

# When Hemp Reigned in Kentucky

In 1900, Macmillan published "The Reign of Law: a tale of the Kentucky Hemp Fields," by James Lane Allen. If published nowadays it would probably be shelved among the romance novels.

The heroine, Gabriella, comes from a wealthy family (even though they've lost their slaves). She is a devout young woman, takes the Bible literally. The hero, David, is the son of a devout hemp farmer.

David goes off to college and learns about evolution. He comes home, gets expelled from the church founded by his great grandfather, and feels the wrath of his father and the disappointment of Gabriella. He gets pneumonia and is near death. He pulls through. He decides to go back to college and study the physical sciences. Gabriella, though her faith in Christianity is unwavering, will go with him.

The first chapter, "Hemp," is a florid paean to its subject. Some excerpts follow:

The Anglo-Saxon farmers had scarce conquered foothold, stronghold, freehold in the Western wilderness before they became sowers of hemp—with remembrance of Virginia, with remembrance of dear ancestral Britain...

Hemp in Kentucky in 1782—early landmark in the history of the soil, of the people. Cultivated first for the needs of cabin and clearing solely; for twine and rope, towel and table, sheet and shirt. By and by not for cabin and clearing only; not for tow-homespun, fur-clad Kentucky alone. To the north had begun the building of ships, American ships for American commerce, for American arms, for a nation which Nature had herself created and had distinguished as a sea-faring race. To the south had begun the raising of cotton. As the great period of shipbuilding went on—greatest during the twenty years or more ending in 1860; as the great period of cotton-raising and cotton-baling went on—never so great before as that in that same year—the two parts of the nation looked equally to the one border plateau lying between them, to several counties of Kentucky, for most of the nation's hemp.

It was in those days of the North that the CONSTITUTION was rigged with Russian hemp on one side, with American hemp on the other, for a patriotic test of the superiority of home-grown, home-prepared fibre; and thanks to the latter, before those days ended with the outbreak of the Civil War, the country had become second to Great Britain alone in her ocean craft, and but little behind that mistress of the seas. So that in response to this double demand for hemp on the American ship and hemp on the southern plantation, at the close of that period of national history on land and sea, from those few counties of Kentucky, in the year 1859, were taken well-nigh forty thousand tons of the well-cleaned bast.

*The roads of Kentucky, those long limestone turnpikes connecting the towns and villages with the farms—they were early made necessary by the hauling of the hemp. For the sake of it slaves were perpetually being trained, hired, bartered; lands perpetually rented and sold; fortunes made or lost.*

What history it wrought in those years, directly for the republic, indirectly for the world! What ineffaceable marks it left on Kentucky itself, land, land-owners! To make way for it, a forest the like of which no human eye will ever see again was felled; and with the forest went its pastures, its waters. The roads of Kentucky, those long limestone turnpikes connecting the towns and villages with the farms—they were early made necessary by the hauling of the hemp. For the sake of it slaves were perpetually being trained, hired, bartered; lands perpetually rented and sold; fortunes made or lost. The advancing price of farms, the westward movement of poor families and consequent dispersion of the Kentuckians over cheaper territory, whither they carried the same passion for the cultivation of the same plant,—thus making Missouri the second hemp-producing state in the Union,—the regulation of the hours in the Kentucky cabin, in the house, at the rope-walk, in the factory,—what phase of life went unaffected by the pursuit and fascination of it?

Thought, care, hope of the farmer oftentimes throughout the entire year! Upon it depending, it may be, the college of his son, the accomplishments of his daughter, the luxuries of his wife, the house he would build, the stock he could own. His own pleasures also: his deer hunting in the South, his fox hunting at home, his fishing on the great lakes, his excursions on the old floating palaces of the Mississippi down to New Orleans—all these depending in large measure upon his hemp, that thickest gold-dust of his golden acres.



"Let these men be the strongest."



"Then the fields are as the camp of an army."



With the Civil War began the long decline, lasting still. The record stands that throughout the one hundred and twenty-five odd years elapsing from the entrance of the Anglo-Saxon farmers into the wilderness down to the present time, a few counties of Kentucky have furnished army and navy, the entire country, with all but a small part of the native hemp consumed.

Little comparatively is cultivated in Kentucky now. The traveller may still see it here and there, crowning those ever-renewing, self-renewing inexhaustible fields. But the time cannot be far distant when the industry there will have become extinct. Its place in the nation's markets will be still further taken by metals, by other fibres, by finer varieties of the same fibre, by the same variety cultivated in soils less valuable. The history of it in Kentucky will be ended, and, being ended, lost.

Some morning when the roar of March winds is no more heard in the tossing woods, but along still brown boughs a faint, veil-like greenness runs; when every spring, welling out of the soaked earth, trickles through banks of sod unbarred by ice; before a bee is abroad under the calling sky; before the red of apple-buds becomes a sign in the low orchards, or the high song of the thrush is pouring forth far away at wet pale-green sunsets, the sower, the earliest sower of the hemp, goes forth into the fields.

*some extinct river-bottom, some valley threaded by streams, some table-land of mild rays, moist airs, alluvial or limestone soils—such is the favorite cradle of the hemp in Nature.*

Warm they must be, soft and warm, those fields, its chosen birthplace. Up-turned by the plough, crossed and recrossed by the harrow, clodless, levelled, deep, fine, fertile—some extinct river-bottom, some valley threaded by streams, some table-land of mild rays, moist airs, alluvial or limestone soils—such is the favorite cradle of the hemp in Nature. Back and forth with measured tread, with measured distance, broadcast the sower sows, scattering with plenteous hand those small oval-shaped fruits, gray-green,

black-striped, heavily packed with living marrow.

Lightly covered over by drag or harrow, under the rolled earth now they lie, those mighty, those inert seeds. Down into the darkness about them the sun rays penetrate day by day, stroking them with the brushes of light, prodding them with spears of flame. Drops of nightly dews, drops from the coursing clouds, trickle down to them, moistening the dryness, closing up the little hollows of the ground, drawing the particles of maternal earth more closely.

Suddenly—as an insect that has been feigning death cautiously unrolls itself and starts into action—in each seed the great miracle of life begins. Each awakens as from a sleep, as from pretended death. It starts, it moves, it bursts its ashen woody shell, it takes two opposite courses, the white, fibril-tapered root hurrying away from the sun; the tiny stem, bearing its lance-like leaves, ascending graceful, brave like a palm.

Some morning, not many days later, the farmer, walking out into his barn lot and casting a look in the direction of his field, sees—or does he not see?—the surface of it less dark. What is that uncertain flush low on the ground, that irresistible rush of multitudinous green? A fortnight, and the field is brown no longer. Overflowing it, burying it out of sight, is the shallow tidal sea of the hemp, ever rippling. Green are the woods now with their varied greenness. Green are the pastures. Green here and there are the fields: with the bluish green of young oats and wheat; with the gray green of young barley and rye: with orderly dots of dull dark green in vast array—the hills of Indian maize.

*Here two shades of greenness: the male plants paler, smaller, maturing earlier, dying first; the females darker, taller, living longer, more luxuriant of foliage and flowering heads.*

But as the eye sweeps the whole landscape undulating far and near, from the hues of tree, pasture, and corn of every kind, it turns to the color of the hemp. With that in view, all other shades in nature seem dead and count for nothing. Far reflected, conspicuous, brilliant, strange; masses of living emerald, saturated with blazing sunlight.

Darker, always darker turns the hemp as it rushes upward: scarce darker as to the stemless stalks which are hidden now; but darker in the tops. Yet here two shades of greenness: the male plants paler, smaller, maturing earlier, dying first; the females darker, taller, living longer, more luxuriant of foliage and flowering heads.

A hundred days from the sowing, and those flowering heads have come forth with their mass of leaves and bloom and earliest fruits, elastic, swaying six, ten, twelve feet from the ground and ripe for cutting. A hundred days reckoning from the last of March or the last of April, so that it is July, it is August. And now, borne far through the steaming air floats an odor, balsamic, startling: the odor of those plumes and stalks and blossoms from which is exuding freely the narcotic resin of the great nettle. The nostril expands quickly, the lungs swell out deeply to draw it in: fragrance once known in childhood, ever in the memory afterward and able to bring back to the wanderer homesick thoughts of midsummer days in the shadowy, many-toned woods, over into which is blown the smell of the hemp-fields.

Who apparently could number the acres of these in the days gone by? A land of hemp, ready for the cutting! The oats heavy-headed, rustling, have turned to gold and been stacked in the stubble or stored in the lofts of white, bursting barns. The heavy-headed, rustling wheat has turned to gold and been stacked in the stubble or sent through the whirling thresher. The barley and the rye are garnered and gone, the landscape has many bare and open spaces. But separating these everywhere, rise the fields of Indian corn now in blade and tassel; and—more valuable than all else that has been sown and harvested or remains to be—everywhere the impenetrable thickets of the hemp.

Impenetrable! For close together stand the stalks, making common cause for soil and light, each but one of many, the fibre being better when so grown—as is also the fibre of men. Impenetrable and therefore weedless; for no plant life can flourish there, nor animal nor bird. Scarce a beetle runs bewilderingly through those forbidding colossal solitudes. The field-sparrow will flutter away from pollen-bearing to pollen-receiving top, trying to beguile you from its nest hidden near the edge. The crow and the blackbird will seem to love it, having a keen eye for the cutworm, its only enemy. The quail does love it, not for itself, but for its protection, leading her brood into its

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*The Reign of Law* from previous page

labyrinths out of the dusty road when danger draws near. Best of all winged creatures it is loved by the iris-eyed, burnish-breasted, murmuring doves, already beginning to gather in the deadened tree-tops with crops eager for the seed. Well remembered also by the long-flight passenger pigeon, coming into the land for the mast. Best of all wild things whose safety lies not in the wing but in the foot, it is loved by the hare for its young, for refuge. Those lithe, velvety, summer-thin bodies! Observe carefully the tops of the still hemp: are they slightly shaken? Among the bases of those stalks a cotton-tail is threading its way inward beyond reach of its pursuer. Are they shaken violently, parted clean and wide to right and left? It is the path of the dog following the hot scent—ever baffled.

*And now some morning at the corner of the field stand the black men with hooks and whetstones.*

A hundred days to lift out of those tiny seed these powerful stalks, hollow, hairy, covered with their tough fibre,—that strength of cables when the big ships are tugged at by the joined fury of wind and ocean. And now some morning at the corner of the field stand the black men with hooks and whetstones. The hook, a keen, straight blade, bent at right angles to the handle two feet from the hand. Let these men be the strongest; no weakling can handle the hemp from seed to seed again. A heart, the doors and walls of which are in perfect order, through which flows freely the full stream of a healthy man's red blood; lungs deep, clear, easily filled, easily emptied; a body that can bend and twist and be straightened again in ceaseless rhythmical movement; limbs tireless; the very spirit of primeval man conquering primeval nature—all these go into the cutting of the hemp.

The leader strides to the edge, and throwing forward his left arm, along which the muscles play, he grasps as much as it will embrace, bends the stalks over, and with his right hand draws the blade through them an inch or more from the ground. When he has gathered his armful, he turns and flings it down behind him, so that it lies spread out, covering when fallen the same space it filled while standing. And so he crosses the broad acres, and so each of the big black followers, stepping one by one to a place behind him, until the long, wavering, whitish green swaths of the prostrate hemp lie shimmering across the fields. Strongest now is the smell of it, impregnating the clothing of the men, spreading far throughout the air.

So it lies a week or more drying, dying, till the sap is out of the stalks, till leaves and blossoms and earliest ripened or un-ripened fruits wither and drop off, giving back to the soil the nourishment they have drawn from it; the whole top being thus otherwise wasted—that part of the hemp which every year the dreamy millions of the Orient still consume in quantities beyond human computation, and for the love of which the very history of this plant is lost in the antiquity of India and Persia, its home—land of narcotics and desires and dreams.

Then the rakers with enormous wooden rakes; they draw the stalks into bundles, tying each with the hemp itself. Following the binders, move the wagon-beds or slides, gathering the bundles and carrying them to where, huge, flat, and round, the stacks begin to rise. At last these are well built; the gates of the field are closed or the bars put up; wagons and laborers are gone; the brown fields stand deserted.

One day something is gone from earth and sky: Autumn has come, season of scales and balances, when the Earth, brought to judgment for its fruits, says, "I have done what I could—now let me rest..."

In the fields, too, the sights and sounds of falling, the fall of the standing fatness. The silent fall of the tobacco, to be hung head downward in fragrant sheds and barns. The felling whack of the corn-knife and the rustling of the blades, as the workman gathers within his arm the top-heavy stalks and presses them into the bulging shock. The fall of pumpkins into the slow-drawn wagons, the shaded side of them still white with the morning rime. In the orchards, the fall of apples shaken thunderously down, and the piling of these in sprawling heaps near the cider mills. In the vineyards the fall of sugaring grapes into the baskets and the bearing of them to the winepress in the cool sunshine, where there is the late droning of bees about the sweet pomace.

But of all that the earth has yielded with or without the farmer's help, of all that he can call his own within the limits of his land, nothing pleases him better than those still, brown fields where the shapely stacks stand amid the deadened trees. Two months have passed, the workmen are at it again. The stacks are torn down, the bundles scat-

tered, the hemp spread out as once before. There to lie till it shall be dew-rotted or rotted; there to suffer freeze and thaw, chill rains, locking frosts and loosening snows—all the action of the elements—until the gums holding together the filaments of the fibre rot out and dissolve, until the bast be separated from the woody portion of the stalk, and the stalk itself be decayed and easily broken.

Some day you walk across the spread hemp, your foot goes through at each step, you stoop and taking several stalks, snap them readily in your fingers. The ends stick out clean apart; and lo! hanging between them, there it is at last—a festoon of wet, coarse, dark gray riband, wealth of the hemp, sail of the wild Scythian centuries before Horace ever sang of him, sail of the Roman, dress of the Saxon and Celt, dress of the Kentucky pioneer.

The rakers reappear at intervals of dry weather, and draw the hemp into armfuls and set it up in shocks of convenient size, wide flared at the bottom, well pressed in and bound at the top, so that the slanting sides may catch the drying sun and the sturdy base resist the strong winds. And now the fields are as the dark brown camps of armies—each shock a soldier's tent. Yet not dark always; at times snow-covered; and then the white tents gleam for miles in the winter sunshine—the snow-white tents of the camping hemp.

Throughout the winter and on into early spring, as days may be warm or the hemp dry, the breaking continues. At each nightfall, cleaned and baled, it is hauled on wagon-beds or slides to the barns or the hemphouses, where it is weighed for the work and wages of the day.

Last of all, the brakes having been taken from the field, some night—dear sport for the lads!—takes place the burning of the "hempherds," thus returning their elements to the soil. To kindle a handful of tow and fling it as a firebrand into one of those masses of tinder; to see the flames spread and the sparks rush like swarms of red bees skyward through the smoke into the awful abysses of the

night; to run from gray heap to gray heap, igniting the long line of signal fires, until the whole earth seems a conflagration and the heavens are as rosy as at morn; to look far away and descry on the horizon an array of answering lights; not in one direction only, but leagues away, to see the fainter ever fainter glow of burning hempherds—this, too, is one of the experiences, one of the memories.

And now along the turnpikes the great loaded creaking wagons pass slowly to the towns, bearing the hemp to the factories, thence to be scattered over land and sea. Some day, when the winds of March are dying down, the sower enters the field and begins where he began twelve months before.

A round year of the earth's changes enters into the creation of the hemp. The planet has described its vast orbit ere it be grown and finished. All seasons are its servitors; all contradictions and extremes of nature meet in its making. The vernal patience of the warming soil; the long, fierce arrows of the summer heat, the long, silvery arrows of the summer rain; autumn's dead skies and sobbing winds; winter's sternest, all-tightening frosts. Of none but strong virtues is it the sum. Sickness or infirmity it knows not. It will have a mother young and vigorous, or none; an old or weak or exhausted soil cannot produce it. It will endure no roof of shade, basking only in the eye of the fatherly sun, and demanding the whole sky for the walls of its nursery.

Ah! type, too, of our life, which also is earth-sown, earth-rooted; which must struggle upward, be cut down, rotted and broken, ere the separation take place between our dross and our worth—poor perishable shard and immortal fibre. Oh, the mystery, the mystery of that growth from the casting of the soul as a seed into the dark earth, until the time when, led through all natural changes and cleansed of weakness, it is borne from the fields of its nativity for the long service.