

HER FIRST EXCURSION RUN.

Red and black posters were struck off three weeks before and had been posted in all the store windows in the small river towns; so when the "New Idlewild" hoisted her gangplank on the brightest morning of last June, all things bade fair to make her first excursion run a great event on the river.

Her captain swore that she was the neatest boat of her size and class on the whole Mississippi river; and the mate assented and swore very hard, and said that she was the prettiest little boat the river had ever seen. Of course, there were a few great white palaces, with large gilded anchors swinging between their smokestacks, sweeping up and down the river, as if they had a mortgage on all creation; but they were not patronized to a great extent by the people along the levee, for they were not accommodating enough to stop at small landings.

They were making good time that day. The excursionists demanded a fast boat, and the captain always tried to keep his name good as the most accommodating steamboatman on the river. So he told the engineer to "ahove her."

The firemen were stripped to their waists; so the little steamer gained speed in proportion to the flow of smoky perspiration down their white backs. And as she churned along she was making as much noise almost, and shrieking with as much audacity as a big New Orleans packet.

On the glistening upper deck the throng of excursionists was chattering and twittering away like magpies. Snuggled in a few quiet corners were the usual number of invalids, old people and cooing doves.

The invalids and old people drank in the flowing green panorama, and looked over the water far away—how far, they alone knew. The cooing doves cooed and forgot the great river and green bluffs; but they looked volumes and said little, while the gabbling crowd paraded the upper deck said volumes and looked very little.

The wheezy brass band near the bow helped the passengers to a keener appreciation of the glorious day—when they compared the delicious silence while it ceased playing to the blaring, drunken music when it played.

When the first horn blared and the first pipe shrilled, a young college man remarked, as he looked sidewise by twisting his eyes: "I don't see where that band gets the 'brass' to inflict itself on suffering humanity;" but one of the bevy of pretty girls in blue flannels who had him in charge threatened—"Now, see here, William Henry, if you try airing your brains much more we girls 'll put you overboard, because we're going to enjoy ourselves." William Henry withdrew into himself in savage silence—for about two minutes, when the same girl beckoned to him from a shaded corner and asked him if he was so entranced that he was going to stand in range of the band all day.

When the band struck a full crescendo, she clapped her hands to her pink ears and led the way to the stern of the boat, followed by the other girls—and, finally, by William Henry.

There, the singing roar of the chugging paddles and the hiss of falling spray drowned the brazen howls and discords of the band, and lulled them into dreamy, mellow swells of far-away music, and the pleasure seekers could not tire of watching the smooth water curve and curl silently behind the keel and mingle with the trail of foam.

Some stayed near the band and applauded occasionally and called for more, but the people who went to the stern counted those who stayed as beyond redemption.

No boat on the river moved easier

than the New Idlewild. Trimmed with her colors, she was a chipper little creature, shooting through the water like a little white water sprite in holiday dress. She always made a pleasing appearance with her pure white passenger deck, trimmed in golden scroll work, that glistened in the sunlight.

The passengers were infatuated with the dainty salon; it was so perfectly white and so scrupulously clean. When night came, and the white-liveried waiters turned on the lights, the salon was a fairy land. Some danced, some sang, and some kept up their ceaseless babble until they nearly fell asleep on their feet.

There were still others who loved to sit outside and watch the search light go chasing inland, mile after mile. Where it flashed on the bluffs, they seemed like great black mountains, fifty miles away.

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Down below, on the lower deck, it was never very light. Even when the sun shone fiercest it was bright only in spots. But near the engines it was hot with fever dampness.

The freight was piled high; and there was an odor of stagnant river water, combined with many odors less pronounced. On this June day the roustabouts were working fast and hard; for the excursionists soon grew impatient if the boat stopped too long at a landing when she loaded or unloaded freight. And the excursionists had to be pleased, else the patrons of the Idlewild might forsake her for her rival boat—the Mary Morton.

There was more freight than usual on this trip, and the roustabouts did not gamble between landings, but as soon as the boat pulled away from shore nearly all of them lay down on the grain sacks to sleep until the mate yelled them out for the next landing.

Even "Canary Jim," the blackest, smallest, toughest of them all, sang little, and his usual rollicking cry of "Holla nigga, holla, hoo-o-hoo!" had changed to a dismal half song, half chant of, "It's haa'd, haa'd; ha'ad to be a nigga, nigga,—so ha'ad, and his one or two attempts at railery had dismally failed to win the loud applause of shout and laughter usually his due.

Occasionally a passenger unaccustomed to the river would stand and watch the roustabouts bear the heavy casks and boxes up to the wharf-house; and if he prided himself as an observer of men, he would not fail to remark something about the strangeness of a life that made men of such terrible muscular force the serfs of comparative pigmies.

As the boat neared the end of this trip the roustabouts slept nearly as soon as the gangplank was raised. Lying sprawled out over the piles of heavy freight they slumbered as if stupified by drugs. At least, they all tried to sleep; but there was one among them who could not. He was the only white roustabout on board; and for a long time he had hung around the bar, hoping to get another drink. Once he had been a man of superb muscular force. Even now, one could see a rude suggestion of strength in his corded neck and hands, and a rent in his greasy cotton shirt showed great rosy muscles over his ribs; but his eyes were dull and his whole body drooped as he shambled along, as though he had long ago grown weary of holding it erect.

When he felt certain that he could get no more whiskey, he slouched down to the lower deck and lay down on some bales of hay, where he could look out over the river.

The water was smooth and swift and strong where he looked, and he felt tempted to let it carry him below the surface, down where he could be cool; but after a while he rolled over and faced the boiler, trying to sleep. He saw "Canary Jim" lying on his stomach

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