Paddle-Wheel Days
IN CALIFORNIA

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Illustrated by the Author

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TO THE MEN OF THE RIVERS

It was their skill, attention to duty—and sense of humor—that made travel safe and pleasant in those grand old packets which, in happier future times, perhaps will return to the waters of the Golden State.
CHAPTER IV

ONE SHOULD NOT TAKE LIBERTIES WITH STEAM

By proving that it was unnecessary to consume fourteen hours on the run between Sacramento and San Francisco, the New World, on April 2, 1851, opened the door to fast inland transportation. She also paved the way for some of the most gaudy and exhibitionistic funerals which California has ever seen. The New World did it, that spring day, in five hours and thirty-five minutes, and the idea seems to have taken hold at once. At any rate, the devil-may-care crews which made up the steamboat fraternity of the time immediately took to racing, both as a sporting proposition and to prove—if they could—that some one boat was better than any of the rest. Competition led to speed, and speed in many cases led to disaster. The fact that the Fawn had blown up on August 18, 1850, was no deterrent; the fifty dead of the Sagamore (she
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went sky-high on October 29 of the same year, just as she left the wharf for Stockton) already were forgotten, and the explosion of the *Major Tompkins* on January 23, 1851, should have taught its lesson, but it hadn't. Even the *New World*, shortly before, had killed seven with a ruptured steam-line while going through Steamboat Slough. And so, hundreds of men and women were to lose their lives by explosions within the next few years as a result of the craze for speed, to say nothing of those who drowned when the *Camanche* rammed the *John Bragdon* in Suisun Bay on January 3, 1853.

Some two years, in which the special Providence which has to do with those with a low IQ must have been busy, passed from the time of the *New World*’s record run to the next steamboat explosion. Then, on March 22, 1853, the *R. K. Page*—ex-*Jack Hays*—was plodding along, more or less minding her own business, when she fell in with the *Governor Dana*. As the latter appeared to have a spot more speed, the gauntlet was thrown down, and the two steamboats went to work, their pilots and engineers egged on by the cheers of their respective passengers. The *Page*’s engineer, whom a passenger had bet the cigars that he couldn't pass the *Dana*, found his professional honor at stake and cast about for something to increase the steam; his eye fell upon a cask of oil, which in no time at all was sluiced into the roaring furnace. It built up the steam, all right—so much so, in fact, that there was a deafening roar, and one of her boilers shot forward like a huge and lethal rocket, carrying with it important parts of the superstructure—and three trusting passengers, who were never seen again.

Just twenty days later, off Las Pulgas Ranch, the *Jenny Lind* blew up, killing thirty-one of her one hundred twenty-five passengers, most of whom were trapped in the dining room. She, however, was not a river steamer in the legal sense of the word, being on the San Francisco–Alviso Creek run, toward San Jose. So perhaps these thirty-one don't count.

Just to prove that 1853 was a bad year, the San Joaquin River put in a novel bid for fame by staging a double-headed steamboat
explosion on October 18, the two being unconnected except by the
general classification of too much steam and too little caution. At
around 3:30 in the morning, the American Eagle, coming down
from Stockton to San Francisco, blew up near Three Sloughs,
killing five passengers\(^1\) and wounding several others. At five
o'clock the same afternoon the Stockton, bound up river from San
Francisco, exploded, killing one outright, fatally injuring another,
and badly scalding eight more.

With 1853 out of the way, the Ranger waited a decent eight days
before making her bid for fame with an explosion which killed three
and maimed five. She was a high-pressure boat—a fact which her
low-pressure rivals took no great pains to conceal from the traveling
public—and the coroner was of the opinion that someone must
have turned cold water into her overheated boiler, which will do it
every time. That was January 8, 1854—and January 19 was the day
which is remembered chiefly for the blowing up of the Helen Hens-
ley. Apparently they were going to get away from their San Fran-
cisco wharf, Benicia-bound, with something of a rush, and had built
up a goodly head of steam in anticipation. At any rate, both ends
of one of her boilers blew out simultaneously. Oddly enough, only
two were killed. One passenger had the novel experience of being
catched by a flying mattress on which he rode, à la Magic Carpet,
through the air to the near-by wharf, landing a bit unhappy but
not really hurt.

Winter passed into spring, and on April 15 of the same year we
find the Secretary (which incidentally had inherited the engines
from the wrecked Sagamore) gleefully racing some rival, each
hell-bent on getting first to Sacramento. Between The Brothers and
The Sisters in northern San Francisco Bay, the Secretary blew up,
killing sixteen of her people and scalding thirty-one so badly that
others died within a few days. At the inquest it came out that the en-
gineer, a playful soul, had secured an oar and at the moment the
boilers could stand no more was actually using it to hold down the
safety valve. No doubt the surviving relatives were a bit perturbed
\(^{1}\) Her boilers, they decided, had been made of “faulty iron”—a convenient way
of laying the blame on someone too far away in the East to prove troublesome.
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by this bit of engine-room buffoonery, but it is not recorded that anything was done about it.

The organization of the California Steam Navigation Company apparently had a slightly sedative effect on racing, for the rest of 1854 passed without incident. But the little independents still yapped at the heels of the wicked monopoly, and so racing and lax maintenance continued. January 27, 1855, in fact, saw one of the worst of the river disasters. At one o'clock in the afternoon, the *Pearl*, after a brush with the *Enterprise*—an independent from Marysville—was just nosing into her landing below the mouth of the American River, and most of her hundred or more passengers were crowded forward, each anxious to be the first to land. There was a rumble and a roar; a boiler, kicking loose from its foundations, ripped through the crowd, filling the air with steam, splinters, and mangled humanity, and plunged into the river some distance away. Fifty-six were killed, drowned, or fatally scalded. Arising in its wrath, the *Daily Alta California* let down its editorial hair on the subject of steamboat racing in general and the *Enterprise-Pearl* affair in particular. In those robust days, the mere fact that a newspaper might lose a two-inch ad by expressing an opinion was no deterrent. The owners of the erring boats were advertisers; but the good old *Alta* poured it on, just the same. It must have done some good, for almost ten months passed before the *Georgiana* blew up, with loss of life, on November 23. So much for 1855. The next year saw but one fatal explosion; on February 5, 1856, the *Belle*, bound from San Francisco for Marysville, blew up at a point about nine miles above Sacramento, her list of a score of dead being graced by the name of her master, Captain Charles W. Houston.

Explosions which occurred at landings, or as engines were slowed down, were not unusual, and contemporary coroners' juries probably were right when they found that someone had forgotten, in these circumstances, to "relieve the steam," which otherwise

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2 In keeping with the quiet good taste of the time, the burial of the victims was set off by a funeral procession which included Governor Bigler, a Grand Marshal, seven volunteer fire companies, those members of the State Senate and Assembly who were sober enough to sit up, and all the available stagecoaches of both the Wells Fargo and Adams Express outfits.
would have passed normally through the engine. This at once brings to mind the *Contra Costa* which in 1859 was doing her bit as a pioneer in the ferry service between San Francisco and the East Bay cities. On April 3 of that year, she left Pacific Street wharf at 9:05 in the evening, bound for Oakland. Eighteen minutes later, having slowed to cross a sand bar, she blew up, killing six and injuring eighteen out of her 300-odd passengers. What caused the greatest sorrow, apparently, was the fact that among the dead was the vessel's bartender. When the clouds of steam cleared away, the pilothouse was blown forward, the stack lay over the port paddle box, and the supports for the forward part of the hurricane deck were blown away, leaving the unsupported deck to hang down “like the limber brim of a worn-out hat,” as the *Alta* put it the next day. The master and engineer were arrested and held for $2,500 bail. At the inquest, it developed that she was allowed 65 pounds pressure, and had been carrying only 42 a few minutes before. This was brought out by a passenger, whose testimony revealed an oddity of the times: the *Contra Costa* had her steam gauge up on the main deck, for the amusement of the passengers. The jurors decided that the engineer had failed to relieve steam pressure by lifting the safety valve, as he closed his throttle. Despite the fact that the *Contra Costa* had been somewhat disorganized by the affair, she was rebuilt, reboilered, and put in service again.

On the morning of August 25, 1861, a small ad in the *Alta* announced that the *J. A. McClelland*, an “independent” owned by Captain C. Mills, was resuming service to Red Bluff. At one o'clock the same afternoon, while she was bound for that city and had reached a point a mile below Knight’s Landing, one of her boilers let go. So powerful was the blast that her pilothouse—complete with Pilot S. Baldwin—rose to some altitude and dropped back into the texas deck, near the smokestack, with the startled Baldwin still intact. Fifteen people died in the blast, and eight others were more or less badly hurt. As the vessel was only eight

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*The starboard boiler had followed the fashion of the day for such cases by skyrocketing clear out of the boat and sinking with a great hiss, some distance away. Later it was raised from the Bay and became Exhibit A for “the people.”*
months old at the time, some cause other than age of material must have been responsible for the blast. Her hull, which sank in fifteen minutes, appears to have been susceptible of salvage, for it lived to ply the river again, as the Rainbow.

Nearly two years elapsed before the next disaster. Then, on April 27, 1863, the Ada Hancock passed into scalding memory. On October 26 of the following year, in Suisun Bay, the Sophie McLean blew up, killing three. Another year of peace and quiet—and then, some thirteen months apart, came the horrors of the Washoe and the Yosemite.

The Yosemite, of the big line, and the Washoe, Captain G. W. Kidd’s “opposition” steamer, were rivals; in fact, the Yosemite had once sunk the Washoe under conditions which caused some comment at the time but could not be legally established as smacking of skulduggery. At any rate, the Washoe left San Francisco for Sacramento at four o’clock on the afternoon of September 5, 1864, eight minutes behind the Yosemite. A reporter from the Alta, scenting a race, interviewed Captain Kidd, who assured him that nothing was further from his thoughts. So she headed into the stream, with the Yosemite some distance ahead, as were the Antelope and the Paul Pry. At 9:30 that night, when the Washoe was five miles above Rio Vista, one of her boilers exploded without warning; almost at once fire broke out in three places and her hull began to fill. There must have been an alert lookout on the distant Antelope, for her master, Captain Foster, sized up the situation and headed back for the stricken Washoe, reaching her in somewhat over an hour. The ship was a shambles; of her one hundred fifty-three passengers, sixteen were dead, thirty-six were badly injured, and another fifteen had suffered minor injuries and burns. Neither Captain Kidd nor Pilots Baldwin and Easton was injured, and the mate, who had been asleep in his room in the texas, was blown out of his bunk, fell through a hole in the deck—and escaped with nothing worse than a bad shaking-up. The Antelope, with the wounded and dead aboard, headed for Sacramento, her bell tolling to indicate tragedy. After hanging up momentarily on a mud bar, she reached the foot of R Street at 4:30 in the morning. Realizing
that something serious had happened, the Sacramento firemen had
started tolling their own bell, and the town was out en masse. They
set up an improvised hospital in the Vernon House in J Street,
doctors and volunteer nurses were called in, and everything was
done which was possible for the suffering victims. For the others,
one of the era’s typically gaudy mass funerals followed.

But California Steam was itself not immune from disaster.
Shortly after six o’clock on the evening of October 12, 1865, the
big Yosemite, running-mate of the Chrysopolis, was leaving Rio
Vista, bound down river. She had been delayed some five
minutes or more while the important paper work of settling the quarterly
account with the postmaster was attended to, and her safety valve,
set for 24 pounds, was blowing off. She was allowed 35—so either
the valve setting was wrong or there was something else amiss.
Her huge wheels had made less than half a turn when there was
a rumbling roar, mingled with the crash of splintering wood and
the yells of horrified humanity. The starboard boiler had gone,
and the air was filled with live steam and the wreckage of her entire
forward superstructure. Stanchions were blown away from under
a deck on which was piled nearly a ton of gold and silver from the
mines, and the precious cargo dropped into the hold. Oddly
enough, Captain Pool, Pilot Enos Fouratt, and Clerk Johnson
were all unhurt. Typical of the racial prejudices of the time was
the Alta’s account the following day; it listed the names of thirteen
American dead, and then added—just to keep the record straight—
“There were twenty-nine Chinamen killed by the explosion, all of
whom were buried at Rio Vista.”

The Chrysopolis, Sacramento-bound, picked up thirty wounded
and five bodies, taking them on with her. Just as the Antelope had
done a year before, she solemnly tolled her bell as she approached
the landing; once more Sacramento’s volunteer firemen passed the
word of disaster, and the Washoe proceedings were repeated. The
inquest, as reported by the Sacramento Union, brought out the fact
that there were “four cocks of water” in the boiler just before the
explosion—that apparently being before widespread use of glass
water gauges. They added that the boiler was made of “rather in-
ferior iron,” and, as several thousand miles separated them from the most interested party, hinted that this was because the iron was “made in England, by the Thornycroft Mill.” In a burst of patriotic virtue, the Union added: “The law now requires U.S.-made iron.” All of the resultant lawsuits were settled out of court, and apparently the only legal action was the arrest of two deck hands who were caught in the act of robbing the dead.

The little high-pressure side-wheeler Julia, on September 30, 1866, had the first of her two explosions. She was bound up the river that evening, but had gone only as far as Alcatraz Island, in San Francisco Bay, when the chief engineer informed the master that there was something wrong with one of the boilers, and they turned back. As they did so, the steam drum blew out, killing five and scalding or injuring eleven others so badly that in several cases their casualties proved fatal. But that was only a foretaste of her real disaster, which came nearly twenty years later. In between, for the sake of continuity, was the only other bad explosion to occur; the Pilot blew up a few miles below Petaluma, killing seven men but not badly damaging herself, and, after repairs, spent many more years on the Petaluma Creek run.

It was dark—and densely foggy—as the Julia came alongside the South Vallejo wharf, at approximately 6:15 on the morning of February 27, 1888. Then those ashore heard, but did not see, a terrific explosion; in a few minutes’ time there was a fluttering orange glow in the fog, for the stricken Julia was in flames, and was sinking. Not only that, but the wharf itself was on fire, adding to the difficulties of rescue parties who tried to get at the terrified passengers and crew. The lifting fog revealed the shattered hulk of the steamer alongside the wharf, from which arose billows of black smoke and sheets of flame. The Julia was an oil-burner—the first one, in fact, other than a few experimental jobs—and her storage tanks on the wharf were alight. Local journalists were not slow in picking out the fact that, instead of burning coal or wood, as any honest steamboat would do, she was flying in the face of Providence and taking the bread out of honest stokers’ mouths by

* How the fine old firm of Messrs. Thornycroft must have loved that!
using oil; with nasty innuendo, they called attention to “the huge vats of petroleum” in her hold. There were some seventy people on board that morning, and thirty of them died in the flaming wreck. Sailors came down from Mare Island Navy Yard to help, and the firemen from North Vallejo drove madly to the scene, only to find that, as there were no hydrants and the tide was out, they had to wait several hours before deep enough water came in to permit the dropping of suction lines into the Bay and making a real attack on the flames. By that time, 600 feet of the wharf had gone. A few days later, divers scotched the story of the oil being responsible for the catastrophe, at least, directly: they found the starboard boiler ruptured and the port one blown out of the hull by the force of the blast, but the oil tanks still were intact. A dangerous seed, however, had been planted in the public mind, and the oil installations which were then being tried out in the ferry Oakland and the car-transfer Solano were at once replaced by coal furnaces.

Early on the morning of November 27, 1898, the big T. C. Walker blew up, about fifteen miles below Stockton, and killed nine men. So great was the force of the blast that the entire forward superstructure of the big two-stacker was demolished. She was successfully repaired, however, and ran for many years more.

That was about the last of the bad accidents. The loss of the San Rafael, in collision with the ferry Sausalito, cost three lives and the total loss of the San Rafael. The Seminole–H. J. Corcoran collision in 1913 was spectacular but not fatal. The San Rafael affair is of some importance in a literary sense, for it was upon this disaster that Jack London based the opening action of his two-fisted novel, The Sea Wolf, produced periodically as a Hollywood thriller, with varying degrees of success, ever since.

She was a cute little thing, was the San Rafael—a dainty single-end with slatted paddle boxes, walking-beam engine, and a circular pilothouse like a ticket booth or kiosk at some bathing beach. And she probably was the last of the California steamboats to have the old-fashioned, wooden hog-framing. At the time—which was November 30, 1901—she was running as a ferry between Sausalito and San Francisco. She left Lombard Street wharf, loaded
Two old-timers at the Sacramento landing in the early days; to the left are the repair-ways and shipyard at Broderick.

Davis Street Landing, San Francisco, showing the river steamer *Capital*; in the foreground is the ferry *Contra Costa*. 
In the Helen Hensley the Mississippi River style of architecture was followed.
with commuters, and twelve minutes late for her regular 6:15 P.M. trip. There was a typical tule' fog on the Bay, and she felt her way along slowly, pausing now and then to listen for the sonorous blasts of other whistles. Off Alcatraz one sounded close aboard; there was a blob of light in the dense murk, and a frantic exchanging of whistles between her and the stranger, which proved to be the Sausalito. The other craft caught the San Rafael right in the dining room, filled with passengers. Both boats were backing furiously at the time, but the little San Rafael was mortally hurt. The captains had the great good sense to pass lines between the two vessels and lash them together, or the loss of life would have been high. Hysterical passengers clambered on the Sausalito, as the other craft settled. A San Rafael fireman proved himself a hero by diving into her neck-deep fireroom to bleed the boilers, thus averting an explosion. Others busied themselves with rescue—and with trying to tell the ships’ officers what to do. A minister of the gospel distinguished himself by storming into the Sausalito’s engine room and demanding to know why the whistle wasn’t blowing, with all that fog on the Bay; his welcome must have had some of the aspects of the bartender’s rush, judging from his complaint in a newspaper interview the following day. In twenty minutes it was all over and the San Rafael was hidden by twenty fathoms of chilly water, never to be seen again.

Nearly a score of years passed. Then the liner Matsonia—the old Matsonia—anchored one day, off Alcatraz. When it was time to get in her anchor, it came up slowly, breaking water with a mass of twisted, shell-covered ironwork—and a little brass eagle—dangling from its flukes. It was the eagle which completed the identification. The Matsonia had brought up a piece of the San Rafael’s engine.

*Easterners and news commentators to the contrary notwithstanding, this is *not* pronounced “tool”; it should rhyme with “Dooley.”