



C H A P T E R 1 4

FOR THIRTY YEARS I HAVE RECEIVED AN AVERAGE OF A DOZEN LETTERS a year from strangers who remember me or whose fathers remember me as a boy and young man. But these letters are almost always disappointing. I have not known these strangers nor their fathers. I have not heard of the names they mention; the memories which they call to my attention have had no part in my experience; all of which means that these strangers have been mistaking me for somebody else. But I received this morning a letter from a man who deals in names that were familiar to me in my boyhood. The letter read:

You no doubt are at a loss to know who I am. I will tell you. In my younger days I lived in Hannibal, Missouri, and you and I were schoolmates attending Mr. Dawson's school along with Sam and Will Bowen and Andy Fuqua and others whose names I have forgotten. I was then about the smallest boy in school, for my age, and they called me little Aleck Tonkray for short.

I don't remember Aleck Tonkray but I knew those other people as well as I knew the town drunkards. I remember Dawson's schooling perfectly. I can remember the sleepy and inviting summer sounds that used to drift in through the open windows. I remember Andy Fuqua, the oldest pupil—a man of twenty-five. I remember Mr. Dawson very

well, I remember his boy, Theodore, who was as good as he could be. In fact he was too good, hatefully good, and I would have drowned him if I had a chance. In this school we were all about on an equality, and so far as I remember, envy had no place in our hearts except in the case of Arch Fuqua—the other one's brother. Of course we all went bare-foot in the summertime. Arch Fuqua was about my own age—ten or eleven. In the winter we could stand him, because he wore shoes then, and his great gift was hidden from our sight and we could forget it. But in the summertime he was our envy, for he could double back his big toe and let it fly and you could hear it snap for thirty yards. There was not another boy in the school that could approach this trick. Except Theodore Eddy who could make his ears go back and forth like a horse's. But he was no real rival, for you couldn't hear him move his ears; so all the advantage lay with Arch Fuqua.

George RoBards, eighteen or twenty years old, was the only pupil who studied Latin. He was a fine young fellow in all ways. He and Mary Moss were sweethearts from a time when they were merely children. But a Mr. Lakeman arrived now to live in the town. He took an important position in that little town at once and kept it. He brought with him a distinguished reputation as a lawyer. He was educated, cultured, brave and dignified. He was a rising man and a bachelor. As a catch he stood at the top of the market. That blooming and beautiful thing, Mary Moss, attracted his favor. He sought her hand and won. Everyone said she accepted him to please her parents, not herself. They were married. And everybody then said he continued her schooling all by himself, proposing to educate her up to standard and make her a suitable companion for him. These things may have been true. They might not have been true. But they were interesting. That is the main requirement in a village like that. George went away, presently, to some far-off region and there he died—of a broken heart, everybody said. That could be true, for he had good cause. He would go far before he would find another Mary Moss.

How long ago that little tragedy happened! None but the white-haired knows about it now. Lakeman is dead these many years but Mary still lives and is still beautiful, although she has grandchildren.

John RoBards was the little brother of George. When he was twelve years old he crossed the country with his father during the rush of the gold seekers of 1849 and I can remember the departure of the men and horses westward. We were all there to see and to envy. And I can still see that proud boy sailing on a great horse, with his long golden hair streaming out behind. We were all on hand to gaze and envy when he returned two years later in unimaginable glory—for *he had traveled!* None of us had ever been forty miles from home. But he had crossed the continent. He had been in the gold mines, that fairy land of our imagination. And he had done a still more wonderful thing. He had been in ships—in ships on the actual ocean; in ships on three actual oceans. We would have sold our souls to Satan for the privilege of trading places with him.

I saw him when I was out on that Missouri trip four years ago. He was old then though not quite so old as I—and the sorrows of life were upon him. He said that his granddaughter, twelve years old, had read my books and would like to see me. It was a sad time, for she was a prisoner in her room and marked for death. And John knew that she was passing swiftly away. Twelve years old—just her grandfather's age when he rode away on that great journey. In her I seemed to see that boy again. She had heart disease and her brief life came to a close a few days later.

Another of those schoolboys was John Garth. And one of the prettiest of the schoolgirls was Helen Kercheval. They grew up and married. He became a wealthy banker and a leading and valued citizen; and a few years ago he died, rich and honored. *He died.* It is what I have to say about so many of those boys and girls. The widow still lives, and there are grandchildren.

Will Bowen was another schoolmate and so was his brother, Sam, who was his junior by a couple of years. Before the Civil War broke out both became St. Louis and New Orleans pilots. Both are dead, long ago. While Sam was still very young he had a curious adventure. He fell in love with a girl of sixteen, only child of a wealthy German. He wanted to marry her but he and she both thought that the

father would not only not consent but would shut his door against Sam. The old man would not have, but they were not aware of that. He had his eye upon them and it was not an unfriendly eye. But the young couple got to living together in secret. Before long the old man died. When the will was examined it was found that he had left the whole of his wealth to Mrs. Samuel A. Bowen. Then the poor things made another mistake. They rushed down to Carondelet, outside the city, and got a judge to marry them and date the marriage back a few months. The old German had some nieces and nephews and cousins and they traced out the trickery and proved it and got the property. This left Sam with a girl wife on his hands and the necessity of earning a living for her at the pilot wheel. After a few years Sam and another pilot were bringing a boat up from New Orleans when the yellow fever broke out. Both pilots were stricken with it and there was nobody to take their place at the wheel. The boat was landed at the head of an island to wait for help. Death came swiftly to both pilots and there they lie buried, unless the river has cut the graves away and washed the bones into the stream, a thing which probably happened long ago.