

BUBBLING WATERS

By

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"Sycamore Shores," and "The Winding Road"

*"Three times, my Lady Moon,
do I make libation."*

—THEOCRITUS



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THE LAND OF CANE

WHEN a flatboat was coming down the river—so an old story has it—the captain was hailed from the bank. What did he have aboard, where did it come from, where was it going? His answer was: “Whetstones from Redstone for Limestone.” This interested me, and so I went to Limestone, which is now Maysville, on the Kentucky shore of the Ohio. Redstone also has changed its name and is Brownsville on the Monongahela in western Pennsylvania. The over-mountain road of early America, known variously as Nemacolin’s Path, Braddock’s Road, and Cumberland Pike, ended there, and there for most settlers, in that jumping-off place of the wilderness, navigation of the Ohio began. For many it ended at Limestone, whence a creek had worn an easy way through a clove in the hills to a buffalo trace that led on to a land of fabled richness. Zadok Cramer’s *Navigator*, printed in 1810, calls the settlement “the oldest and most accustomed landing place on the Ohio,” which, of course, was after Wayne’s victory at Fallen Timbers had rid the river’s Indian shore of danger and shifted westward travel from Cumberland Gap.

Diarists from New England, descending the Ohio, used to draw a contrast between what they called the bustle and comeliness of towns on the right bank of the river, the shore of freedom, and the slovenly disrepair of towns on its left bank, the shore of slavery. A sedate

community of about six thousand inhabitants, Maysville does not carry out the parable, and probably never did. From the water, its front street showed a pictorial facade of red houses with sloping roofs, and stepped chimneys down which swallows trickled, and dormer windows, and arched doorways with fanlights, and wrought-iron balconies. Church steeples rose behind.

As I walked the streets in the dusk, I had glimpses of rose bushes through covered archways, porches screened by blooming honeysuckle, back yards with hen roosts, pigeon cotes that dripped a guttural sweetness. From kitchens came the soft voice of Africa. Just the end, I caught also, of a street conversation between an elderly gentlewoman and a younger colored woman.

"Come and see me, Mandy," said the white woman as she turned away.

"Ah will, ma'am, an' you come an' see me, an' we'll talk mattahs ovah," said the daughter of Africa.

This could happen in Kentucky, but could it happen in the homeland of the Yankee river travelers of ante-bellum America?

The next day, I climbed the long hill back of Maysville, and set out toward the Bluegrass, great inner meadow of Kentucky. I was traveling a highway of history, following a shadowy procession of hunters and settlers, and worthies who rode in stage coaches. Other figures it had known before—so-called "improvers" who "came and went like woodpeckers," putting up bark-roofed lodges, deadening a few trees, planting a little corn, and decamping when the raids of Ohio Indians began. Its later history has the gaudy hues of an age of both overland travel and inland navigation, for it was part of the diagonal route that crossed the young repub-

lic from Washington to New Orleans. For half a century it was a sort of political Appian Way. The elder Michaux traveled it on one of those strange missions which are possible only to a Frenchman. He was both a spy and a botanist. His official errand was to sound American sentiment in the Old West on a French project to wrest Louisiana from Spain. His personal errand was to study trees and herbs, and in this he was more interested. From the attractive account which he wrote of his travels, all—or nearly all—references to the political quest were deleted. There is, however, a paragraph about his visit to “a Mr. Jackson” who lived near Nashville, with the oracular statement, “soil fertile.” This was Andrew Jackson, and was the soil which he found there red Tennessee earth, or something immaterial?

Over the Maysville pike in their journeys to Washington passed and repassed the masters of America—Jackson the Democrat, Clay the Whig. Sometimes Clay took his violin along; it helped a public man to know how to fiddle. Another traveler of consequence was Richard M. Johnson, who may have killed Tecumseh at the battle of the Thames, and who was Vice President during the Van Buren administration. There rode John C. Breckinridge, Democratic candidate for President against Lincoln and Douglas. At Maysville, these men could take a packet up river to Wheeling and the Cumberland Road, or cross over to Ohio and strike into the same national highway at Chillicothe. The coming of the railroads closed a colorful chapter.

A mile or so back of Maysville, and a little off the main highway I passed the place where Simon Kenton built his station. He built it as a sort of gateway to cane-land. The canebrakes have nearly gone from the state, but in the

old days they were a green threshold for the high fable that was Kentucky. The Indians called its central meadow region Kain-tuck-ee, or "the meadows"; yet when white men spoke of Kain-tuck, they meant the land of cane, mistaken and yet graphic etymology. It grew only on rich soil; it was the retreat of fat bears and deer; where it flourished the forest could not take root—and the forest stood for long and painful labors with the ax, and the menace of painted savages on soundless moccasins, who struck and vanished into its shadows. Tales of the cane-lands, brought over the mountains by traders and trappers, fired the restless hearts of forest-hating borderers.

This was just the country for Simon Kenton, who by his own words, spent only one day in school and never did a regular day's work in his life. In him was the playboy streak that still survives among Kentucky mountain folk. He set off down the Ohio to find the land of cane.

What he sought had a wide place in the economy of the wilderness. In Virginia, says a letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, the Indians fashioned arrows out of "small canes, headed with a sharpe shell or tooth of a fish." In Kentucky they flung blazing cane torches on the roofs of blockhouses. Squaws tortured captives by thrusting the reeds tipped with burning pine into their flesh. By such torchlight, settlers speared fish. They made rafts out of cane bundles. The brakes entered geographical nomenclature, as witness Cane Ridge, where the Kentucky Revival broke out, and the numerous Caney Creeks of the Old West. They even found their way into politics, for Davy Crockett, Tennessee Whig Congressman and pungent critic of Andrew Jackson, is self-styled "the bear hunter, the man from the cane." When a rival candi-

date discovered him at a rally, he disavowed any purpose to seek votes there: "I have just crept out of the cane to see what discoveries I could make among the white folks."

Cane was an evergreen plant, from eight to twelve feet high, and in winter, says Timothy Flint, the richest vegetation he had ever seen. The smallest sparrow would find it difficult to fly among it, a man could not make three miles in a day through it, and bears and panthers used it as a refuge from hunters. "When the cane has been cut and is dried," Flint continues, "it is holiday amusement to the negroes to fire it. The rarefied air in the hollow compartments of cane bursts them with a report not much inferior to the discharge of musquetry, and the burning of a canebrake makes a noise as of conflicting armies."

The thickets were at once larders where people got their bear-hams and venison, pens for their pigs, sheds and mangers for their cattle. Since they were green and succulent both winter and summer, the herds were turned out to forage in them. Kine and swine ate the young stalks and leaves greedily, and there was no such beef, pork, milk and butter as that which came out of the brakes. The seed also was nutritious, and deemed little inferior to corn. But the fondness of animals for the cane wiped it out; five years of foraging in a thicket ended it. In the rich soil of Kentucky, corn has taken the place of cane; it is still better.

In cane-land Kenton built his log station. Other men joined him with their families and helped watch the border for Indians. His men had a double advantage. They could shoot straighter, and had far better guns—long, groove-barreled rifles forged in the backwoods smithies

after patterns brought into Pennsylvania about 1700 by Swiss and Palatinate immigrants; the Indians had only trade muskets. The borderers thought it a bad shot, says Cuming, "if they missed the head of a squirrel on the top of the highest forest tree."

While yet he lived, Kenton was a legend. The imagination of the French painter Millet was so stirred by a true tale of how his savage captors bound him, Mazeppa fashion, to an untamed horse, that he made a picture of it called "*Mazeppa americain*." The man lived a life of unmatched variety and vicissitude. Sometimes he went off on long, strange journeys of his own. For a time he was a landlord of more than baronial scope. His land-hunger was unappeasable, yet always the land got away from him. The curse of overlapping surveys and worthless land-titles, which caused Boone to leave Kentucky and become a Spanish *alcalde* in Missouri, drove Kenton to exile in Ohio, where he died in 1836, venerable and contemplative onlooker of the new age, which danger-court-*ing*, restless-hearted men like him had made possible, but in which they had no place.

The town of Washington, which I reached after an hour's walk, was laid out by Kenton, and is one of several places where he was imprisoned for debt. It is an odd, ruinous village, which was once a county seat of consequence, and has shrunk far inward from the square mile that it sought to cover. On its main street I found several long, low brick houses with good colonial doorways and sagging roofs, that may have been posting taverns. There was a number of negroes. A colored mammy lived in the house where Albert Sidney Johnston, stately Confederate cavalier, was born.

You might call Washington the ghost capital of the

vanished cane-land. It became a town by the simple pioneer expedient of cutting a wagon road through the brake, and chopping narrow paths back from the road, at the end of which cabins were reared. Founded in 1786, it grew rapidly. At one time it had seventeen stores. In 1803 the younger Michaux counted two hundred houses in the town, all of wood. Around it were plantations and barns as good as those among the Pennsylvania Dutch, and it "exported butter to the Carribees." Great things were expected of it, and distinguished men lived there, among them two brothers of Chief Justice John Marshall. One of the best-known female schools in the West was conducted by Mrs. Louise Caroline Warburton Fitzherbert Keats, sister of an English baronet and wife of a relative of the poet. Among her pupils were the daughters or future wives of men who became governors, senators and cabinet chiefs in a larger Washington. On the steps of the court house, tradition says that Harriet Beecher Stowe saw an old negro sold, and he was the Uncle Tom of her continent-shattering story. Ripley, where it is legend that Eliza crossed the Ohio on the ice, is not many miles away.

Mrs. Stowe had declared in her novel that "perhaps the mildest form of slavery is to be seen in Kentucky." Its agriculture was of a "quiet and gradual nature" without the "periodic seasons of hurry and pressure" that obtained farther south in the Land of Cotton: "Whoever visits some estates there, and witnesses the good-humored indulgence of some masters and mistresses, and the affectionate loyalty of some slaves, might be tempted to dream the oft-fabled poetic legend of a patriarchal institution." In a post-bellum preface she confided that she had hoped her book would tend to bring North and South

together because she "had painted slaveholders as amicable, generous and just." But to her astonishment "the entire South rose up against it." In a sympathetic and skillful chapter, "Uncle Tom at Home," the Kentuckian, James Lane Allen, seeks further to lighten her picture. "Throughout the seventy-five years of pro-slavery state-life," he says, "the general conscience was always troubled." The state laws decreed that a slave inhumanly treated could be sold to a better master, and "families who lost their negroes in this way were socially disgraced."

In the Civil War this little corner of Kentucky for a moment held the fate of slavery in its grasp, for its sons began and ended a savage drama the name of which is the Battle of Shiloh. Johnston commanded the Confederates there and died in action. His troops were robbed of a victory over Grant by Buell's vanguard under a Union leader born four miles from Washington—William Nelson, an able officer with an overbearing temper; soon after, at Louisville, he struck another Union general, who shot him dead on the spot.

From the faded, memory-haunted village of Washington I walked on to Mayslick, eight miles away, through a pleasant land and rich, with fields of wheat and corn and rye neighboring each other. Twice I heard the boding cry of a raincrow, precursor—though I did not guess it—of a night that Kentucky will not forget.

I ate lunch under a roadside tree near a water hole. Cattle were standing among the bordering willows, swine half immersed in its coolness. The hole was big enough for a kildeer to visit, and a red-winged blackbird. In the green stillness, a short-tailed shrew nearly ran over my feet, and a rabbit's curious pace minded me of Cowper's

line, "the fearful hare limps awkward." A large black-snake provided a moment's drama by slowly crossing the highway as a car came along. This drove right at the head of the harmless creature, while I shouted a futile expostulation. But the snake could take care of itself. It dodged with the swift skill of a boxer, drawing back so that the wheels missed it by inches.

Daniel Drake says that the East Jersey families who settled Mayslick in 1788 betrayed an "uncultivated taste" by calling it that. In a century-old French atlas it appears as "Mazeleak," and this is really a better name, since it suggests at once that the principal crop of the country was maize, and that there was a leak in the town. The leak was a salt spring about which it grew up. The important thing about Mayslick is that Daniel Drake lived there as a boy—his parents were in the first party of settlers—and wrote afterward in his *Pioneer Life in Kentucky* the best account of early days in the Old West.

The cabin, set in the midst of a clearing of girdled trees, had a clapboard roof, a puncheon floor, and port-holes. In the fireplace an imperishable buckeye backlog and hickory fore-sticks rested on stone andirons, and the teakettle swung above from a wooden lugpole; the chimney was of "cats and clay." Food prepared there was mainly forest meat and people grew homesick for civilized provender. Drake has a poignant little story of his mother's call on a neighbor who was churning. She had set her heart on a drink of buttermilk: "When the butter was ladled out and the churn set aside, with the delicious beverage for which she was too proud to ask, she hastily left the house and took a good crying spell."

My way had become a ridge road with long, deep valleys on either side, and views of blue hills that seemed to

be in another county. This, I thought, must be an ancient buffalo road; as it proved, it was, and greatest of all. I have since traced its course in old pioneer records. Crossing the Ohio at Maysville, it took the route I had been following to Lower Blue Licks and thence on to the Great Crossings of the Elkhorn near Georgetown, to Stamping Ground, and to Big Bone near the Ohio. This ridge, the river, these names, suggest the strange adventure of the buffalo herds in eastern America.

The explorer, Stephen Long, speaks of "the unsightly figure, the cumbrous gait and impolitic movements of the bison." Its formidable and rudely triangular contour has an archaic grace of its own; but the other phrases are significant. Because of its great weight, nearly twice that of domestic cattle, it avoided wet, low-lying lands and traveled along the summits of watersheds which sun and wind bared of snow. It crossed rivers by swimming or on sandbars where, as at Maysville, creeks came in. To protect itself against gnats and flies, it rolled in muddy pools—buffalo wallows—and when the mud dried it was encased in armor. It needed salt as well as pasture. Every salt spring was called a lick because buffaloes licked there, and those were "impolitic movements" which brought them to the springs on the great road—at Mayslick, at Lower Blue Licks, and at Big Bone Lick—since at each red hunters and white awaited them.

Both races hunted the buffalo because in its day it was the most useful of American beasts. Its flesh was better than domestic beef, its hump was prized. It was said that you never tired of buffalo meat, and could get along without either grain, vegetables or salt if you had it. Sun-dried or jerked, it was the ration of wandering tribes. The marrow of the shin bones was "trapper's butter."