



CHAPTER 16

ONE DAY RECENTLY A CHANCE REMARK CALLED TO MY MIND AN EARLY sweetheart of mine and I fell to talking about her. I hadn't seen her for forty-eight years; but no matter, I found that I remembered her quite clearly and that she possessed a lively interest for me notwithstanding that great interval of time. She wasn't yet fifteen when I knew her. It was in the summertime and she had gone down the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans as a guest of a relative of hers who was a pilot on the *John J. Roe*, a steamboat whose officers I knew very well, as I had served a term in that boat's pilothouse. She was a freighter, but she always had a dozen passengers on board; they paid no fare; they were guests of the captain and nobody was responsible for them if anything of a fatal nature happened to them.

It was a delightful old boat and she had a very spacious deck—just the place for moonlight dancing and daytime fun, and such things were always happening. She was a charmingly slow boat. Mark Leavenworth, her captain, was a giant, and warm-hearted and good-natured, which is the way with giants. Zeb, his brother, was another giant, possessed of the same qualities, and of a laugh which could be heard from Vicksburg to Nebraska. He was one of the pilots and Beck Jolly was another.

Jolly was very handsome, very graceful, very intelligent, companionable—a fine character—and he had the manners of a duke.

Beck Jolly was a beautiful creature to look at. But it's different now. I saw him four years ago and he had white hair, and not much of it, and two sets of cheeks and chins.

All the crew were simple-hearted folk and overflowing with good-fellowship and the milk of human kindness. They had all been reared on farms in the interior of Indiana and they had brought the simple farm ways and farm spirit to that steamboat. When she was on a voyage there was nothing in her to suggest a steamboat. One didn't seem to be on board a steamboat at all. He was floating around on a farm. Nothing in this world pleasanter than this can be imagined.

At the time I speak of I had fallen out of the heaven of the *John J. Roe* and was steering for Brown, on the swift passenger boat *Pennsylvania*. On a memorable trip, the *Pennsylvania* arrived at New Orleans, and I discovered that she was in the harbor right next to the *John J. Roe*. I climbed over the rail and jumped aboard the *Roe*, landing on that spacious deck of hers. It was like arriving home at the farmhouse after a long absence. As usual, there were a dozen passengers, male and female, young and old; as usual they were of the likable sort affected by the *John J. Roe* farmers. Now, out of their midst, floating upon my vision, came that slender girl of whom I have spoken—that instantly elected sweet-heart out of far-away Missouri—a frank and simple child who had never been away from home in her life before, and had brought with her to these distant regions the freshness of her own land.

I can state the rest, I think, in a very few words. I was not four inches from the girl's side during our waking hours for the next three days. Then there came a sudden interruption. Zeb Leavenworth came aboard shouting, "The *Pennsylvania* is backing out." I fled at my best speed, made a flying leap, and just managed to make the connection, and nothing to spare.

That charming child was Laura M. Wright, and I could see her with perfect distinctness when I was telling about it last Saturday. And I finished with the remark, "I never saw her afterward. It is now forty-eight years, one month and twenty-seven days since that parting, and no word has ever passed between us since."

I reached home from Fairhaven last Wednesday and found a letter from Laura Wright. It shook me to the foundations. In the place of that carefree girl of forty-eight years ago, I imagined the world-worn and trouble-worn widow of sixty-two. Laura's letter was an appeal to me for money for herself and for her disabled son, who, as she mentioned, is thirty-seven years old. She is in need of a thousand dollars and I sent it.

It is an awful world—it is a devilish world. When I knew that child her father was an honored judge of a high court and was a rich man, as riches were counted in that day. What had that girl done, what crime had she committed that she must be punished with poverty in her old age?

We have heard again from my long vanished little fourteen-year-old sweetheart. She has written a charming letter and it is full of character. I find in her, once more at sixty-two, the little girl of fourteen of so long ago. Her letter carried me back so far into the past that for the moment I was living it over again, the stretch of years between forgotten. And so, when I presently came upon the following in her letter it hit me with surprise and seemed to be referring to somebody else:

But I must not weary you nor take up your valuable time. I really forget that I am writing to one of the world's most famous and sought-after men.

And so I am a hero to Laura Wright! It is wholly unthinkable. One can be a hero to other folk, and in a sort of way understand it, or at least believe it, but that a person can really be a hero to a near and familiar friend is a thing which no hero has ever yet been able to realize, I am sure.