

SHOW BOAT

BY
EDNA FERBER

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**To
Winthrop Ames
Who First Said Show Boat
to Me**

INTRODUCTION

“SHOW BOAT” is neither history nor biography, but fiction. This statement is made in the hope that it will forestall such protest as may be registered by demon statisticians against certain liberties taken with characters, places, and events. In the Chicago portion of the book, for example, a character occasionally appears some three or four years after the actual date of his death. Now and then a restaurant or gambling resort is described as running full blast at a time when it had vanished at the frown of civic virtue. This, then, was done, not through negligence in research, but because, in the attempt to give a picture of the time, it was necessary slightly to condense a period of fifteen or twenty years.

E. F.

SHOW BOAT

I

BIZARRE as was the name she bore, Kim Ravenal always said she was thankful it had been no worse. She knew whereof she spoke, for it was literally by a breath that she had escaped being called Mississippi.

“Imagine Mississippi Ravenal!” she often said, in later years. “They’d have cut it to Missy, I suppose, or even Sippy, if you can bear to think of anything so horrible. And then I’d have had to change my name or give up the stage altogether. Because who’d go to see—seriously, I mean—an actress named Sippy? It sounds half-witted, for some reason. Kim’s bad enough, God knows.”

And as Kim Ravenal you doubtless are familiar with her. It is no secret that the absurd monosyllable which comprises her given name is made up of the first letters of three states—Kentucky, Illinois, and Missouri—in all of which she was, incredibly enough, born—if she can be said to have been born in any state at all. Her mother insists that she wasn’t. If you were an habitué of old South Clark Street in Chicago’s naughty ’90s you may even remember her mother, Magnolia Ravenal, as Nola Ravenal, soubrette—though Nola Ravenal never achieved the doubtful distinction of cigarette pictures. In a day when the stage measured feminine pulchritude in terms of hips, thighs, and calves, she was considered much too thin for beauty, let alone for tights.

It had been this Magnolia Ravenal's respiratory lack that had saved the new-born girl from being cursed through life with a name boasting more quadruple vowels and consonants than any other in the language. She had meant to call the child Mississippi after the tawny untamed river on which she had spent so much of her girlhood, and which had stirred and fascinated her always. Her accouchement had been an ordeal even more terrifying than is ordinarily the case, for Kim Ravenal had actually been born on the raging turgid bosom of the Mississippi River itself, when that rampageous stream was flooding its banks and inundating towns for miles around, at five o'clock of a storm-racked April morning in 1889. It was at a point just below Cairo, Illinois; that region known as Little Egypt, where the yellow waters of the Mississippi and the olive-green waters of the Ohio so disdainfully meet and refuse, with bull-necked pride, to mingle.

From her cabin window on the second deck of the Cotton Blossom Floating Palace Theatre, Magnolia Ravenal could have seen the misty shores of three states—if any earthly shores had interested her at the moment. Just here was Illinois, to whose crumbling clay banks the show boat was so perilously pinioned. Beyond, almost hidden by the rain veil, was Missouri; and there, Kentucky. But Magnolia Ravenal lay with her eyes shut because the effort of lifting her lids was beyond her. Seeing her, you would have said that if any shores filled her vision at the moment they were heavenly ones, and those dangerously near. So white, so limp, so spent was she that her face on the pillow was startlingly like one of the waxen blossoms whose name she bore. Her slimness made almost no outline beneath the bedclothes. The coverlet was drawn up to

her chin. There was only the white flower on the pillow, its petals closed.

Outside, the redundant rain added its unwelcome measure to the swollen and angry stream. In the ghostly gray dawn the grotesque wreckage of flood-time floated and whirled and jiggled by, seeming to bob a mad obeisance as it passed the show boat which, in its turn, made stately bows from its moorings. There drifted past, in fantastic parade, great trees, uprooted and clutching at the water with stiff dead arms; logs, catapulted with terrific force; animal carcasses dreadful in their passivity; chicken coops; rafts; a piano, its ivory mouth fixed in a death grin; a two-room cabin, upright, and moving in a minuet of stately and ponderous swoops and advances and chassés; fence rails; an armchair whose white crocheted antimacassar stared in prim disapproval at the wild antics of its fellow voyagers; a live sheep, bleating as it came, but soon still; a bed with its covers, by some freak of suction, still snugly tucked in as when its erstwhile occupant had fled from it in fright—all these, and more, contributed to the weird terror of the morning. The Mississippi itself was a tawny tiger, roused, furious, bloodthirsty, lashing out with its great tail, tearing with its cruel claws, and burying its fangs deep in the shore to swallow at a gulp land, houses, trees, cattle—humans, even; and roaring, snarling, howling hideously as it did so.

Inside Magnolia Ravenal's cabin all was snug and warm and bright. A wood fire snapped and crackled cosily in the little pot-bellied iron stove. Over it bent a veritable Sairey Gamp stirring something hot and savoury in a saucepan. She stirred noisily, and talked as she stirred, and glanced from time to time

at the mute white figure in the bed. Her own bulky figure was made more ponderous by layer on layer of ill-assorted garments of the kind donned from time to time as night wears on by one who, having been aroused hastily and in emergency, has arrived scantily clad. A gray flannel nightgown probably formed the basis of this costume, for its grizzled cuffs could just be seen emerging from the man's coat whose sleeves she wore turned back from the wrists for comfort and convenience. This coat was of box-cut, double-breasted, blue with brass buttons and gold braid, of the sort that river captains wear. It gave her a racy and nautical look absurdly at variance with her bulk and occupation. Peeping beneath and above and around this, the baffled eye could just glimpse oddments and elegancies such as a red flannel dressing gown; a flower-besprigged challis sacque whose frill of doubtful lace made the captain's coat even more incongruous; a brown cashmere skirt, very bustled and bunched; a pair of scuffed tan kid bedroom slippers (men's) of the sort known as romeos. This lady's back hair was twisted into a knob strictly utilitarian; her front hair bristled with the wired ends of kid curlers assumed, doubtless, the evening before the hasty summons. Her face and head were long and horse-like, at variance with her bulk. This, you sensed immediately, was a person possessed of enormous energy, determination, and the gift of making exquisitely uncomfortable any one who happened to be within hearing radius. She was the sort who rattles anything that can be rattled; slams anything that can be slammed; bumps anything that can be bumped. Her name, by some miracle of fitness, was Parthenia Ann Hawks; wife of Andy Hawks, captain and owner of the Cotton Blossom Floating Palace Theatre; and mother of

this Magnolia Ravenal who, having just been delivered of a daughter, lay supine in her bed.

Now, as Mrs. Hawks stirred the mess over which she was bending, her spoon regularly scraped the bottom of the pan with a rasping sound that would have tortured any nerves but her own iron-encased set. She removed the spoon, freeing it of clinging drops by rapping it smartly and metallically against the rim of the basin. Magnolia Ravenal's eyelids fluttered ever so slightly.

"Now then!" spake Parthy Ann Hawks, briskly, in that commanding tone against which even the most spiritless instinctively rebelled, "Now then, young lady, want it or not, you'll eat some of this broth, good and hot and stren'th'ning, and maybe you won't look so much like a wet dish rag." Pan in one hand, spoon in the other, she advanced toward the bed with a tread that jarred the furniture and set the dainty dimity window curtains to fluttering. She brought up against the side of the bed with a bump. A shadow of pain flitted across the white face on the pillow. The eyes still were closed. As the smell of the hot liquid reached her nostrils, the lips of the girl on the bed curled in distaste. "Here, I'll just spoon it right up to you out of the pan, so's it'll be good and hot. Open your mouth! Open your eyes! I say open—— Well, for land's sakes, how do you expect a body to do anything for you if you——"

With a motion shocking in its swift unexpectedness Magnolia Ravenal's hand emerged from beneath the coverlet, dashed aside the spoon with its steaming contents, and sent it clattering to the floor. Then her hand stole beneath the coverlet again and with a little relaxed sigh of satisfaction she lay

passive as before. She had not opened her eyes. She was smiling ever so slightly.

“That’s right! Act like a wildcat just because I try to get you to sup up a little soup that Jo’s been hours cooking, and two pounds of good mutton in it if there’s an ounce, besides vegetables and barley, and your pa practically risked his life getting the meat down at Cairo and the water going up by the foot every hour. No, you’re not satisfied to get us caught here in the flood, and how we’ll ever get out alive or dead, God knows, and me and everybody on the boat up all night long with your goings on so you’d think nobody’d ever had a baby before. Time I had you there wasn’t a whimper out of me. Not a whimper. I’d have died, first. I never saw anything as indelicate as the way you carried on, and your own husband in the room.” Here Magnolia conveyed with a flutter of the lids that this had not been an immaculate conception. “Well, if you could see yourself now. A drowned rat isn’t the word. Now you take this broth, my fine lady, or we’ll see who’s——” She paused in this dramatic threat to blow a cooling breath on a generous spoonful of the steaming liquid, to sup it up with audible appreciation, and to take another. She smacked her lips. “Now then, no more of your monkey-shines, Maggie Hawks!”

No one but her mother had ever called Magnolia Ravenal Maggie Hawks. It was unthinkable that a name so harsh and unlovely could be applied to this fragile person. Having picked up the rejected spoon and wiped it on the lace ruffle of the challis sacque, that terrible termagant grasped it firmly against surprise in her right hand and, saucepan in left, now advanced a second time toward the bed. You saw the flower on the pillow

frosted by an icy mask of utter unyieldingness; you caught a word that sounded like shenanigans from the woman bending over the bed, when the cabin door opened and two twittering females entered attired in garments strangely akin to the haphazard costume worn by Mrs. Hawks. The foremost of these moved in a manner so bustling as to be unmistakably official. She was at once ponderous, playful, and menacing—this last attribute due, perhaps, to the rather splendid dark moustache which stamped her upper lip. In her arms she carried a swaddled bundle under one flannel flap of which the second female kept peering and uttering strange clucking sounds and words that resembled izzzer and yesseris.

“Fine a gal’s I ever see!” exclaimed the bustling one. She approached the bed with the bundle. “Mis’ Means says the same and so”—she glanced contemptuously over her shoulder at a pale and haggard young man, bearded but boyish, who followed close behind them—“does the doctor.”

She paused before the word doctor so that the title, when finally it was uttered, carried with it a poisonous derision. This mysterious sally earned a little snigger from Mis’ Means and a baleful snort from Mrs. Hawks. Flushed with success, the lady with the swaddled bundle (unmistakably a midwife and, like all her craft, royally accustomed to homage and applause) waxed more malicious. “Fact is, he says only a minute ago, he never brought a finer baby that he can remember.”

At this the sniggers and snorts became unmistakable guffaws. The wan young man became a flushed young man. He fumbled awkwardly with the professionally massive watch chain that so unnecessarily guarded his cheap nickel blob of a watch. He

glanced at the flower-like face on the pillow. Its aloofness, its remoteness from the three frowzy females that hovered about it, seemed to lend him a momentary dignity and courage. He thrust his hands behind the tails of his Prince Albert coat and strode toward the bed. A wave of the hand, a slight shove with the shoulder, dismissed the three as nuisances. "One moment, my good woman. . . . *If* you please, Mrs. Hawks. . . . Kindly don't jiggle . . ."

The midwife stepped aside with the bundle. Mrs. Hawks fell back a step, the ineffectual spoon and saucepan in her hands. Mis' Means ceased to cluck and to lean on the bed's footboard. From a capacious inner coat pocket he produced a stethoscope, applied it, listened, straightened. From the waistcoat pocket came the timepiece, telltale of his youth and impecuniosity. He extracted his patient's limp wrist from beneath the coverlet and held it in his own strong spatulate fingers—the fingers of the son of a farmer.

"H'm! Fine!" he exclaimed. "Splendid!"

An unmistakable sniff from the midwife. The boy's florid manner dropped from him. He cringed a little. The sensitive hand he still held in his great grasp seemed to feel this change in him, though Magnolia Ravenal had not opened her eyes even at the entrance of the three. Her wrist slid itself out of his hold and down until her fingers met his and pressed them lightly, reassuringly. The youth looked down, startled. Magnolia Ravenal, white-lipped, was smiling her wide gay gorgeous smile that melted the very vitals of you. It was a smile at once poignant and brilliant. It showed her gums a little, and softened the planes of her high cheek-bones, and subdued the angles of

the too-prominent jaw. A comradely smile, an understanding and warming one. Strange that this woman on the bed, so lately torn and racked with the agonies of childbirth, should be the one to encourage the man whose clumsy ministrations had so nearly cost her her life. That she could smile at all was sheer triumph of the spirit over the flesh. And that she could smile in sympathy for and encouragement of this bungling inexperienced young medico was incredible. But that was Magnolia Ravenal. Properly directed and managed, her smile, in later years, could have won her a fortune. But direction and management were as futile when applied to her as to the great untamed Mississippi that even now was flouting man-built barriers; laughing at levees that said so far and no farther; jeering at jetties that said do thus-and-so; for that matter, roaring this very moment in derision of Magnolia Ravenal herself, and her puny pangs and her mortal plans; and her father Captain Andy Hawks, and her mother Parthenia Ann Hawks, and her husband Gaylord Ravenal, and the whole troupe of the show boat, and the Cotton Blossom Floating Palace Theatre itself, now bobbing about like a cork on the yellow flood that tugged and sucked and tore at its moorings.

Two tantrums of nature had been responsible for the present precarious position of the show boat and its occupants. The Mississippi had furnished one; Magnolia Ravenal the other. Or perhaps it might be fairer to fix the blame, not on nature, but on human stupidity that had failed to take into account its vagaries.

Certainly Captain Andy Hawks should have known better, after thirty-five years of experience on keelboats, steamboats,

packets, and show boats up and down the great Mississippi and her tributaries (the Indians might call this stream the Father of Waters but your riverman respectfully used the feminine pronoun). The brand-new show boat had done it. Built in the St. Louis shipyards, the new *Cotton Blossom* was to have been ready for him by February. But February had come and gone, and March as well. He had meant to be in New Orleans by this time, with his fine new show boat and his troupe and his band of musicians in their fresh glittering red-and-gold uniforms, and the marvellous steam calliope that could be heard for miles up and down the bayous and plantations. Starting at St. Louis, he had planned a swift trip downstream, playing just enough towns on the way to make expenses. Then, beginning with Bayou Teche and pushed by the sturdy steamer *Mollie Able*, they would proceed grandly upstream, calliope screaming, flags flying, band tooting, to play every little town and landing and plantation from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, from Baton Rouge to Vicksburg; to Memphis, to Cairo, to St. Louis, up and up to Minnesota itself; then over to the coal towns on the Monongahela River and the Kanawha, and down again to New Orleans, following the crops as they ripened—the corn belt, the cotton belt, the sugar cane; north when the wheat yellowed, following with the sun the ripening of the peas, the tomatoes, the crabs, the peaches, the apples; and as the farmer garnered his golden crops so would shrewd Captain Andy Hawks gather his harvest of gold.

It was April before the new *Cotton Blossom* was finished and ready to take to the rivers. Late though it was, when Captain Andy Hawks beheld her, glittering from texas to keel in white paint with green trimmings, and with Cotton Blossom Floating

Palace Theatre done in letters two feet high on her upper deck, he was vain enough, or foolhardy enough, or both, to resolve to stand by his original plan. A little nervous fussy man, Andy Hawks, with a horrible habit of clawing and scratching from side to side, when aroused or when deep in thought, at the little mutton-chop whiskers that sprang out like twin brushes just below his leather-visored white canvas cap, always a trifle too large for his head, so that it settled down over his ears. A capering figure, in light linen pants very wrinkled and baggy, and a blue coat, double-breasted; with a darting manner, bright brown eyes, and a trick of talking very fast as he clawed the mutton-chop whiskers first this side, then that, with one brown hairy little hand. There was about him something grotesque, something simian. He beheld the new *Cotton Blossom* as a bridegroom gazes upon a bride, and frenziedly clawing his whiskers he made his unwise decision.

“She won’t high-water this year till June.” He was speaking of that tawny tigress, the Mississippi; and certainly no one knew her moods better than he. “Not much snow last winter, north; and no rain to speak of, yet. Yessir, we’ll just blow down to New Orleans ahead of French’s *Sensation*”—his bitterest rival in the show-boat business—“and start to work the bayous. Show him a clean pair of heels up and down the river.”

So they had started. And because the tigress lay smooth and unruffled now, with only the currents playing gently below the surface like muscles beneath the golden yellow skin, they fancied she would remain complaisant until they had had their way. That was the first mistake.

The second was as unreasoning. Magnolia Ravenal's child was going to be a boy. Ma Hawks and the wise married women of the troupe knew the signs. She felt thus-and-so. She had such-and-such sensations. She was carrying the child high. Boys always were slower in being born than girls. Besides, this was a first child, and the first child always is late. They got together, in mysterious female conclave, and counted on the fingers of their two hands—August, September, October, November, December—why, the end of April, the soonest. They'd be safe in New Orleans by then, with the best of doctors for Magnolia, and she on land while one of the other women in the company played her parts until she was strong again—a matter of two or three weeks at most.

No sooner had they started than the rains began. No early April showers, these, but torrents that blotted out the river banks on either side and sent the clay tumbling in great cave-ins, down to the water, jaundicing it afresh where already it seethed an ochreous mass. Day after day, night after night, the rains came down, melting the Northern ice and snow, filtering through the land of the Mississippi basin and finding its way, whether trickle, rivulet, creek, stream, or river, to the great hungry mother, Mississippi. And she grew swollen, and tossed and flung her huge limbs about and shrieked in labour even as Magnolia Ravenal was so soon to do.

Eager for entertainment as the dwellers were along the little Illinois and Missouri towns, after a long winter of dull routine on farm and in store and schoolhouse, they came sparsely to the show boat. Posters had told them of her coming, and the news filtered to the back-country. Town and village thrilled to

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