

CATFISH ARISTOCRACY.

To the physical geographer, Kansas presents an elevated, treeless plateau, rising with imperceptible gradation westward toward the base of the Rocky Mountains. Its area is quadrangular, with regular outlines, except upon that portion of its eastern boundary which conforms to the sinuosities of the Missouri.

The withdrawal of the ocean beneath which this territory was originally submerged, and the drainage of the rains and melting snows that subsequently fell upon its surface, practically bisected this parallelogram with a central water-course known to cheap politicians as the "Valley of the Kaw," which, with its numerous affluents from either side, resembles the spinal cord of the vertebrate, with its lateral nerves branching from the cervix at Wyandotte to the coccyx or os sacrum in Colorado.

Commencing at the general level of the upland, these tributaries wear deeper and wider channels through the friable and incoherent soil. Their gathered volume, with sluggish momentum, crawls reluctantly eastward, forming the Kansas River, one of the most important affluents of the Missouri. These streams may be properly characterized as amphibious, or composed equally of land and water. They constitute an anomaly in Nature, being too shallow for navigation, too dense for a constant beverage, and too fluid for culture. If the catfish

were permanently expelled, and proper attention given to such soil plowing and irrigation in dry seasons, they would eventually become the garden spots of the world. This is an appropriate field for legislative action, and Congress should be immediately memorialized upon the subject.

During our Territorial history, a company was incorporated to render the Kaw navigable, by cutting a conduit from the Platte to the headwaters of the Republican, and thus uniting the two rivers. The resolute opposition of the farmers of Nebraska, who would have been deprived of stock water by the success of the scheme, prevented the consummation of this great enterprise, which would only have been equalled by the Suez Canal in its effects upon the commerce of the world. But the present Legislature is so much occupied in discussing the one-term principle, in discovering who received the most money for his vote at the election of the last senator, and in passing resolutions to adjourn, that nothing can be expected upon the irrigation proposition before another session.

The outer limits of these valleys are the bluffs, whose summits were the original shores of the rivers, when their broad, shallow currents had a scarcely perceptible motion toward the Gulf of Mexico. As the attrition has worn deeper and deeper channels, the lateral drainage has cut narrow and precipitous defiles through the bluffs, giving them an apparent isolation, and sculpturing them into rugged and picturesque outlines, waiting only to be crowned with castles to become as romantic as the banks of the Rhine. The increased moisture of soil and atmosphere preventing the annual devastation by fire, forests of oak, hickory, and other deciduous trees have gradually clothed the slopes and ravines of the hills with their graceful garniture, and extended a short distance into the interior.

The length of time required for the accomplishment of these results is matter of surmise and conjecture. Inasmuch as the waters of the Missouri now flow in a bed at least one hundred and fifty feet lower than the adjacent level of the prairie, and have cut through a stratum of solid limestone not less than fifteen feet thick in their descent, it is probable that the process must have commenced previous to the passage of the Nebraska Bill in 1854, and possibly prior to the affair in the Garden of Eden.

The degradation of the hills and the detritus washed down from the higher regions is suspended in the sordid wave, and deposited along the margins of the streams at the base of the bluffs, in greater or lesser crescents of muddy sand, wheresoever the capricious current permits a momentary delay. Born of a snag, a wreck, an adverse gale, a sunken floater, anything that can afford brief lodgement for accumulation, these accretions may dissolve and vanish with the next "rise," or they may mysteriously elevate themselves above the level of the water, give root to wind-sown willows, cottonwoods, elms, and sycamores, an anonymous growth of feculent herbage and festering, crawling weeds, but never a bright blade of wholesome grass, a lovely bud or flower.

Malarious brakes and jungles suddenly exhale from the black soil, in whose loathsome recesses the pools of pure rain change by some horrible alchemy into green ooze and bubbly slime, breeding reptiles and vermin that creep and fly, infecting earth and air with their venom, fatal alike to action and repose. Gigantic parasites smother and strangle the huge trunks they embrace, turning them into massive columns of verdure, changing into a crimson like that of blood when smitten by the frosts of October. Pendulous, leafless

vines dismally sway from the loftiest trees like gallows without their tenants. Deadly vapors, and smoky, revolting odors, begotten of decay, brood in the perpetual gloom.

If not too soon undermined by the insidious elite gnawing at its foundation of quaking quicksands, this foul alluvion becomes subject to local government, and, under a mistaken idea that it is a component part of this sure and firm set earth, is surveyed and taxed. Its useless forests are deadened, and the ruined boles stand like grizzly phantoms in the waste. A zig-zag pen of rotten rails creeps round a hovel of decayed logs with mud-daubed interstices that seems to spring like a congenial exhalation from the ground. In the uncouth but appropriate phraseology of its denizens, it is "elevated bottom," and has become the abode of the catfish aristocrat. It was amid such surroundings that I first met Shang, the Grand Duke of this order of nobility. Thus he had always lived; thus his ancestors, if he had any; and thus he and his successors, heirs, and assigns will continue to live till education, religion, and development shall render him and his congeners as impossible as the monsters that tore each other in the period of the Jurassic group.

The foes of Darwin are accustomed to assail the deductions of that impolite philosopher by the assertion that beings are nowhere found in transit from type to type, either among the higher or lower orders of existence. In their efforts to escape the irresistible conclusion that their own immediate ancestors were monkeys or donkeys, they affirm with suspicious plausibility that if this process of evolution were constantly proceeding, we should somewhere find a fish with feathers, a bird with fins, a horse with horns, or a man with unpaired claws and a prehensile tail.

These high-prairie logicians who thus attempt to salve their wounded vanity are possibly honest, but their horizon is narrow. They illustrate the errors that arise from imperfect generalization, based upon insufficient data. Reflection should convince them that they had seen hogs on the bench, asses in the pulpit, and bores in every relation in life; and if they would descend from their altitudes to the dwellers along the creeks and upon the bottoms, we should hear no more of this sophistical argument. In Shang they would find that long-lost brother, "the connecting link between man and the gorilla."

They would also discover additional proof of another significant fact, interesting not less in physics than in morals, but indisputable in both, that vice, degradation, infamy, ignorance—all the conditions that tend to corrupt and debase mankind—by some inexorable law of their being, do most luxuriantly thrive and flourish on low and level lands, the shores of rivers, and the margins of gulfs and lakes and bays. Sin gravitates downward, not spiritually alone, but materially also. Nature abhors it. She throws the harlot and the drunkard in the gutter. She moves her human trash, like her other garbage, constantly lower and lower, till it is consumed in central fires or purged in purifying seas.

Whatever is virtuous and lofty in thought, sentiment, and purpose, we irresistibly associate with elevated regions: mountain summits cleaving the zenith, high table-lands, with clear streams and glittering atmosphere.

"What pleasure dwells in height, the shepherd sang,
 In height and cold, the splendor of the hills!"

* The patriotism of mountaineers, their love of home, integrity, religion, fortitude, are proverbial. The history of Switz-

erland and the national characteristics of its inhabitants, the hardy virtues of the farmers of New England and the peasantry of Northern Europe, are in vivid contrast with the nameless degradation of the emasculated myriads that swarm upon the alluvions of the Ganges, the Missouri, and the Nile.

The same distinction is perceptible within the narrow range of isolated communities. Business, traffic, manufactures, whatever enslaves man and drags him down to the level of his most clamorous necessities, seek low grades; while the church, the school, the home, crown the eminences that rise above the dust and smoke of this dim spot which men call earth.

The hell of theology is in a bottomless pit, a profound abyss; while the evangelical heaven is depicted to the popular fancy as a walled and castellated city, leaning over whose comfortable battlements the celestial burghers contemplate, with complacent security, the elaborate contortions of their less-favored brethren in fuliginous realms below.

The Esquimaux could not exist at the equator, nor the Hindoo at the pole. No man of genius or power in letters, arts, or arms has ever been born outside of a narrow zone of mean annual temperature. Whether soil, climate, and diet produce their own peculiar species of the human animal, or whether, being created, he seeks the conditions to which he is specially adapted, is a matter of doubt, but the fact admits of no question. The most cursory observer cannot fail to notice the difference, even in the same township, county, or State, between the farmers who live in bottoms and those who cultivate the prairie; between communities that congregate under the bluffs and those that dwell upon high and airy sites; between the catfish aristocrat and the Yankee. Perhaps the most marked and ineradicable outward distinction is the man-

ner in which they respond to a question imperfectly understood. The one, squirting a gourdful of tobacco juice into the jimson-weeds, with a prolonged, rising inflection, drawls out, "Whi-i-ich?" The other stops whittling, or lays down *The Kansas Magazine*, and jerks out, "Hawww?"

Beware of the creature that says "Which?" and shun the vicinage wherein he dwells! He builds no school-house. He erects no church. To his morals the Sabbath is unknown. To his intellect the alphabet is superfluous. His premises have neither barn, nor cellar, nor well. His crop of corn stands un-gathered in the field. He "pucks" water half a mile from the nearest branch or spring. His perennial diet is hog, smoked and salted in the summer, and fresh at "killin' time." He delights in cracklins and spare-ribs. Gnashing his tusks upon the impenetrable mail of his corn-dodger, he sighs for the time of "roas'n-eers." He has a weakness for "cowcumbers" and "watermelns"; but when he soars above the gross needs of his common nature and strives to prepare a feast that shall rival the banquets of Lucullus, he spreads his festive cottonwood with catfish and pawpaws.

From such a protoplasm, or physical basis of life, proceeds an animal, bifid, long-haired, unaccustomed to the use of soap, without conscience or right reason, gregarious upon bottom lands, where they swarm with unimaginable fecundity. In time of peace they unanimously vote the Democratic ticket. During the war they became guerrillas and bushwhackers under Price, Anderson, and Quantrell; assassins; thugs; poisoners of wells; murderers of captive women and children; sackers of defenseless towns; house-burners; horse-thieves; perpetrators of atrocities that would make the blood of Sepoys run cold.

The catfish aristocrat is pre-eminently the saloon bouncer. Past generations and perished races of men have defied oblivion by the enduring structures which pride, sorrow, or religion have reared to perpetuate the virtues of the living or the memory of the dead. Ghizeh has its pyramids; Petra its temples; the Middle Ages their cathedrals; Central America its ruins; but Pike and Posey have their saloons, where the patrician of the bottom assembles with his peers. Gathered around a rusty stove choked with soggy driftwood, he drinks sod corn from a tin cup, plays "old sledge" upon the head of an empty keg, and reels home at nightfall, yelling through the timber, to his squalid cabin.

A score of lean, hungry curs pour in a canine cataract over the worm-fence by the horse-block as their master approaches, baying deep-mouthed welcome, filling the chambers of the forests with hoarse reverberations, mingled with an explosion of oaths and frantic imprecations. Snoring the night away in drunken slumber under a heap of gray blankets, he crawls into his muddy jeans at sun-up, takes a gurgling drink from a flat black bottle stoppered with a cob, goes to the log pile by the front door, and with a dull ax slabs off an armful of green cottonwood to make a fire for breakfast, which consists of the inevitable "meat and bread" and a decoction of coffee burned to charcoal and drunk without milk or sugar. Another pull at the bottle, a few grains of quinine if it is "ager" day, a "chaw" of navy, and the repast is finished. The sweet delights of home have been enjoyed, and the spiritual creature goes forth, invigorated for the struggle of life, to repeat the exploits of every yesterday of his existence.

I have heretofore alluded to Shang as the typical grandee of this ichthyological peerage. Whence he derived the appel-

lation by which he was uniformly known, I could never satisfactorily ascertain. Whether it was his ancestral title, or merely a playful pseudonym bestowed upon him by some familiar friend in affection's most endearing hour, was never disclosed. Of his birth, his parentage, his antecedents, it were equally vain to inquire. He was unintentionally begotten in a concupiscence as idle and thoughtless as that of dogs or flies or swine. It has been surmised that he was evolved from the minor consciousness of his own squalor, but this must always remain a matter of conjecture.

To the most minute observer, his age was a question of the gravest doubt. He might have been thirty, he might have been a century, with no violation of the probabilities. His hair was a sandy sorrel, something like a Rembrandt interior, and strayed around his freckled scalp like the top-layer of a hayrick in a tornado. His eyes were two ulcers half filled with pale-blue starch. A thin, sharp nose projected above a lipless mouth that seemed always upon the point of breaking into the most grievous lamentations, and never opened save to take whisky and tobacco in and let oaths and saliva out. A long, slender neck, yellow and wrinkled after the manner of a lizard's belly, bore this dome of thought upon its summit, itself projecting from a miscellaneous assortment of gents' furnishing goods, which covered a frame of unearthly longitude and unspeakable emaciation. Thorns and thongs supplied the place of buttons upon the costume of this Brummel of the bottom, coarsely patched beyond recognition of the original fabric. The coat had been constructed for a giant, the pants for a pigmy. They were too long in the waist and too short in the leg, and flapped loosely around his shrunk shanks high above the point where his fearful feet were par-

tially concealed by mismatched shoes that permitted his great toes to peer from their gaping integuments, like the heads of two snakes of a novel species and uncommon feter. This princely phenomenon was topped with a hat that had neither band nor brim nor crown;

"If that could shape be called which shape had none."

His voice was high, shrill, and querulous, and his manner an odd mixture of fawning servility and apprehensive effrontery at the sight of a "damned Yankee Abolitionist," whom he hated and feared next to a negro who was not a slave.

He was a private in that noble army of chivalry which marched to Kansas to fight the Puritan idea, and the ebbing tide left him stranded upon the Missouri bottom. He found a community with no inheritance of transmitted force from which to rear the institutions of her new society. The liberal climate and generous soil had nurtured a luxuriant vegetation, pastured by untamed herds, that were pursued by men more savage than the beasts they slew. These were her only heritage, except the traditions of religion, education, and freedom that animated the hearts of her pioneers. The useless magnificence of the prairie was unweaved by a furrow. Spring knew no seedtime, autumn no harvest, save of the wild store that Nature garners for beast and bird.

It is appalling to reflect what the condition of Kansas would have been to-day had its destiny been left in the hands of Shang and those of his associates who first did its voting and attempted to frame its institutions. A few hundred mush-eating chawbacons, her only population, would still have been chasing their razor-backed hogs through the thickets of black-jack, and jugging for catfish in the chutes of the Missouri and the Kaw. How great the change has been is attested by her

five hundred thousand people living in Christian homes and pursuing the arts of peace; by her two thousand miles of railroad in successful operation; by her granaries that would feed the world; by the general prevalence of law and order amid great temptations to violence and crime.

Much of this prosperity is due to the favorable conditions in which we are placed, but vastly more to the moral causes which underlie our social and moral structure. Kansas is the child of Plymouth Rock. It was once fashionable to sneer at this historic boulder, but it is the most impressive spot on the face of the earth, save the summit of Calvary. The Puritan idea rules the world. Like Aaron's rod, when it appears it swallows up all others. Shang and his friends would have starved to death the first season on the sterile hills of New England; but the Puritan manured the stingy soil with ideas, and it has produced a crop that is better than corn, or oil, or wine. Ideas are more profitable than hogs or beeves. Rich Virginia grows poor, and poor Massachusetts rich, because the Cavalier thought for the one, and the Roundhead for the other. The Puritan idea is aggressive. It has an unconquerable vitality. Wheresoever it is planted it becomes a majority. A little of its leaven leavens the whole lump. Assailed, it grows strong; wounded, it revives; buried, it becomes the angel of its own resurrection.

To the invincible potency of this idea much of the marvelous growth of Kansas is attributable. It is, on the whole, doubtful whether there is or has ever been, in this country, any idea but the Puritan. Shang never thinks. He vegetates; he exists. He toils on horseback through the mud with his sack of meal from grist-mill to grocery. The Puritan builds a railroad, and meditates new projects as he trav-

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els in his palace car from ocean to ocean. Wheresoever he pauses in his triumphal career, the telegraph, the printing-press, the sewing-machine, and the innumerable achievements of his genius signalize his beneficent presence, render the burdens of life less degrading, and ennoble the soul by the consciousness of its powers to bless the race.