

THE JERICHO ROAD.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH THE HERO IS INTRODUCED.

"LIVELY, boys, lively! Trot along! 'Tain't no time to try the turtle-step. While you're a-creepin' along like an angle-worm funeral, the Wabash is a-fallin', and if we get stuck way up the river, so's we have to lay up all summer, and you have to hoof it to deep water, you can blame your own lazy legs for it."

The speaker was Captain Sam Bates, of the river packet "Helen Douglas," and his hearers were the deck hands, or "roustabouts," who were engaged in the operation of "wooding up." To the passengers, the men seemed to move with great alacrity, and the large pile of wood on the bank appeared literally to melt under their touch, but the captain, anxious to get up the Wabash for a load of freight, and to get out again before the river, temporarily swollen by the "June freshet," should fall, the men seemed to move as if going to church. Besides, the captain had to say *something*—no western steamboatman in good standing ever imagined that a steamboat *could* be wooded up unless some one stood at the rail and roared encouragingly and cursorily throughout the operation.

Again the captain raised his voice. "Come, come—nobody asked you to go back in the country and cut down trees and split them up before you brought wood aboard. By thunder, I believe some of you are waiting to have the wood grow before you pack it in. I wish I'd have wooded down at Carrollton—there's a big cemetery there, and I might have hired a few corpses to tote in wood, just to show you fellows how business is done. Here! you slim fellow ashore there (this to a wretched-looking specimen of humanity, who, bent half double, and with hands in pockets, was looking on), freeze in, and show them snails how to travel!"

The person addressed undoubled himself, scrambled up the bank, seized several sticks of wood, and hurried up the "return" plank

and aboard the boat so rapidly and recklessly as to strike one man between the shoulders with the wood, and to edge another off the plank and into the water.

"Bully!" shouted the captain, as a volley of oaths came up from the injured men, and from others against whom the new man rubbed and scraped. "Bully! Now you're wakin' up, just as your work's about done! Lively, you loafers, or you'll be left behind! Haul in! Put it to her, Ben" (this to the pilot). "Cast off that head-line, there."

The head-line was cast off as the pilot's bell rang; the escape-pipes groaned like demons in agony; the wheel astern stirred the mud; and the boat glided slowly from beneath the overhanging boughs, and went staggering and trembling up the Mississippi. The captain turned from the rail with the countenance of a saint conscious of having done his full duty towards a perverse generation, when his eyes fell upon the stranger whose performances upon the gang-plank had awakened the spirits of the roustabouts.

"Hands not allowed on deck—trot!" exclaimed the captain, when the man stretched forth his hands appealingly, and said:

"Captain, let me go along, won't ye? I hain't done nothin' for God knows how long—been down with ager—an' I've got a family to look out for."

"Well," said the Captain, looking significantly at the stretch of water between the boat and the shore, "I reckon I'll have to take you, unless I drop you overboard, and I s'pose you wouldn't think that kind of me. Go below and tell the mate to take your time."

The new hand reached the boiler-deck, and reported to the mate. That functionary surveyed him critically, hinted that the captain was an eternally condemned idiot for employing so eternally condemned a rack of bones, and instructed him to "go aft with the other roughs." Having gone aft, the young man did not experience as cordial a reception as he could have wished. The man he had knocked off the plank upbraided him in scriptural language. Another man was dressing an ear which had been wounded by