

Wilderness

By Anthony Schmitz

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Amidst all the others on that boat my eyes set on him at once, and yours would have done the same. Not for his height, for he was neither tall nor short; not for his girth alone, though he was thick about the waist; nor for his hair, which was curled and gone to gray. Despite all about him that was ordinary, he was a star that shone more brightly than its fellows. His blue eyes had a light in them. His lips, surrounded by a neat white beard, curled at some private joke.

We were bound north on the paddle steamer, *Bountiful*, soon to depart from Saint Louis and headed for Saint Paul. The boat earned her name. She was gilded and polished, all gleam and sparkle and filigree. Her stacks reached one hundred feet above the water. Her calliope whistled *Oh! Susanna* for anyone with ears inside a mile or two. Man, woman or child approaching the levee that morning, looking over the few dozen boats tied there, could only pray that the *Bountiful* was theirs. As the departure time drew near, the captain ordered a load of pitch tossed into the firebox, so that the smoke rising from her chimneys billowed black against the haze.

Then came a commotion like the end of the world. Crates dangling from ropes, whistles blowing, a tramping up the gangplank, workers bent under loads of tools, clothing, food — the vitals of civilization — making their way up the stream. Goodbyes and tears and I'll-send-word-

soon, all the rituals of departure. This while the Mississippi drifted on, mute and dark, solemn even, its surface barely troubled by the flow or breeze.

I paused on the boarding plank and looked up. That is when my eyes first fixed on him. I will give you his name now — Horatio Reilly (if in fact that was his name) — though I did not learn it until later. Reilly leaned against the rail of the boiler deck in his white suit, his expression one of serene goodwill, as if he knew what he deserved and knew that was exactly what he would get. Reilly tipped his chin toward me and disappeared into his stateroom. I found my own small berth, where I settled my few belongings.

We churned upriver, the *Bountiful's* wheels beating the river to froth. Vast as she was, still she rattled from stem to stem with the stroke of her engines and the smack of the paddles. Cinders trailed into the water behind us. The city dropped away, the sun slipped lower. We settled into the river's hold, the flow of which diminished as we passed steadily northward. A wilderness, or so it seemed to me then. Not that I yet had a true idea what the word meant. This green, dark corridor was the zenith of civilization, compared to where I was headed.

I ate my supper sitting on the edge of my bed. Crackers, smoked fish, an apple. This while the aromas from the main saloon swept through the transom window. I finished, sweeping up the few crumbs and swallowing them. Then, the better to torment myself, I strolled to the dining room.

Oh, the glitter and gawkery! The crystal chandeliers, the lanterns glowing with whale oil, the gingerbread frippery upon every surface. Then, too, the heat of the room, the smothering humidity, the glaze of perspiration on the ladies, the sweat streaming from the overdressed men. The dark waiters, bearing plate upon plate to tables set with china and laid with checkered

tablecloths. Watermelon sculpted into lily buds and filled with mounds of fruit. Platters of beefsteak. Duck and pork. Corn bread and potatoes. Wine and beer doing their part to raise a din in the long, narrow hall. An orchestra added to the racket. I went to the bar and, exploring my pockets for the pennies there, found enough for a glass of beer.

I saw Reilly again. He was at a table, playing cards with four others beneath a sign that read, "Games for money strictly forbidden." The rule was apparently not in effect at the moment. A pot of coins and bills spilled across the table, more money than I had seen in one place up to that point in my life. Reilly fingered his pipe contentedly, chucking coins into the pot, taking precious little out, seemingly undisturbed by his losses. He leaned back in his chair, his hand settled on his round stomach, a picture of satisfaction. You would have thought the money was nothing to him; that in fact the other players were doing him a favor by relieving him of the burden. His pipe went out. He tapped the bowl lightly and set it on the table to his left. Then the deck passed to his hands, it being Reilly's turn to deal.

Reilly babbled on gaily as he shuffled and dealt. The men at the table laughed. A fine joke, it seemed. Given the distance and the noise in the room, I could not hear a word. I saw nothing suspicious or out of the ordinary. When the hand was done, Reilly scraped up the jackpot he had won. He made a remark that once more had all of those at his table laughing, as though it were a fine amusement to be parted from one's money by so gay a fellow.

Reilly enjoyed a change of fortune. He split pots now and again. When he dealt he often won. I studied him with such intensity that finally he glanced my way. Reilly cocked an eye, as if we were partners in deception, though at the moment I could not have described its exact nature. Without thinking I aped the look he gave me. He smiled slightly and went on with his game.

Finally, exhausted by my efforts to uncover his secret, I left the saloon to stand on the boiler deck again. A sliver of moon hung over the dark river. I moved to the stern where I could stand alone and look out over what I had left behind. Home, in a word.

I was not so far from dismal self-pity when I heard footsteps on the deck. Reilly. He rested his elbows on the rail beside me. His white suit all but glowed in the darkness. Together we watched the river flow. “How were you cheating them?” — the question foremost on my mind — seemed an awkward path to conversation.

Reilly poked at his pipe and lit it. The concerns of the greater world burned away in his presence. There was only the small space that held the two of us; everything beyond became a blur. He said to me softly, purred to me, in fact, “The opportunities are endless, don’t you agree?”

Expecting the usual banality — *Beautiful night, is it not?* — or — *Allow me to introduce myself* — I struggled to reply. “Sir,” I said finally, “we have not been introduced.”

He set his pipe on the rail, then took my hand and held it in both of his. “We know each other, I’m certain,” he replied, “if not necessarily by name. Call me Horatio Reilly.”

“Thaddeus Morley, sir.”

“There, we have been introduced. I repeat: the opportunities are endless.”

“I’ll be satisfied by a few,” I said.

Reilly’s hand moved to my shoulder. “There is no question. Every ten miles north, a doubling. Enter the Territories and the possibilities are boundless.” He paused. “How far north do you travel?”

“To Saint Paul.”

“Excellent,” he said. “Excellent. You are already a success.”

“Your estimate is high.”

“I am never mistaken in such matters.”

“You don’t know anything about me. I know nothing about you.”

“You watched our game in the saloon.”

I shrugged. “I did.”

He put a hand on each of my shoulders and whispered now. “Let me ask the question for you, then. ‘Where was the deception?’”

“I would not accuse you.”

“Of course not.”

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a glimmering piece of metal, the size of a coin. Then he picked up his pipe, tapped it on the rail and handed the pipe to me. “There, Thaddeus Morley. Smoke. And mirror,” said Reilly.

I looked into the bowl and saw a reflection. With some sleight of hand he had deposited it inside the pipe and passed the cards over it as he dealt.

I handed the pipe back to him. Before either of us could utter another word, we heard a heavy tramping on the deck. A figure flew toward us, his arms spread wide as if to snatch both of us up. His clothing was in disarray. His eyes contained such a wild spark that at first I did not recognize him.

“There you are!” he shouted. Whether he meant me or Reilly I could not say.

Reilly was not a forbidding specimen. His hands were pale and stubby, his feet so dainty that I thought he might make a fine dancer. He was thick in the neck and chest, perhaps, but this

disguised by his substantial padding elsewhere. He sidestepped our attacker. By a cunning use of his arms and hip, he launched the assassin over the rail and into the night. I barely heard a splash above the paddles' noise. I looked around quickly. The man was so utterly vanished that I thought to wonder if I had dreamed him up.

“Pay no mind,” said Reilly.

“He’s sure to drown.”

“These types are rarely such delicate flowers.”

“You know him?”

Reilly shrugged. “There are a few who have a grievance with me.”

Reilly saw something in my eye. A tell, as a card player would say.

“I wonder if I should ask you the same,” he said.

We churned for a while up the black river, which seemed to me as mysterious as the man just hurled into it.

“My father,” I said to Reilly.

He paused and then replied, “Thaddeus Morley. Come along with me.”

Reilly took me to his stateroom, as opulent as my poor berth was threadbare. The gingerbread that bedecked the saloon was piled on even more fearsomely here. Reilly motioned me toward a pair of overstuffed chairs as he filled two glasses with bourbon.

The lamps in his room flickered and glowed, surrounded by crystal baubles. The bourbon had its predictable effect. Reilly asked about my history. He leaned toward me, hanging on my response, as if I were the raj of the river.

I gave him chapter and verse. I will spare you the total of the performance poor Reilly coaxed from me. Instead the broad outline here, and this only so you can understand the effect of Reilly's charms. My mother had died several months prior of yellow fever. A horror, to state the obvious. The start of her misery, prosaic. A headache. Soon she complained she felt her eyeballs crushed in her head. Her eyes and skin went yellow with jaundice, as though the urine that now mysteriously refused to leave her body had backed up within her. Next the bleeding, impossible to stem, from the nose, from the mouth. A blossom, then a torrent. Finally my father and I were alone in our house with the corpse that had been my kind old ma.

My father, a elusive figure to begin with, settled into a pit of grief.

He ran a Saint Louis pharmacy, though not with any great head for business. That much was clear even to me as I worked beside him in his small shop. You would have thought he made his money by fussing over the pretty little bottles — sapphire, jade, crimson, a rainbow of glassware —that lined his windows. He spent hours polishing, arranging, rearranging. Had he devoted as much time to tracking down those who abused the credit he offered, we might have eaten from higher up on the hog.

Instead, with my mother dead and gone, the latch on his mind, never so secure in my opinion, grew looser. When the bell on the shop door rang to announce a customer he barely bothered to look up. He came in late, he left early. Where did he go? Not to a saloon, from what I can tell, for he never returned in a whiskey fog. Once I came across him by accident in the middle of the day, sitting on a dockside barrel, watching the river run past. The sun smacked down on him but he seemed not to care, though he was hatless and dressed in a suit of black wool. I watched him for

an hour or so and if he moved even once I did not notice. Others bustled over the boards, but for him time had stopped.

I could have told Reilly more, there being much more to tell. But by now Reilly was moved to tears, which set me off as well. We blubbered together, attempted to drown our sorrows, sobbed anew, drank more. I felt a kinship with the man, certain that he, unlike my father or anyone else on this planet, understood the depth from which I then struggled to emerge.

“Again, your prospects, son?” he asked me. “What is it you imagine?”

I told him that I had my knowledge of pharmaceuticals, such as it was, plus a trunk of drugs and tonics that I rescued from my father’s store before they could be seized by creditors. On the frontier, or so I reckoned, there would be more need of potions than ever there were in Saint Louis.

“Well reasoned,” said Reilly, patting my knee.

We sat there silently for a spell. My thoughts lumbered, buffalo in a swamp. Such was the effect of the liquor, the light, the deep chair and the night's smothering warmth. The engine’s pulse carried through the deck and into the springs of my chair. I felt purged by tears, drugged, content. Then the image of my father on the deck returned to me.

“You think he’s dead?” I asked.

Reilly seemed confused. More than anyone I have met, he lived in the here and now. The events of ten minutes prior could have been a lifetime ago.

“My father,” I added.

He considered this, studied my face, tried, I now believe, to establish what answer I most wanted to hear. “In my experience,” he said. “Those who pursue us are not easily put off. Likely

he will swim to the shore, crawl through the woods, make his way to a cabin. Whatever was shall continue to be. For better or worse.”

“Hunted, then?”

“You and me both. We all have our demons, Thaddeus.”

Our boat was the latest in science and engineering, a wedding cake of art and craft. This fired by a furnace and boiler, manned by slaves leased out by their southern masters, the hard-used souls dark and glistening with sweat, pitching wood into the firebox. A crackle and roar, like at the gate of hell. Surrounding us, vast swarms of the unimaginable. The Mississippi, God only knows how deep, its dark waters concealing who-knows-what. Beyond, a wall of green. Mystery below, mystery to the left and the right, the only certainty the sky above, and this, too, shifting endlessly, from the gentle light of morning to the towering, bruised clouds that dropped torrents by mid-afternoon. A few days after our departure I stepped onto the deck, glanced to the nearby shore, turned away and was struck belatedly with the notion that a face had stared back at me from the thicket. I looked again. Nothing. An Indian, perhaps, or a moment’s madness. There was no way to tell.

My first glimpse of Milly LaCroix was in keeping with the day, a surprise that I could not so easily assign to its proper place. Her dark hair was piled atop her head and covered with a straw hat near the end of its useful life. Her neck, thus exposed, was graceful enough. Her fingers, if I can be honest here, were coarse and chapped. Her clothing was not altogether clean. I suppose she was my age, more or less. She glanced at me and quickly looked away.

Soon she appeared beside me at the rail and said, “I have never been north of St. Louis.” Her voice was low, almost raspy. In appearance she was not so different than a dozen shop girls I knew.

Oh, but Milly — she insisted that I immediately forget her full name, Millicent — was so much more interested in my particulars than any shop girls had ever been. She questioned me closely about my family history, which was, she said, so brutally similar to her own. Her parents both as dead as my dear mother, snatched in an outbreak of disease too awful to relate. Her father also a man of business, though of what type remained unclear to me. I took it that Milly, an only child, lived in some luxury until she was reduced by disease, her father’s conniving partners and the estate executor’s complicity. And so now she was headed north, alone, to forget and to start over.

“A sweet enough girl, I suppose,” was Reilly’s view later. “But if I may offer you advice, Thaddeus? We are on our way to a new world together, all of us on this boat. We are not here because our old life was perfect. If so, who would have left? We cast off, we start over. Strictly speaking, the truth is not always our friend. I would take this into account. And not necessarily believe all I am told.”

“What are you saying?”

“Your enthusiasms. You might put them on a leash.”

I thanked him somewhat icily, and promised to consider his advice.

Later Milly and I made a turn around the boiler deck, with its clear view of the river and woods. The stream was increasingly narrow, the flow hemmed in by steep bluffs. We had come into the Minnesota Territory. At a bend below the village of Winona we saw a steamboat wreck,

already pillaged for anything of value. The wheel was sunk past the shaft. Beside the place where the pilot house had been, a rusted chimney lay crumpled. “We pay for our stupid mistakes,” Milly declared.

I thought for a moment that we were not necessarily talking about a boat.

“An accident,” I said. “It might have been.”

“If there is such a thing. We make our world. That’s what I think.”

She took my arm and steered me toward a stairway. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s look at the engine that makes this thing work.”

The main deck was stacked high with provisions. Tucked into the spaces between barrels and boxes were solitary travelers and whole families, transported at the cheapest rate. Lacking quarters of their own, they found their own places to sleep and eat. In the shadow of wooden boxes piled beside the bull rail I saw a young mother nursing a baby. Her hair hung in greasy hanks. Two boys, starved little monsters both, dressed in rags, scampered on the barrel tops. No husband in sight.

“There are plenty who’ve got it worse,” I observed.

“This time next year she could be rich,” Milly declared. “She keeps her wits about her. Should that be possible.”

Milly’s lips were generous and well-colored, especially against her pale skin. There was a playfulness in her eyes that made her declarations more merry than the words alone convey. But I also admit that I was nagged by Reilly’s observations. Not everything about her added up. The worn clothes, the schemer’s eyes; you could take her for a costumed actress.

Bells rang. From the engine room, a hoarse voice, shouting. "I want fire! I want Lucifer himself begging for a glass of ice water inside that goddamn firebox!" This attended by more banging, more oaths, more bells. Milly pulled me toward the open door. The engineer had already created purgatory within. He did not appear completely sober, judging from his florid face and staggering gait. Head and face alike were covered with gray stubble and grease smudges. The target of his wrath: the slave team that pitched wood into the blaze. Sweat flew from them. They muttered under their breath as steam hissed from the boiler pipes. A hurricane roared past, made by the draw of the chimneys.

"What's that you say?" the engineer shouted. "You'll do your further mumbling in hell if I don't see more fire. Work, you sons of bitches!" He poked a rod in the boiler to check the water level.

From behind us, footsteps. Then a callow voice attached to a callow face topped by an idiotic cap. "No place for a lady," he said, ignoring me completely.

To which Milly replied with an arched brow, "My ears haven't fallen off yet."

"Not yet, but then, the engineer has not built up a full head of steam. I can tell you that as pilot of the vessel."

"Pilot?" I said.

"Assistant pilot," he said.

"Ah, cub. The cub pilot," I guessed.

"In training," he said to Milly. He wore a flouncy shirt with a black ribbon at the neck, in addition to the cap which was in itself the height of affectation.

The cub worked at the pilot's foot, for no pay except board and training, but that was only to say that his fortune was slightly deferred. The pilots' knowledge of the river was encyclopedic, their self assurance and decisiveness legendary. So much so that even the most wretched cub, by dint of association, was full of himself.

He took Milly by the elbow and led her away from the engineer, whose oaths continued at a fevered rate. You have not seen the river, he told her, until you see it from the pilot house of a Mississippi River steamer. At eight the next morning he would finish his shift, and she could join him on the texas deck as the *Bountiful* rounded the bend into Saint Paul. You would have thought him the Mississippi's own Creator, to hear him go on. The morning sun reflecting off the river, the lush riverside and the oak-spattered prairie beyond, then the town itself, the next Manhattan of the northern prairie, with which he was intimately familiar, being a man of many parts.

Milly seemed a half step removed from tugging at his lips to check his teeth, like a horse she would buy that moment if the price were right. She said that her morning stroll might take her to his workplace. In the event itself, however, the next morning was not to include a relaxed contemplation of scenery, nor sweet attempts at romance.

For the most part we ignore the everyday hazards of our lives. To dwell upon them would force us into paralysis, as we all know. Our lives are in constant peril — in fact, they will certainly end! — yet we put one foot ahead of the other and soldier on, willfully ignorant. So it was with passengers upon the paddle steamers of the Mississippi.

Where to begin with the inventory of risk?

The river itself was a living thing. It could be indolent, barely moving at all, a giant lake such as appeared in the vicinity of Pepin, not far from Saint Paul. Then again, the flow could be quick and powerful, as if the hand of a monster reached from below and worked its will on anything that dared to float. There might be waterlogged tree trunks, shorn of their branches, sharpened to a point against a gravel bar and set loose just below the river's surface. These great skewers could run a ship through in a beat of your heart. Of course there were bars and reefs, some temporary, some permanent, all more or less dangerous depending on the depth of water in the stream, which might itself change on account of the time of year or yesterday's rain. This was to speak solely of the hand of God, and to say nothing of man's blundering works.

Now, picture this. A boat called the *Bountiful* turns up the river, its hands anxious to land in Saint Paul and to begin the usual rounds of drinking, brawling and whoring. The pilot, believing that he could safely leave a monkey at the wheel for this short stretch, retires to his cabin to primp for his arrival. He is, like all his class, no stranger to pride. He must shave and change his shirt. Thus will he be prepared to pull up to the levee, stride out onto the deck and bask, or so he imagines, in the regard of all who see him there. He trusts the boat briefly to his cub. The cub, momentarily distracted by a step upon the deck, turns and spies that rough beauty from the day before. Now she will have an opportunity to see a great man of the river in action. He gives the wheel a jaunty spin and smacks into a sandbar that had not been there even six hours before. A lurch, a groan, a clatter of boxes and barrels as they tumble onto the main deck. Screams from the passengers sleeping there, awakened by the snap of their bones. The boat instantly motionless, pinned on the bar. The pilot, shaving, all but cuts off his nose. For a few precious moments he is more concerned with staunching the flow than with rushing to the pilot house.

Because surely the ship is not *going* anywhere until an expert hand takes control. The cub tips his hat to the bemused girl standing beside him. He pulls at the bell to the engine room. More steam! Reverse engines! He shall bull his way off the bar and find the channel. The sudden crisis finds the engineer somewhat less than prepared. He has not waited until reaching shore to begin his celebration. He is drunk. He screams again for more fire. His slave crew vows that this time they will melt the damn firebox and be done with their troubles. They heave whole trees of fuel into the inferno, which blazes beneath the boiler. Sparks and smoke bellow from the chimney. It being a sultry, still morning, and the boat itself being at a standstill, the cinders settle down upon the wood decks. Soon a blaze is kindled on the rear main, where a fat, glowing spark lands among the straw spilled from a shattered box of china.

Bad enough, but still things can get worse. The groaning of the injured is now joined by a fresh set of screams. Fire! Fire! Seen from far above, the dashing hither and fro might be comical, except that the circumstance is so grave. The engineer pulls himself upright, holds his head, looks as if he might most happily vomit upon his own feet. The *Bountiful's* captain, who is not sure were he ought first run, comes across the engineer, assesses his condition, and smashes him in the face with his fist. Whereupon the engineer sinks to the deck, slightly less capable than before of noticing that his boiler is clogged with mud from the river water. This is a familiar problem. The boiler water is drawn from the river, the river is full of mud, ergo, the boiler fills with mud. The solution is routine maintenance, but then routine maintenance is a difficult concept for an engineer who maintains little except a state of drunkenness. Even so, the battle might still be won, were the slave crew not heaving wood into the furnace as if they were Satan's

own henchmen. So, next, a clatter, a volcanic hiss, a scream of pipes torn asunder by steam, and an explosion that tears the boat in two.

One moment I was sitting on my bed, searching for my boots. The next I was flying into what would otherwise have been a glorious morning in the Minnesota Territory, a scant mile from the city of Saint Paul. The dark green of the treetops, the brilliant skein of river, the faint blue of a humid summer morning in the North: I took it all in as if time had ceased to exist. Which seemed about to be true for me. I was dead, or soon would be. A leg, shorn of its owner, flew past. Parts of our former vessel shot rocket-like in all directions. Far below were Indian tipis, their astonished occupants now gazing upwards at the white man's latest perplexing activity.

Then down I went.

At last the muddy water, cool and dark as a grave, closed over me, and I knew nothing more until I awoke to find myself dragged by the collar through the muck along the shore. The slime stank in what was already a hot day. Mosquitoes, flies and God knows what else feasted on my exposed skin. A considerable amount of feasting was available, since such a quantity of my clothing had been blasted from my person. I choked, coughed, then suffered a stout pounding upon my back.

"There, there," I heard, "you will not be dying on me now. Not here on the shore of the promised land." It was my very own Moses, Horatio Reilly. I slipped into unconsciousness again, cradled in his arms.

Some time later I awoke. Reilly and I lay together in the mud, watching the *Bountiful* burn. Reilly was, like me, filthy as a rat, his clothes in tatters. His fine white suit looked like an

exploded cigar. Screams, flames and smoke rose from the river. Then came a rustling in the weeds behind us as the citizens of Saint Paul launched a rescue and grave-picking operation. The last I remember was to be thrown into the back of a wagon that Reilly and I shared with a pair of corpses. At that the lights went out for me once more.

In such a manner, and in such company, did I cast off my former life and begin anew, in the Minnesota Territory, in the year 1856.