

Edna Ferber Show Boat Illustrated

*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.

THE TIME:

From the gilded age of the 1870's, through the '90's up to the present time.

THE SCENE:

The earlier parts of the story take place on the *Cotton Blossom Floating Palace Theatre*, a show boat on the Mississippi. The background aboard *The Cotton Blossom* is panoramic. Twice a year the unwieldy boat was towed up and down the mighty river and its tributaries; it was a familiar sight from New Orleans to the cities of the North, from the coal fields of Pennsylvania to St. Louis, and stirring presentations of "East Lynne," "Tempest and Sunshine," and other old dramatic favourites, by the actors and painted ladies of the *Cotton Blossom* troupe, are still remembered in Paducah, Evansville, Cairo, Cape Girardeau, Natchez, Vicksburg, Baton Rouge, and in many other river towns and cities.

Following the fortunes of the Hawkes-Ravenal family, the story then carries us to the notorious "Gambler's Alley" of earlier Chicago, and then to the modern theatrical centre of America, the Times Square district of New York City.

THE PLAYERS:

CAPT. ANDY HAWKES

Mississippi River steamboat captain and owner of the *Cotton Blossom*

PARTHENIA ANN HAWKES

His wife

MAGNOLIA RAVENAL

Their daughter, later a famous actress on the variety stage

GAYLORD RAVENAL

Gambler, gentleman of fortune and sometime actor. Husband of Magnolia

KIM RAVENAL

Daughter of Gaylord and Magnolia. Now the famous Kim Ravenal of the New York stage

JULIE, ELLY, STEVE, SCHULTZY, AND
OTHER MEMBERS OF THE SHOW BOAT
TROUPE HABITUÉS OF OLD SOUTH CLARK
STREET IN CHICAGO

ACTORS AND DRAMATIC CRITICS OF THE
PRESENT THEATRICAL WORLD OF NEW YORK
CITY

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 bunchy; 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