

# HALIBURTON POSTSCRIPT I

## RING-TAILED YANKEE

By V. L. O. CHITTICK

IN "The Pervasiveness of Sam Slick," an article it was my privilege to contribute to the summer number of *The Dalhousie Review* in 1953, I stressed to the point of over-stressing the importance (as I then thought) of Professor Richard Chase's theory, advanced in his *Herman Melville, a Critical Study*, that the humourously lurid, "all-fired," Western quality of the diction made use by Haliburton in compounding the "genuine" Yankee type of speech employed by his clock-vending creation had a demonstrable effect in forming the partly Westernized, at times fairly luminous, highly inflated style observable in *Moby Dick*, and in some of its author's later novels. The four-point argument underlying my presentation of Professor Chase's theory may be restated in brief as (1) that the comic Yankee, since the appearance of his prototype in the pages of *The Clockmaker*, had been progressively made over by Haliburton, and others, in the image of the ring-tailed roarer of the West; (2) that by the time of Melville's hey-day in authorship this synthetic product of East-West ingredients had become fully accepted and widely popular as an authentic American folk "hero;" (3) that Melville was well acquainted with, and appreciative of, the whole range and variety of such favorites in his country's oral and written tradition; and (4) that in the declamatory prowess of the "wild West" Yankee, as fashioned by Haliburton (mainly), Melville found the impetus for out-doing him in bombast, if not in humor. To what extent Professor Chase's theory has met with the experts' approval I have no sure way of telling. But one other American scholar, if no more, has in effect endorsed it by citing a further instance of Haliburton's literary influence. Professor William Van O'Connor, in his *The Tangled Fires of William Faulkner*, gives to a "strong echo" of Sam Slick credit for the "highly charged rhetoric" of at least some of Faulkner's tall tale writing.

Personally, after three years of sober second thought on the matter, I feel bound to confess that I now find much less validity in Professor Chase's argument than I formerly assigned to it. Not that Sam Slick did not steadily evolve closer and closer towards the vaunting comedy of the ring-tailed roarer. Others before Professor Chase had made that point abundantly clear.

Nor is there any question that Sam Slick, blended of "down East" and "out West" elements in whatever proportion, became a thoroughly popular folk figure. There is overwhelming evidence to prove that. And there is evidence in plenty, too, in recent Melville scholarship, to show that Melville knew the anecdotal legend of his mid- and far-west America so well that he could hardly have missed knowing that part of it built about the braggart's reputation of the New England "notions" travelling salesmen. Yet all that leaves the claim that Melville in any sense derived the inspiration for his extravagant heaven-splitting style, framed to match the dimensions of his leviathan White Whale, from Haliburton's version of the comic Yankee, modified or other, quite unsupported. It is my guess (and not more) that Professor Chase made his error in tracing the provenance of Captain Ahab's and others of Melville's characters' capacity for multi-powered declamation back to Haliburton's creation, and not to some derivative creation, such, say, as the title-figure in the broadside medley, "Sam Slick the Yankee Peddler," (with verse sung to the tune of "Yankee Doodle," and prose spoken in highest-gear "ring-tailed" idiom), a portion of which I quoted in the article above referred to. The original Sam Slick, however variously Haliburton may have moulded him, and he was nothing if not protean, never more than approached, save, possibly, in moments of palpable "banging," the tallness of that figure's tall talk, and no talk of lesser height could have served as even a partial model for Melville's protagonists' roaring speeches. The identical names of the medley's boaster and the yarn-spinning moralist of *The Clockmaker* series and its sequels, appear to have misled Professor Chase, and Professor O'Connor too, into concluding, when they happened upon the broadside (as I'm assuming they did), that they had discovered something stemming immediately from Haliburton's outstanding gift for humorous adaptation. How far short of the truth that conclusion falls is revealed by a careful inspection of Sam Slick's Western motley, an undertaking which I doubt Professor Chase ever engaged in, though he makes shrewd use of the results obtained by those who have.

## I

The archetypal ring-tailed roarer was, of course, Davy Crockett, whether actual or mythical. (Davy, given time, was both.) This redoubtable West Tennesseean made his earliest appearance, in extended print, in the anonymous and partly apocryphal *Sketches and Eccentricities*, 1833, and his next in the

*Narrative* of his life allegedly written by himself, 1834. (Whoever wrote the former almost certainly wrote the latter, in each case with the help of a "ghost.") Astonishing as it may seem, as promptly as the year following the publication of the second of these books, Haliburton in Nova Scotia became familiar with the first, and perhaps with both, of them, and was already drawing upon their common store of Crockettiana for the edification of his prospective readers even prior to the serialization of the first *Clockmaker* in *The Novascotian*. In no later than the third chapter of his soon to be famous "Sayings and Doings," Sam Slick speaks of "Col. Crockett, the greatest hand at a flam in our nation," and there is little doubt his Bluenose audience knew perfectly well whom and what he was talking about. From then on, the blaze marks of Davy Crockett's trail show plainly in every one of Haliburton's humorous works, with the exception of *The Letter-Bag*. In *The Attaché* that trail opens out into a veritable clearing, in which Sam Slick praises and paraphrases at some length, in a Yankee lingo version of the "original" (as found in *Crockett's Exploits and Adventures in Texas*, 1836), the fighting speech which Davy is said to have made to his West Tennessee constituents after they had failed to re-elect him to the United States Congress in 1835, culminating in the characteristically defiant, "You may all go to Hell, and I'll go to Texas." "Lord, I shall never forget old Davy Crockett's last speech; . . . he was a great hunter, a great shot with the rifle, a great wit, and a great man," is Sam Slick's tribute to his most obvious exemplar. Thereafter he recalls Davy's valediction on three different occasions, and possibly anticipated it in *The Clockmaker* when he explains that a "G.T.T." sign on a bankrupt trader's stand means "Gone to Texas." Davy's insistent and endlessly repeated motto, "Go ahead," a cant phrase widely current in the eighteenth-thirties and forties, is urged by Sam Slick upon anyone who will listen to him, in three of his creator's volumes, no fewer than sixteen times. It occurs twice in *The Old Judge*, in which the loquacious Yankee is allowed no opportunity of holding forth. Its point is given an extra thrust in *The Attaché* by means of a stanza quoted from "Old Zip Coon," a popular song of the day. And Sam Slick's double in *The Season-Ticket* uses it in several of his harangues. Davy's addiction to stump oratory, "or speakin' off a whiskey barrel," is recalled in two of Sam Slick's allusions to "politickin'," and once he reminds us that Davy was as physically formidable as he was forensically eloquent. "Lord bless you," he said, while bragging of

how "we [Americans] licked the British when we had only three millions of people," "we have fellows like Crockett, that would sneeze a man-of-war right out of the water." And he should have been as well informed as anybody concerning what Davy could do, since his "old Colonel Crockett said to me" (*Wise Saws*) and "my old friend Crockett," (*Nature and Human Nature*) suggest that the two were cronies. In *The Season-Ticket* Haliburton repeats, with minor changes, a Crockett tall tale which he had earlier included in *Traits of American Humor*.

A ring-tailed roarer when he was the two-fisted real thing, such as Davy Crockett, would rather fight than eat. Next to fighting, he preferred to talk fight while going through a ritual of neighing like a stallion or flapping his "wings" and crowing like a cock. There are premonitions of him, or his kind, in *The Clockmaker* from the earliest chapters on, and he arrives *en masse*, under his own colors, in one of Sam Slick's boasting outbursts half-way through the second series: "... we got chaps in our country that can stand on one side of the Mississippi, and kill a racoon on t'other side, with a sneeze,—rigular ring-tail roarers; don't provoke us... We can out-talk thunder, out-run a flash of lightnin', and out-reach all the world—we can whip our weight in wild cats." (Sam Slick himself was none of the breed, and admits as much when recounting, in one of his rare moments of humility, how his fellow members in the Connecticut House of Representatives ironically twitted him with being "a very ring-tail roarer... a regular sneezer.") The type is given full-scale exhibition with the advent of the rather too symbolically labelled Lucifer Wolfe in the third *Clockmaker*: (Sam Slick speaking) "I seed at once he warn't a native of Maine, but a ring-tail roarer from the West. ... And he crowed like a rael live rooster. ... cock-a-doodle-doo! ... a-flappin' so with his hands, like wings. ... a-risin' up, and a-clapping both arms a-kimbo, lookin' as fierce as a wild-cat, and just crowin' like a cock agin." (Lucifer Wolfe speaking) "... you'll find me just a leetle the ugliest colt you ever undertook to brake [*sic*]; there is no back out in me, for I'm a snappin' turtle, so you'll fight or play, that's flat, and no two ways about it, so take your choice, for I feel intirely wolfish and savagerous, and have half a mind to give you a tickler [bowie knife] in the ribs that will make you feel monstrous amiable, and set you a-considerin', I tell you." To that display of ill-natured belligerency Sam Slick's tongue-in-the-cheek comment is, "Only thinkin' of fightin' such a ring-tail roarer as that, nearly broke two of my ribs short off." In *The*

*Attaché*, Sam Slick abroad asks, with a double-barrelled glancing shot at Great Britain and the United States, "Ain't there lords in this country that know how to 'repudiate' as well as any ring-tailed roarers in our own." "Gander pulling" may have been no part of a fastidious ring-tailed roarer's diversions, but "gouging" certainly was. Both varieties of frontier "sport" are described in mawkish detail (lifted straight from the "correspondence" currently featured in the American weeklies) by Sam Slick for the benefit of Old Country "gulls," with the desired effects. And only unusual discretion keeps him from throwing a comparable rise-getting scare into a titled *vis-à-vis* with, "I'm a sneezer, a reg'lar ring-tailed roarer, and can whip my weight in wild cats, so look out for scaldin's, will you." ("Sneezer" and "screamer" are used with about equal frequency by Sam Slick as near-synonyms for "ring-tailed roarer.") In *The Old Judge* there are a "merry negro, flapping his mimic wings and crowing like a cock in defiance of all his sable brethren," an inn-keeper who would "fight like a game-cock for half nothin'," and a lady "screamer" (further described, however, as "in full health and spirits; tall well-formed, and exceedingly handsome, as 'supple as an eel, and full of fun as a kitten,'" showing that the term could be used to convey more than one kind of compliment). In *Wise Saws* a fight scene is staged on shipboard during which one of the combatants, a make-believe ring-tailed roarer, "crowed like a cock, and pretended to flap his wings." Elsewhere in this volume Sam Slick has hopes of meeting, among other terrors rumored as likely to be encountered on Sable Island, "a ripper, . . . a regular ring-tailed roarer," and does meet up at LaHave with "a bold, daring, onprincipled feller . . . a sneezer" who is also "a regular ring-tailed roarer," and with a strangely transplanted one, a "coloured gentleman [in Nova Scotia] who will butt, gouge, fight, and kick shins with you, whichever you please." In *Nature and Human Nature* there is a most unlikely looking specimen, an early morning beau, who in the long run perhaps qualifies for inclusion among the elite: ". . . he feels inclined to flap his wings and crow. . . . He would give a dollar to crow . . . he does actilly crow."

The ring-tailed roarer's accomplishments in spouting vociferous defiance were almost as strictly a matter of ritual as his grotesque antics to signify that he was spoiling for a fight. Usually the spate of his dire threats and his claims to physical superiority was terminated by some variant of the formula, "I hope I may be shot [or something equally horrendous], if

I don't." Davy Crockett set the standard in this game of brag and boast, and those who followed his lead were legion. Haliburton, among them, quickly learned the prescribed routine, and passed it along to Sam Slick, to the decided enhancement of that worthy's pungency. Sam Slick's asseveration in the second *Clockmaker* of what he would do to bring about the discomfiture of the person who he, mistakenly, thinks is responsible for the evil times upon which his home-town clergyman, "old minister," has fallen (in reality the separation of the church and state in Connecticut was to blame) will serve as a sample: "... give me the sinner's name, and afore daybreak tomorrow mornin' I'll bring him to a reckonin' . . . The infernal villain! tell me who he is, and if he war as big as all out-doors, I'd walk into him. I'll teach him the road to good manners, if he can save eyesight to see it,—hang me if I don't." Another occurs in his report of a Southern judge's determination to bring a gang of tough river-boatmen to trial; "I'll put you on trial so sure as you are born; I hope I may be skinned alive by wild cats, if I don't." And still another is his ascription, in the third *Clockmaker*, of similarly inflexible punitive powers to a native chief in Java: "I am a pickaxe, and will dig you out of your hole like a badger, I hope I may be gouged, if I don't." Though Sam Slick often departs from a literal adherence to the formula, his declarations of intent to do bodily harm show no slackening off from the Crockett standard of comic vehemence. How he would serve "Britishers" indiscreet enough to talk back to him, he makes clear early in the *The Attaché*: "... let any o' the Britishers give me slack, and I'll give 'em cranberry for their goose, I know. I'd jump right down their throat with spurs on, and gallop their sarse out." He is equally clear in assuring "Squire" (an *alias* of Haliburton himself) how he'll back him up in telling the upper-crust English just where to draw the line in patronizing colonials: "Hit or miss, rough or tumble, claw or mud-scraper, any way you damn please, I'm your man." In defense of his assumed right to criticize whatever he finds abroad he issued, well ahead of time, this warning to anybody who might dare to call it in question: "I'd polish his dial-plate first, and then I'd feel his short ribs, so as to make him larf, a leetle just a leetle the loudest he ever heerd. Lord, he'd think thunder and lightnin' a mint julip to it. I'd ring him in the nose as they do pigs in my country, to prevent them rootin' up what they had n't ought." Cold sober, he said that if he were a member of Parliament he'd "electrify 'em [the opposition] and kill 'em dead like lightnin', and then galvanize 'em and

fetch 'em to life agin, and then give 'em exhilaratin' gas and set 'em a-larfin';" and, fortified with a "horn of lignum vitae" ("brandy and water . . . pipin' hot, scald an iron pot amost, and spiced with cloves and sugar . . . , stiff enough to make a tea-spoon stand up in it, as straight as a dead nigger"), he'd serve a member of the same opposition "as our Slickville boys sarve the cows to California. One on 'em lays hold of the tail, and the other skins her as she runs strait *sic* on eend. Next year it's all growed ready for another flayin'. Fact, I assure you. Lord! I'd skin a feller so, his hide would never grow agin; I'd make a caution of him to sinners, I know." In mock protest against an expected jostling at a loathed soirée, he threatens: "Onder below there, look out for your corns, haul your feet in like turtles, for I'm a-comin'. Take car o' your ribs, my old 'coons, for my elbows are crooked. Who wants to grow? I'll squeeze you out as a rollin pin does dough, and make you grow ten inches taller. . . . Look out for scaldin's there. Here I am; it's me Sam Slick, make way or I'll walk right over you . . ." The Sam Slick-like "American citizen" in *The Letter-Bag* boasts of what General Jackson would have done to the French had they interfered with a British naval ship under the pretext that it was Mexican (as they recently had): "If they had dared to venture that sort of work in Old Hickory's time, I hope I may be skinned alive . . . if he would n't have blowed every cussed craft they have out of the water. Lord, . . . he'd a sneezed them out, cuss me if he would n't." In *Nature and Human Nature*, Sam Slick tells of a fellow citizen from Connecticut who trading with a "difficult" native in Calcutta vows: "I hope I may be darned to all darnation, if I would n't chaw up your ugly mummified corpse, hair, hide, and hoof, this blessed minute as quick as I would mother's dough nuts . . ." And in *The Old Judge*, Stephen Richardson, the Bluenose part-time double of Sam Slick, declares in typical ring-tailed manner: "I'm not a man that's easily darnted. A feller that's had a fair stand-up fight with a she-bear weighing six hundred-weight, and nothing but a jack-knife in his fist to defend himself with, and I have, and killed her too-ay, and skinned her arterwards, don't deserve to be called a coward, I know. I warn't brought up in the woods to be scared by an owl, I tell you, and therefore what I say I'll stand to."

Proclaiming his skill with the rifle was another of the frontier roarer's characteristic vaunts indulged in by Davy Crockett and his sort. Sam Slick admired the skill and emulated the vaunt. In *The Season-Ticket*, Ephraim Peabody, Sam Slick's

stand-in, speaking of the rumored chance of Canada's being invaded by the United States, explains that if it occurs, "England would feel [as] astonished as the squirrel was Colonel Crockett fired at when he did n't want to kill the poor thing. He drew on it, let go, and took its ear off so sharp and slick the critter never missed it till he went to scratch his head and found it gone—fact, and no mistake." Sam Slick's own first admitted admiration for marksmanship of the Western back-woodsman's degree of accuracy is recorded near the beginning of *The Clockmaker* in a remark concerning a Nova Scotian "outlaw": "... he can knock the eye out of a squirrel with a ball, at fifty yards hand running." In *Wise Saws*, he refers to an even better shot, this a *called* one, by which a hunter *scalps* a squirrel. His own prowess in squirrel-shooting he casually mentions in the second *Clockmaker* while praising his "genuwine good Kentuck [rifle]," with which he "can take the eye of a squirrel out of her as easy as kiss my hand." (Haliburton, *in propria persona*, repeats what is virtually the same boast in the opening chapter of *The Attaché* when he informs the captain of the store-ship on which he is a passenger to England that, "Everybody shoots in America . . . there are those [there] who can take the eye of a squirrel at a hundred yards.) In *The Attaché*, Sam Slick asserts that he can peel and quarter an orange with his pistol shots. And in *Nature and Human Nature*, he augments his claims to pre-eminent ability in target-shooting by describing a match in which he had "driven" his opponent's bullet (or "turned it round"), a feat in which he takes less pride though than in being able to "snuff a candle with a ball hand runnin'." (With commendable self-restraint, for him, he does n't pretend to rival a marksman in *Wise Saws* who could turn that trick "without as much as flickerin' the flame.")

## II

Another accomplishment that Sam Slick took over from his exemplars on the Western frontier was the mastery of the art of caricature through exaggerated comparison, or just plain exaggeration. Davy Crockett's recollected self-portrait of one of his recruits for service on the Mexican border, "I'm shaggy as a bear, wolfish about the head, active as a cougar, and can grin like a hyena, until the bark will curl off a gum log," is matched, if not topped, in descriptive power by his Yankee rival for impromptu sketching honors again and again. Witness Sam Slick's repeated characterisation of any woman that meets



with his approval: "She's a whole team and a horse to spare," sometimes given an extra touch of adornment with "and a dog under the wagon"; his special compliment to one for being "spry": "She could e'en a'most jump over her own shadow, she was so tarnal wirey"; and his refusal to certify another on any score: "[She] was so thin . . . she would have to lean agin a wall to support herself when she scolded." He knew a man once "who was so tall he did n't know when his feet were cold, they were so far off from his heart," and one whose feet "is so big, folks say he has to haul his trousers on over his head." "Old Bosting domestic rum [is] made of lye wood-ashes, sweetened with molasses, and has some vitriol to give it spirit." An unnamed hard liquor is "strong enough almost to throw an ox over a five-bar gate." His father's vinegar "was so cussed sharp the old gentleman shaved with it once." Ephraim Peabody played no second fiddle to Sam Slick's virtuosity in the upper register of the tall tale scale, even if he did assume the Yankee entertainer's role late in Haliburton's writing career. In *The Season-Ticket*, he boasts, with no lessening in his creator's powers to have him do so in true roarer style, that he has a squatter uncle who "could outrun, outride, outswim, outshoot, and outlie any white man or Indian in all Tennessee; he could out-Herod Herod if he'd a been there." One could go on endlessly quoting this sort of thing from Haliburton, showing how up to the very last he kept in step with the best of the backwoods "comics." (Incidentally, in *The Attaché*, Haliburton offers an ingenious theory as to why writers in the United States had once customarily indulged in exaggeration. They formerly needed it, he says, to give them confidence, but the necessity not longer exists—their national independence has been won, through its system of checks and balances their government is working satisfactorily, their country is prosperous, and the promise of its future is bright. Nevertheless American humorists went right on exaggerating, and there is Sam Slick with his borrowings from them to prove it.)

An interesting special case of the frontier humorists' exaggeration is their unrestrained indulgence in explosive word formations, mostly adjectives. It is so interesting and special, in fact, that such eager students of Western American folklore as B. A. Botkin and the late Constance Rourke have been moved to compile lists of these verbal absurdities. If what they have put on exhibition represents anything like complete collections of the irfindings, then Haliburton quite outstripped his immediate forerunners in the number of his inventions in this category of

linguistic comedy. And his verve in detonating word-play reveals him often bettering that of the best of his mentors. While I cannot lay claim to Geiger counter accuracy in tracking down his grotesque malformations in diction (mutilated texts add to one's difficulty), I have noted more than sixty of them, an unusually large number by whatever reckoning even though it includes, as it must, what are obvious, and permissible, "steals." It is convincingly significant of the steadily progressive trend in Sam Slick's evolution towards the ring-tailed roarer type that the occurrence of these Westernisms in his talk increases in the sequence of his creator's works following *The Clockmaker*. As would be expected, they occur most frequently in *The Attaché*, since in that book Haliburton deliberately set out to present his overseas readers with a portrayal of what they wanted to believe an untamed American was like. In the later volumes there is a diminution in the proportion of his "wild West" locutions, but they never drop off to the level of their relative infrequency in the first. Haliburton was more than a little self-conscious of the improbability of these speech distortions in a "proper" Yankee's dialect, and in the third *Clockmaker* he interpolated a comment as to how and why regional elements from the East and West had become intermingled in the popular idiom of his day. He repeated this passage as a footnote in *The Attaché*, and recasts it in shortened form in *Nature and Human Nature*, adding a remark about the intrusion of *Spanish* words, "in consequence of the Mexican war," in the "phraseology" of New England. *The Season-Ticket* opens with a reminder to the reader that "the far West and far East have shaken hands and pirouetted together . . ." Read "down East" for "far East" and you have a figurative summary of what had been going on by way of fraternization along the westward-moving language front during the period of Sam Slick's greatest popularity.

Haliburton's contributions (whether original or not) to the resultant stock-pile of high explosive epithet and imagery may be roughly divided into three groups:

1. Those the meaning of which is obvious despite their perverted spellings, *savagerous*, *angeliferous*, *pompious*, *sumtotalize*, *crotchical*, *hugeacious*, *rampagenous*, *haggardized*, *timersome*, *riproarious* (spelt variously), *splendiferous*, *solemncholy*, *allerbaster*, *insinervations*, *nobiliferous*, *idolotolize*, *golorious*, *exporate*, *mumyized*, *spontinaciously*, *dumb-founded*, *broughtens-up*, *sanctiouslyfied*, *snobocracy*, *tempestical*, and, for good measure, *how-sundever*. (Several of these monstrosities were in common circu-

lation as school and college humor in the Nova Scotia of my boyhood there, and, for all I know, may still be. They no longer strike me as "funny."

2. Those the meaning of which may be guessed from their contexts, *absquatulate* (make speed), *dubersome* (doubtful), *lumpus* (flat), *finkify* (scare), *crinkum-crankum* (imitation?), *sloped* (sneaked off), *corn-crackers* (teeth), *twitteration* (trembling), *rumfoozle* (mess up), *bung-fungered* (non-plused), *unfakilized* (dumbfounded), *whamble-cropped* (crest-fallen), *conflustergated* (flustered?), *obstropolus* (obstreperous?), *oliferous* (odorous), *kirwalop* (crack-O), *solitudinize* (to render unsocial), *transmogrified* (completely changed), *chattyfication* (loquacity), *circumbendiously* (roundabout), *sockdolager* (a knock-out blow), *mislested* (molested), and *navigators* ("criters that work on the rail-roads all day," a blown-up form of "navvies"?)

3. Those that, without any appreciable loss of voltage, defy even a guess (though I hazard a couple) as to what they might mean, *onswoggled*, *siscerarin*, *gauliopolis*, *ondagious*, *jobation*, *grimmification*, *slangwanger*, *abselja* (a-b-c plus sol-fa, something elementary?), *clackmutch*, *skewonaky* or *skywonoky* (nervous, frightened?), *skuldiferous*, *skuguboniky*, and *tantooned*. Haliburton often ventured beyond coining (or making use of apparently meaningless single words into employing what look like similarly meaningless Western slang phrases, most of which seems to have eluded (or been ignored by) the compilers of dictionaries dealing with such deviations from conventional discourse. Their labors throw no light, for instance, on either the origin or intent of Sam Slick's reiterated "like Statiee" (at times without the capital). "Wake snakes and walk your chalks," and "If that don't bang the bush quite," lose none of their forcefulness for want of being defined. "Lock, stock, and barrel," "tank, shank, and flank," "stand up to your lick (or collar]" need no defining, but they deserve a place in a catalog of guided verbal missiles.

### III

If the "half-horse, half-alligator" riflemen of the tall tales tradition and the ring-tailed roarers were not blood relatives, they were at least kin-spirits. The former may have been more notable for deeds and the latter for talk, but it would be an error to think of a true specimen of the one as hesitant to speak his piece or of the other as nothing but a blow-hard. And it certainly would not have been the better part of valor to voice

any such notion to either. How near the probable truth it might be to identify the two is made evident in a *Season-Ticket* caricature of what seems to be both at once—or, if not, which? (As a matter of fact it is offered as a description of *all* Americans.) “They have the largest rivers, the highest hills, the widest prairies, the richest soil, the fastest horses, the prettiest galls, the best revolvers, cutest lawyers, *powerfullest* preachers, and smartest generals, that are to be found on the face of the airth; also Clippers that beat all natur, steamers that streak off like iled lightning, and men that are half horse and half alligator, with a touch of the devil, and cross of the airthquake.” While (as their legend has it) the doughty “alligators” made their sharp-shooting reputation secure by valorous exploit at the battle of New Orleans, their fame likely dates from farther back than that. Their original habitat, according to the song in which they made their first entry into print, was the state of Kentucky, though they must have been trigger-happily at home in almost any area of the lower Mississippi valley where “game,” human or other, could be potted. Haliburton, recognizing the reader appeal of the mention of their brand-name (synonymous with the highest award for frontier derring-do), made prompt use of it by having Sam Slick, as early as the first *Clockmaker*, introduce his riding-horse, “Old Clay,” as “from old Kentuck, half horse, half alligator, with a cross of the airthquake.” Still earlier in the same work he possibly had its drawing power in mind when he refers to a “half nigger, half alligator-looking villain.” In *The Attaché*, he quotes an anti-British, anti-French doggerel lampoon with a pair of lines that run,

“But I is an alligator, a floatin- down stream,

And I’ll chaw both the bullies up, as I would an ice-cream.” In *The Old Judge*, there is a man “that was half horse, half devil;” and in *Nature and Human Nature*, “a slashin’ large negro woman . . . half horse, half alligator, with a cross of the mammoth in her.” Haliburton’s fondness for the hair-raising label led him to try several variants of it, involving tinctures of lore drawn from sources as divergent as husbandry, magic, lumbering, medicine, and even the classics: “half landsman, half seaman, with a strong dash of the fire-eater” (*The Clockmaker*); “half tiger, half lurcher” and “half-trapper, half-logger, with a touch of the river cat [rat?]” (both in *Wise Saws*); “a [Canadian] farm in the woods, half swamp, half stumps, with a touch of the ague;” “British [Colonial] governors, heavy English cattle, with a cross of Latin and Greek, and a touch of the brewer’s dray;” and (perhaps) “a team that’s one half devils and t’other half cow-

ards" (all three in *The Season-Ticket*). Once his recurrent weakness for pathetic sentimentality betrayed him into, "half angel, half woman, with a touch of cherubim, musical tongues, telegraph eyes, and cheeks made of red and white roses" (*Wise Saws*). But there is nothing sentimental about one of his final uses of the hybrid term, revealing once more how closely until the end of life he kept informed of happenings south of the border: "Steamers have civilized the whole population of the Mississippi, who were in fact a few years ago, what they called themselves, 'half hunters, half alligators, with a cross of the devil'" (*Season-Ticket*).

Besides "horse-alligators" Haliburton found much also in Kentucky well suited to his caricaturing purposes. Among other such materials there were "a breakfast of lead . . . hard to digest;" a villain who was "a forger, a thief, and a Yankee spy;" "squatters" that feared neither man nor devil; a sentencing judge who held that justice has "a hand of iron, and its blow is death;" "Kentucky butter" (bear's grease?) and bowie-knives everywhere; roughs like those in Dickens' *Note Book*; and "wappin' big" folks, that were "a perfect pictur," in size, of what the English imagined all Americans were. No wonder Sam Slick looked forward to having in England "a lark of the rael Kentucky breed!" Kentucky was not the only Western or South-western district that Haliburton explored for the comedy effects of fearsome exaggeration. Arkansans as a class, he learned, "were as fond of blood as Indians," and had "skivered" (stabbed) the speaker of their legislature. "Arkansas toothpicks" was a substitute term for bowie-knives. Mississippi, or the news from there, yielded him the story of a "desperate row" and a lynching party that ended in the stringing up of its victims "in less than ten minutes." In New Orleans, there was the scandal occasioned by an auction of a near-white slave girl and a subsequent fight over her. (A "scoop" of an incident in Robert Penn Warren's *Band of Angels*?) In Vicksburg, the citizens "cut each other up," despite their having, as elsewhere along the border, "Lynchers and Regulators to enforce the law." The Mississippi river is alive with "crocidiles, them cryin' devils," and with steamboats that are "always blowing up." Rocky Mountain pine trees grow 200 feet high. "Texas, they say, is a perfect paradise; . . . but earthquakes are common, and the people kill each other in the streets in the open day . . . singing 'Welcome to your gory bed,' as if it were fine sport." In gold-rush California, a person might do all right if he could survive the ague-causing alternations of heat and cold, "and

don't get robbed, burnt out, or murdered." "It's a noble place, lots of gold there; all you've got to do is to find it, . . . and you can't help doin' that, if you don't miss it." And all you'll get, if you don't, "will only purchase a night's lodgin', and a pair of shoes to walk back [home] in." Though Astoria, in Oregon, "is called a factory, . . . nothin' is made there but munny, a tradin' in furs." (The letter from the wife of "the settler who could n't settle," in *The Letter-Bag*, is an extended over-all account of the entire gamut of rumored horrors awaiting the emigrant in America.)

Less sensational informing tid-bits of entertainment value were gathered by Haliburton on his vicarious swing around the Great Plains and Western States circle. En route, he observed young men "troopin' off fast to the far West," where they were likely to be turned "back East" by the unhealthy climate and the ensuing ravages of disease ("the heat takes the solder out of the knees and elbows, weakens the joints, and makes the frame rickety"), to say nothing of the disabilities of living among Indgians, "panthers," catamounts, rattlesnakes, "and such like varmint." Still, the bottom lands of Iowa were fabulously rich, the prairies of "Illenoy" were "the top of the ladder" for fertility, and the Mackinac country was the "tallest" ever. He heard with delight the colorful nick-names applied to the residents of various states, and twice jotted down lists of them, "hoosiers," "pukes," "buckeyes," and the rest. He noted, without admiring, "the yaller crocuses of Illenoy." (The mythical Davy Crockett once boasted that he was "the yaller blossom of the prairie.") Tobacco-chewing, expectorating Americans were, of course, in evidence wherever he went, though Sam Slick, who had come to despise "spittin' on carpets afore company," tried to play down the resentment of a foreign dignitary against the habit by explaining that, while "some of our Western people are compelled to chaw a little tobacco, . . . it is only to judge the quality of the article."

While many of these odds and ends of description are grossly overdrawn, they disclose, as sound caricature always does, a large element of truth. Actually, item for item, they closely parallel the impressions of the Western United States recorded in the widely read contemporary travel-books by a number of touring writers from abroad. Nor is this surprising, since much of Haliburton's more or less amusing data was drawn from the contemned pages of Hunt, Hamilton, Dickens, Mrs. Trollope, and Harriet Martineau. It was authors such as these he had in mind when he complained in *The Clockmaker*, "They have a

whole stock of notes. Spittin',—gougin',—lynchin',—burnin' alive,—steam boats blown up,—snags,—slavery,—stealin,—Texas,—State prisons,—men talk slow,—women talk loud,—both walk fast,—chat in steamboats and stage coaches,—anecdotes,—and so on. Then out comes a book." Yet in spite of the intended sting in this enumeration, he consulted the resultant books. Over and above what he obtained there, the basic reliability of his Western *mores*-mongering is vouched for by his own revelation that his sources were "United States almanacs, road manuals, newspapers, and guide-books." (*The Letter-Bag*). And impressive additional corroboration of the accuracy of his caustic reporting is furnished in the *Letters and Journals* of no less dependable an authority than Ralph Waldo Emerson, between whom and himself there seems to have existed a complete and mutual unawareness.

With most of the territory surveyed (after a fashion) by Haliburton this other itinerant Yankee was acquainted at first-hand, through annual lecture tours into it extending over many years, and his eyes were as keenly alerted to the comic, and not so comic, aspects of life there as Sam Slick's. Like his Nova Scotian precursor in Western panoramic coverage, he discovered the prototype of the frontier "rough customer" in Kentucky. The Kentuckian, he wrote, "is a man who loves fight," and he continues with, "Our Kentuckian cannot see a man of good figure, but thinks he would like to break his neck over an iron bannister, or give him a fall that would finish him." The "tall, restless, Kentucky strength," that attracted his attention was matched by an equally tall gift of brag: "The Kentuckian said that his country was bounded on the east by the rising sun, on the north by the aurora borealis, on the west by the procession of the equinoxes, and on the south by the Day of Judgment." Commenting on a more general type of frontiersman, he speaks of their "ruffian touch," "the swagger and vapping" of their "braggart lips," and their "canine teeth." One of his sketches of Mississippi steamboating, for its wealth of homely and humorous data, might well have been the background original of the tall tale classic, "A Bully Boat and a Brag Captain," that Haliburton later included in his *Traits of American Humor*. "Our western prairie," he found, besides being deep in mud ("the bottomless universal quagmire"), "shakes with fever and ague." Arkansas and Texas were "a dreary wilderness." Exploring expeditions to the West will supply those who enlist with "files to gnaw and crocodiles to eat." ("Let Texas, California, and Minnesota, and Oregon

be never so quarrelsome," though, their stump-oratory "is of great worth.") The stampede to California "was a rush and a scramble of needy adventurers, and . . . a general delivery of all the rowdies of the rivers." "All distinctions of profession and habit [are] ended at the mines." What "every man's dollar" would buy there was "a shanty, dysentery, hunger, bad company and crime." As Haliburton had done before him, Emerson diverted himself with compiling lists of the "hoosier," "puke," "buckeye" order of regional nick-names and traits. (Though Hoosiers were "good to begin a fight, they soon 'cave'.") He copied down churchposted placards that "pled against the fury of expectoration." On the more alluring side of his accounts he entered such settler-attracting items as that in the bottom lands of Illinois "the grass was fourteen feet high," and elsewhere on the prairies "was over the tops of carriages, or higher than the head of a man riding on horseback." In Wisconsin, "this pine country," "the trees were so large and so many . . . that a man could not walk in the forest." Infected with the virus of Western exuberance, he told, with New England poker-faced seriousness, about a farmer who perceiving how vegetation thrived in sheltered valleys threw a wind-break around his orchard: "his pears grew to be the size of melons, and the vines beneath them ran an eighth of a mile."<sup>1</sup> The impression likely to be created by Emerson's (unintentional) confirmation of Haliburton's presentation of Middle and Western America is that it is quite as exaggerated and prejudiced as the testimony it confirms. But Emerson, because of his incorrigible optimism and persistent unwillingness to admit the reality of evil, sooner or later after setting them forth balances (but does not deny) his disillusioning and satiric details of frontier conditions with countervailing details. Haliburton, giving free rein to his innate sense of humor and adhering closely to his critico-didactic purposes, let even his most absurd ironies stand with little or not attempt to correct them.

#### IV

At the outset of this discussion, as may be recalled, I made the statement that Haliburton's Sam Slick was never a full-fledged ring-tailed roarer. By dint of piling up evidence showing his increasing familiarity with, and imitation of, the typical

(1) Even more astonishing evidence to the degree to which Emerson was similarly infected I omit as not of primary relevance to my purpose here. But perhaps this is the place to note his inspired emendation of "half horse, half alligator" into "half song-thrush, half alligator," made in recognition of the poetry implicit in backwoods "flyting." Compare with Haliburton's banal variant quoted above.



backwoods boaster I may appear, however, to have succeeded in proving that the two were in the long run virtually identical. But the fundamental difference between them stands, and in spite of their many similarities should now be clear. The *bona-fide* ring-tailed roarer not only boasted endlessly of his eagerness and readiness to fight, he had the reputation of invariably making his intimidating defiance good. As closely as Sam Slick approached him at times in braggadocio (it was never closer than an approach), Sam Slick at heart as not pugnacious. And therein resides the essential unlikeness that distinguishes him from that chronic disturber of the peace, the mythical Westerner upon whom he was in so large a part modelled. When he professed himself otherwise, he was usually, as I have already pointed out, "bamming," as, for instance, he was when, for no better reason than a pretended misunderstanding, he threatened to "chaw" a titled (and absent) landowner "right up like mince-meat, titles, stars, garters, and all." But with all his make-believe he was no craven and no weakling. "If I can't walk into a man, I can dodge around him; and if he is too nimble for that, I can jump over him; and if he is too tall for that, although I don't like to play, yet I can whip him," that and his "Pat me on the head and I soon cool down, drop a soft word and I won't boil over; but don't talk big, don't threaten or I curl directly," show him an easy person to placate, but a dangerous one to insult. "I never could carry malice till the next day since I was born, so I punish on the spot," he explained. But his procedure for inflicting punishment on a rival was much more subtle than "playing." Instead of his fists, he used his wits. In contrast with the scores of Yankees who peddled their wares through the West in the pages of the American joke-book almanacs of the eighteen-forties and-fifties, he had both brains and bravery. One and all, the others (so far as I have observed them "on the road") were crooks, cowards, and, whatever their claims to "cuteness," suckers. It is true that, in general, they had acquired a more consistent command of Davy Crockett's inflated manner of speaking than the Sam Slick of *The Clock-maker* and its sequels, but they lacked completely the courage that was both his and Davy's. Only the title-figure of the broadside medley (conjecturally dated in the eighteen-sixties) referred to at the beginning of this postscript measures up to the double test of Crockett's bullying bravado and intrepidity. And in that figure alone the comic Yankee comes as close as it is possible to come to being fully realized as a ring-tailed roarer while being still a Yankee, and comic. Yet I am disinclined to

believe that the evolution of the comic Yankee into the ring-tailed roarer had to await the creative touch of the unknown author of "Sam Slick the Yankee Peddler" to be completed. Certainly it was not Haliburton who supplied it, as great as is the share in assisting, and possibly in initiating, that process which must be assigned to him. By whom, then, or (as more likely to be learned) when, was it supplied? The answer to that question will be found, if anywhere, in the unmatched collection of Davy Crockett and similar almanacs in the library of the American Antiquarian Society, at Worcester, Massachusetts. Until that treasure trove of American frontier folklore has been examined, whether any Sam Slick, or other folk hero, inspired Melville's use of a "condor's quill" and "Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand" in writing *Moby-Dick* (if inspiration beyond the drive of Melville's agonized spirit were needed) will remain undetermined.

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#### A CORRECTION

The omission of a line from the article, "Suez and the U.N.O." by Sir Robert Holland, which appeared in the Winter, 1957, issue of *The Dalhousie Review*, destroyed the sense of the passage. The sentence — on page 326 — should read "Nasser has apparently emerged from the ordeal with enhanced power in his own land, though not in the neighboring Arab states. If he starts further contumacy, especially in regard to the U.N. police force and Israel, as appears likely, corrective measures will concern the U.S."