seeking easy passage cut gullies that deepened into moisture reservoirs. The reservoirs invited trees and tree roots obstructed the gullies diverting the water into whorls and gouges that in turn caused further erosion. But the large boulder atop the escarpment spared Drucker's slope from water-cut gullies keeping it passable. Buffalo herds were using the slope to climb up out of the floodplain long before Josh Mohler hauled hay down it.

It was the same year the Indians were removed to Oklahoma and snow fell early. Even with deep snow Josh managed to drive his empty wagon up the slope, but on his return trip to town with the wagon loaded he couldn't trust the brake to hold going downhill so he unhitched the team, led them down, and lowered the wagon by rope using a winch block tied to the boulder. He eased the wagon over the lip, tailed the winch, and let her roll safely down. Josh made numerous such descents that winter and gained a reputation for being quite an engineer, but he didn't deserve full credit because as a boy he'd watched men working barges on the Missouri where employment of ropes and winch blocks was routine.

In the spring of that year the snow melted making the wagon road a mudslide. Josh kept using the boulder for his anchor point unmindful of the fact that during the winter it

had been frozen to the ledge. With the spring thaw it was no longer fastened, and his loaded wagon pulled it loose. Luckily he was standing aside tailing the rope otherwise he would've been crushed, and for the rest of his life he took pleasure telling his children and grandchildren how that big red rock broke loose and tumbled onto his wagon. He said the wagon accepted its burden and rolled briefly while its wheels collapsed. The iron tires twisted into corkscrews, the spokes flew out like straws, and the wagon box sledded the boulder on down a ways until it had ploughed up enough mud to stop—with the boulder standing vertical in the box. Over time the wooden wagon box rotted away leaving the boulder on end like an egg in a parlor trick. It stood that way for many years overlooking the river valley.



This Kansas epic spans one hundred and fifty years from the steamboat adventure of a fourteen-year-old girl, told in the manner of Mark Twain, to the present day. It mingles mystery, history, herpetology, and romance until quiet meditation erupts in violent action threatening the lives of these resilient people, all scrabbling to find their emotional toehold in the layered limestone - early settlers called it rock chalk.

RATTLESNAKES IN THE ROCK CHALK