

MERQUEEN OF THE MISSISSIPPI (1851)



“So it was, as he stoked his campfire one evening, cooking up a right thick catfish he hooked that afternoon, he saw a sight appear on that black ribbon of the Mississippi that seemed almost magical—yea, it nearly stopped his heart for joy!”

As I remarked in journal entries past, Jacob Waltz, Sr and I came to be friends in a sluicing camp, when he lent me his boots to wear after I lost mine in a thunderstorm. Jacob Waltz and I shared several points in common, not least of which was the size of our feet, but also that we were both widowers, which means our beloved brides had passed on, and we were both struggling to rear young ones on our own.

I spoke of his boy Bubby to you’ns before, but I never got around to introducing his other, younger son, Ebenezer, whom everyone called Benny for short.

Now, I don’t think it’s out of place for me to mention that Jacob Waltz’s bride, Delilah, came from a family of considerable wealth, so that when she passed away during the birth of Ebenezer, why, a sizeable fortune was willed on to Jacob, the lion’s share of which was to be held in trust for the boys. But young Benny, always itchin’ to see and do some new thing, wasn’t content to wile away his youth in mining camps. No! In fact, all he ever seemed to talk about was exploring life along the mighty Mississippi River.

So, at the ripe old age of ten, Benny Waltz petitioned his father for his inheritance. Now, Benny was what you’d call a precocious child, seeing as he was as savvy in the wilderness survival arts as any plainsman or fur trapper. To anyone who spent more than ten seconds picking the young boy’s brain, why, he was keen to find him socially adjusted and wise beyond his years. As much as Jacob resisted the idea of relinquishing the trust, he soon gave in, reasoning that Benny was less likely to find trouble when running free than when pinned down.

With his fortune tucked safely in his sock, Benny set off one spring morning to experience the life he yearned for on the

Mississippi. Following trade routes back east, hitching rides on stagecoaches and cattle drives, he emerged from the dusty forsaken Southwest desert to find himself in the sweltering heart of Cajun country. Woo hoo—I do mean New Orleans!

Benny watched after each penny of his inheritance like a hawk watches after her young, buying only the essentials for an itinerant lifestyle—that is to say, the kind of life where he set down no roots, drifting hither and thither as his fancy carried him. He purchased such things as fishing line and hooks; a Sunday-best suit for attending church services and other social festivities; and a large tarpaulin to keep him dry from the frequent rains and morning dew. He purchased a sturdy roll of twine and a bucket of pitch, too, and with driftwood he foraged along the banks of the Mississippi, why, he did build himself a river-worthy raft.

He spent his days reclined on the raft—a little fishing, a little napping—and when he wasn't engaged in those leisurely activities, why, he'd tie the raft to the nearest tree and explore the wilderness. He'd hunt squirrels and rabbits out there with a slingshot, becoming quite the dead-eye—yea, perfecting an aim that would make even King David a tad envious.

In the evenings, he'd pitch tent in the wilderness, build a campfire, play songs on a harmonica and gaze into the great expanse of stars scattered 'cross the heavens above. Those were bar none the best days of his young life!

'Twould've remained that way, too, were it not for the fact that a restless boy like Benny couldn't stay put in one place for long—no! As I pointed out before, he was always looking on to the next thing, never content with the good life he had. So it was, as he stoked his campfire one evening, cooking up a right thick catfish he hooked that afternoon, he saw a sight appear on that

black ribbon of the Mississippi that seemed almost magical—yea, it nearly stopped his heart for joy!

For in those days, large riverboats known as sternwheelers stroked their way up and down the Mississippi, with strains of trumpets, trombones and saxhorns billowing off their swag-splayed balconies, the decks lit bright as the Fourth of July. Onboard, gentlemen in tailcoats twirled beautiful young ladies arrayed in hoop-gowns—the kind of dresses that fanned out around the hips and puffed up like thunderclouds the faster the couples danced. 'Twas a carnival drifting by Benny's camp each evening, and it wasn't long before he got an itch to be a part of that twilight parade.

Now these sternwheelers carried folks along the river for entertainment purposes. And the type of entertainment of which I speak was gambling—poker tournaments, casting of dice and spinning the roulette wheel—all games of chance where the lucky winners stood to make a neat little fortune over the course of an evening; the losers, on the other hand, outnumbered the winners a thousand-to-one, and oft times lost the shirts off their backs—yea, the very last balls of lint out of their belly buttons! Now, don't you go laughing at that, thinking there ain't no value in belly button lint. Why, I saved up mine over the years and from it I knit together the shirt I'm wearing today. Indeed, 'tis the best shirt I ever owned!

But I'm getting ahead of myself telling you this story of Benny Waltz's adventures on the Mississippi. To be plain, this type of entertainment wasn't meant for children. So, Benny found himself in a bit of pickle. How in tarnation was he supposed to gain entry onto the sternwheeler to participate in the nightly celebrations?

As Benny ruminated on these things, he sat down on a log and opened a can of sardines that he'd purchased at the general store—one of the few luxuries he afforded himself. Much to his surprise, as soon as he peeled back the lid of the can, why, he heard a gasp escape from inside—a gasp like one hears when a person comes up from being under water too long. It was *that* kind of gasp.

Turning the can toward the campfire, Benny peered inside, stirring his finger among the fish to pinpoint the source of the peculiar noise. No sooner had he done so than he saw something squirming inside, and out from the fish arose a sight that was quite hard for him to fathom—yea, for there among the sardines, slathered in mustard sauce, was a mermaid about the size of his thumb! And she was quite alive, no less!

She said, “Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you, Master, for delivering me from this dreadful can. ‘Twas nearly my tomb!”

“You’re quite welcome. But dare I say, I can hardly believe my eyes. Are you a mermaid?”

“I am that type of creature that men would call a mermaid, but I am altogether much more than that.” The little mermaid leaped from the can into the Mississippi River, where she rinsed the mustard sauce from her body. Then, she flipped out of the water and back into the can where she plucked a bone from a sardine to comb her catfish-black hair. The tresses shimmered like crude oil in the campfire light.

“How do you mean that you are much more than that—that is, a mermaid?”

“Why, I’m not just any mermaid, but I so happen to be the queen of the mermaids. My name is Delilah—Merqueen of the Mississippi.”

“Your name is Delilah? That’s my mammy’s name! Well, ‘twas before she died, anyhow.”

“It’s a beautiful name, if I do say so myself. But pray tell, what is my Master’s name?”

“I reckon I don’t know who your Master is, nor his name. As for me, my name is Benny.”

“Pshaw—you have captured me! Therefore, you’ve become my Master until the day I grant you the third of three wishes, to which you are entitled.”

“You grant wishes? I dare say you are pulling my leg, Delilah!”

“Tis a fact. You may ask for anything, and I am bound by the code of the mermaids to convey it into your hands.”

Benny thought about this for a moment. He had a good raft, he had the freedom to come and go this way and that as he pleased, and he even had his youth. Then it struck him. “I wish to be a part of the festivities on the sternwheeler, but I am only a boy. It is well known that young boys are not allowed onto the sternwheelers. And yet, that is my wish.”

“As you wish, it will be so.” Delilah curtsied to him. “But first, we must disguise you as a man.”

The Merqueen leaped down from the sardine can into the darkness, rustling through Benny’s belongings, making quite a ruckus for a creature so small. When she reemerged into the light, she sprang onto Benny’s shoulder with a small bundling of grass blades, dipped in the pitch he used to waterproof his raft. She dabbed this on Benny’s upper lip and chin, then pressed clumps of squirrel fur onto the pitch. She held up the shiny side of the sardine can lid for him as a mirror.

“Have a look, Master.”

Benny gazed at his reflection on the lid and marveled at what he saw: a man round about the age of fifty years old! His heart skipped several beats, for he felt real hope of gaining entry onto the sternwheeler. Wasting not a moment, he changed out of his day-to-day clothes and into his Sunday-best suit, knowing the mustache and beard that Delilah fashioned for him was only part of the disguise. Once he was dressed, he placed Delilah in his pocket, untied the raft and paddled downstream for the sternwheeler dock.

No sooner had they reached the dock than Benny swaggered forward to pay the admission fee (it was a sizeable fee, to be sure, but Benny had brought his inheritance along, stuffed in his sock), but the closer he got to the boat, the colder his feet got for the ride. He stepped out of line and into the shadows, pulling Delilah the Merqueen from his pocket.

“I have another wish.”

“As you wish, my Master.”

“I wish that the people on this boat will like me. You know, treat me as someone special, like I’m someone important.”

“As you wish, my Master.”

And with that, Benny found his pluck, venturing forward to pay the admission fee, his disguise not raising the first question from the gatekeepers. In what seemed like a whirlwind of a moment, Benny was safely aboard the ship as the departure horn sounded, and the great churning of water from the sternwheel washed over the night. He had succeeded!

He pulled Delilah from his pocket, beaming at her. “We made it, Delilah! We made it! All thanks to you!”

“Not thanks to me,” she corrected. “’Twas your rightful wish.”

But no matter to Benny. He had come for adventure and adventure was brewing all about him. Elegant people passed by him, nodding and smiling. The expressions on their faces bespoke respect for him—indeed, pleasure to have glimpsed his appearance on the balcony of the ship! His heart swelled with pride, feeling he belonged on the ship, on that night, in that moment.

Benny pressed his way into the ballroom of the sternwheeler, tipping his hat to the piano player, swaggering past dancing, swirling couples and waiters carrying silver platters of hors d’oeuvres, slipping deeper into the heart of the vessel until at last he reached the gaming rooms. Now, listen up, children—Benny said, in my own presence, ‘twas the greatest concentration of excitement he ever expected to behold this side of Paradise! He was drawn to the gaming table where dice were thrown for bets—that is, money was placed down on the table in wager that these or those numbers came up on the throws. Benny figured that was easy, seeing that he and his brother Bubby used to play dice in the mining camps.

He watched the games for a few moments before pulling Delilah from his pocket. “Listen,” he told her. “Can I really wish for anything and you will grant it?”

“By the code of the mermaids, ‘tis as you say.”

“In that case, ‘tis my final wish that I win \$100,000 playing the dice table tonight. Can I really wish for that?”

Delilah made a little jump from his hand to his shoulder and whispered in his ear, “Of course, my former Master. With your third wish, I now bid you farewell.”

And so it was that Delilah, Merqueen of the Mississippi, leaped from Benny’s shoulder, flopped along the deck until she reached the railing, then disappeared over the edge into the night.

Benny heard a little splash as she went down. Then, turning his attention to the dice table, he removed the inheritance from his sock and placed his wager on the line.

Now, I told you children that Benny's departed mother, Delilah, who so happened to share the same name as the Merqueen of the Mississippi, had left him a sizeable fortune in trust. But his inheritance was far less than \$100,000, for that, dear children, is a sizeable amount of money indeed! Even so, he gambled his entire inheritance on a roll of the dice and a wish.

And do any of you children out there know what happened when Benny rolled the dice? Well, I imagine there are a couple of guesses out there as to what happened, but seeing as I'm not good at keeping secrets, why, I'll just tell you what happened. Benny won! Yes, indeed, he doubled his inheritance on a roll of the dice!

And the patrons on the ship that night treated Benny as someone special, as someone important, as he bought drinks for all those people in the room—to spread the wealth around, as it were. The patrons beloved Benny, indeed! So, he took what winnings remained after buying all those drinks and placed it back on the line.

And he rolled the dice.

And again, he won!

So, Benny, in the span of two rolls of the dice, had first doubled, and then quadrupled his winnings! Which is to say, he now had four times the inheritance with which he first stepped on board the sternwheeler. Why, it was just like the good times back in the mining camp, thought Benny, when he rolled the dice against Bubby for pickled herrings.

And at this point, doing some rapid mathematical calculations in his head, he realized he had won over \$100,000!

Enough money to set up him and his kinfolk for life—yea, for generations! But then, Benny thought, imagine what good double that amount could do? I think you all know the answer, don't you? Well, yes, that's right—it could do twice as much good!

With that thought fixed in his head, Benny placed his quadrupled inheritance on the line and rolled the dice. And do any of you Children out there care to place a wager on what happened next?

Well, I don't want to take your money, and as I said before, I'm not so good at keeping secrets, so I'll just tell you. He lost it all! Yes, you heard right—young Benny, hero of the sternwheeler, friend of the patrons at the dice table, lost every penny he had on a single roll of the dice.

As the dealer pulled Benny's money off the table, a noticeable change came over the patrons. Their eyes turned away from Benny and the pats on his shoulders they gave freely only moments before did not return. 'Twere as if he wasn't even in the room! Well, 'twasn't entirely like that, seeing that security for the sternwheeler burst onto the deck at that moment, apprehending young Benny on charges of being a boy disguised as a man.

They shuttled him off to a dinghy, lowered him in the water and rowed ashore, where they left him on the banks to find his way back to wherever he had a mind to go.

Benny was crushed. How could he have been so careless with the inheritance left to him by his beloved mammy? As he sat on a log thinking about these things, behold, he heard a splashing in the river. In the moonlight, he saw Delilah, Merqueen of the Mississippi, climb onto a rock and toss back her inky locks of hair.

Benny glared. "You cheated me out of my wishes. You took me for everything I had."

“Did I?”

“You said you’d gain me entry to the sternwheeler, but look at me now—tossed off the ship like a common stowaway!”

“But I did gain you entry.”

“Well, what about my second wish, when I asked that all the people on the boat would like me, and treat me as someone special, as someone important. Where are they now?”

“And so they did treat you special, while you were winning and buying them things.”

“But what about my third wish? I wished to win \$100,000, but now I have nothing! How did you not cheat me out of that?”

“And so you did win \$100,000, before you bet it all away.” The Merqueen shook her head. “Such is life.”

Benny knew Delilah was right. “But what am I to do now? Where am I to go?”

“Go home to your Pa. The face of a son always blesses a father, even one so wasteful with the inheritance entrusted to him.”

With those words, Delilah—Merqueen of the Mississippi—slipped into the water and swam into the moonlit night, never to be seen by Ebenezer Waltz again.

Benny heeded her final advice, making his way out of the sweltering Cajun country, back into the dusty forsaken Southwest desert. It was a bright, clear morning when Benny stood in sight of the mining camp where his father and brother still lived. Much to his astonishment, he spotted his father in the distance, waving his hat high above his head. Then, his Pa was a running, running faster than he had ever run in his entire life to greet his son who was lost, but now was found.

When his Pa reached him, he wrapped him up in his arms, kissed him on the head and cried a good number of tears (the good

kind of tears) for his son who had returned to him. Jacob Waltz, Sr, overjoyed by the return of Benny, called out all the prospectors and miners, all the foremen in the camp and all their families, to a celebration for the return of Benny. Why, he even bought up all the pickled herring in the camp for the celebration to follow.

But for all the joy in the camp that day, there was one resident who was not overjoyed—nay, Jacob Waltz, Jr, known to the world as Bubby, was about as sour and down in the dumps as one you ever saw. He sulked all day and into the evening shadows, refusing to celebrate, bitter that his Pa threw a great party for his brother who had wasted away his inheritance on a roll of the dice.

Old Jacob Waltz sought out Bubby and confronted him about his attitude. “Why are you not celebrating the return of your brother, who was lost but now is found?”

“Why should I? He doesn’t deserve a party thrown in his name, with pickled herring as far as the eye can see—he squandered away his inheritance. As for me, I slave away like a dog in this camp with rags for clothes and blisters for wages, and not once have you thrown me a party.”

“But Bubby, I always had you by my side, knowing you was safe. Your brother seemed lost and gone forever, only to return safely to my arms. You don’t understand now, but one day you’ll have your own children, and perhaps the distinction will be crystal clear to you then.”

And with those words, Bubby’s heart began to soften—yea, soften it did until he swallowed his pride and sought out his brother, falling into his arms and telling him how grateful he was to see him alive! Not to get too sappy on you, children, but those brothers did shed a few tears that evening, realizing how much they loved one another.

As they made amends, the tears gave way to smiles, the smiles gave way to laughter, and eventually Bubby said to his brother, “Hey, Benny. How about tossing me one of those pickled herrings?”

Benny, happy to do so, removed the lid from the herring box. But he found no pickled herrings, nor mermaids waiting to grant wishes. Instead, he found an empty box, not so much as a dollop of mustard sauce to be had. With a touch of sadness in his voice, he said, “Such is life.”

Such is life indeed, children. For getting down to brass tacks, the moral of this story, the very crux of it, is that when we don’t forgive others, we miss out on the good life. Or, as we like to say in the mining camp, “Cut loose the saddlebags you’ve loaded up with sin, that you may pass out of the desert, through the narrow gate, and into the oasis of God.”

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