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Chapter 1 : The Secret Service, The Field, The Dungeon and The Escape : EBTH

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I will go on the slightest errand now to the antipodes that you can desire to send me on. Much Ado about Nothing. Early in , I felt a strong desire to look at the Secession movement for myself; to learn, by personal observation, whether it sprang from the people or not; what the Revolutionists wanted, what they hoped, and what they feared. But the southern climate, never propitious to the longevity of Abolitionists, was now unfavorable to the health of every northerner, no matter how strong his political constitution. I felt the danger of being recognized; for several years of roving journalism, and a good deal of political speaking on the frontier, had made my face familiar to persons whom I did not remember at all, and given me that large and motley acquaintance which every half-public life necessitates. I did not care to meet their eyes, for I could not remember a single man of them all who would be likely to love me, either wisely or too well. But the newspaper instinct was strong within me, and the journalist who deliberates is lost. My hesitancy resulted in writing for a roving commission to represent The Tribune in the Southwest. A few days after, I found the Managing Editor in his office, going through the great pile of letters the morning mail had brought him, with the wonderful rapidity which quick intuition, long experience, and natural fitness for that most delicate and onerous position alone can give. For the modern newspaper is a sort of intellectual iron-clad, upon which, while the Editorial Captain makes out the reports to his chief, the public, and entertains the guests in his elegant cabin, the leading column, and receives the credit for every broadside of type and every paper bullet of the brain poured into the enemy,â€”back out of sight is an Executive Officer, with little popular fame, who keeps the ship all right from hold to maintop, looks to every detail with sleepless vigilance, and whose life is a daily miracle of hard work. The Manager went through his mail, I think, at the rate of one letter per minute. He made final disposition of each when it came into his hand; acting upon the great truth, that if he laid one aside for future consideration, there would soon be a series of strata upon his groaning desk, which no mental geologist could fathom or classify. Some were ruthlessly thrown into the waste-basket. Others, with a lightning pencil-stroke, to indicate the type and style of printing, were placed on the pile for the composing-room. A few great packages of manuscript were re-enclosed in envelopes for the mail, with a three-line note, which, while I did not read, I knew must run like this: There was that quick, educated instinct, which reads the whole from a very small part, taking in a line here and a key-word there. Two or three glances appeared to decide the fate of each; yet the reader was not wholly absorbed, for all the while he kept up a running conversation: Are you going to New Orleans? We have six still in the South; and it would not surprise me, this very hour, to receive a telegram announcing the imprisonment or death of any one of them. Go and remain just where you think best. Do you know how long you will stay? You will be back here some fine morning in just about two weeks. Snodgrass, "suppose there are two mobs? Volumes could not say more. Upon this plan I determined to actâ€”concealing my occupation, political views, and place of residence. A Ride Through Kentucky. Public affairs were the only topic of conversation among the passengers. They were about equally divided into enthusiastic Secessionists, urging in favor of the new movement that negroes already commanded higher prices than ever before; and quasi Loyalists, reiterating, "We only want Kentucky to remain in the Union as long as she can do so honorably. A ride of five hours among blue, dreamy hills, feathered with timber; dense forests, with their drooping foliage and log dwellings, in the doors of which women and little girls were complacently smoking their pipes; great, hospitable farm-houses, in the midst of superb natural parks; tobacco plantations, upon which negroes of both sexesâ€”the women in cowhide brogans, and faded frocks, with gaudy kerchiefs wrapped like turbans about their headsâ€”were hoeing, and following the plow, brought us to Cave City. I left the train for a stage-ride of ten miles to the Mammoth Cave

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Hotel. In the midst of a smooth lawn, shaded by stately oaks and slender pines, it looms up huge and white, with a long, low, one-story offshoot [Pg 21] fronted by a deep portico, and known as "the Cottages. Many of them are vast in dimension, though the geologists declare that it requires thirty years to deposit a formation no thicker than a wafer! Well says the German proverb "God is patient because he is eternal. The story is not so improbable when one remembers that the passages of the great cavern are, in the aggregate, upwards of one hundred and fifty miles in length, and that it has two hundred and twenty-six known chambers. The outfit consisted of two lamps for himself and one for each of us. Cans of oil are kept at several interior points; for it is of the last importance that visitors to this labyrinth of darkness should keep their lamps trimmed and burning. The thermometer within stands constantly at fifty-nine Fahrenheit; and the cave "breathes just once a year. Its vast chambers are the lungs of the universe. In , a number of wood and stone cottages were erected in the cavern, and inhabited by consumptive patients, who believed that the dry atmosphere and equable temperature would prove beneficial. After three or four months their faces were bloodless; the pupils of their sunken eyes dilated until the iris became invisible and the organs appeared black, no matter what their original color. Three patients died in the cave; the others expired soon after leaving it. Mat gave a vivid description of these invalids flitting about like ghostsâ€”their hollow coughs echoing and reechoing through the cavernous chambers. It must have looked horribleâ€”as if the tomb had oped its ponderous and marble jaws, that its victims might wander about in this subterranean Purgatory. A cemetery would seem cheerful in comparison with such a living entombment. Volunteer medical advice, like a motion to adjourn, is always in order. My own panacea for lung-complaints would be exactly the opposite. Mount a horse or take a carriage, and ride, by easy stages at first, across the great plains to the Rocky Mountains or California, eating and sleeping in the open air. Nature is very kind, if you will trust her fully; and in the atmosphere, which is so dry and pure that fresh meat, cut in strips and hung up, will cure without salting or smoking, and may be carried all over the world, her healing power seems almost boundless. The walls and roof of the cave were darkened and often hidden by myriads of screeching bats, at this [Pg 23] season of the year all hanging torpid by the claws, with heads downward, and unable to fly away, even when subjected to the cruel experiment of being touched by the torches. The Methodist Church is a semi-circular chamber, in which a ledge forms the natural pulpit; and logs, brought in when religious service was first performed, fifty years ago, in perfect preservation, yet serve for seats. Methodist itinerants and other clergymen still preach at long intervals. Worship, conducted by the "dim religious light" of tapers, and accompanied by the effect which music always produces in subterranean halls, must be peculiarly impressive. It suggests those early days in the Christian Church, when the hunted followers of Jesus met at midnight in mountain caverns, to blend in song their reverent voices; to hear anew the strange, sweet story of his teachings, his death, and his all-embracing love. Upon one of the walls beyond, a figure of gypsum, in bass-relief, is called the American Eagle. The venerable bird, in consonance with the evil times upon which he had fallen, was in a sadly ragged and dilapidated condition. One leg and other portions of his body had seceded, leaving him in seeming doubt as to his own identity; but the beak was still perfect, as if he could send forth upon occasion his ancient notes of self-gratulation. The oft-invoked goddess, wearied by the merciless orators who are always compelling her to leap anew from the brain of Jove, has doubtless, in some hidden nook, found seclusion and repose. A Ride Down the Lethe. Then, embarking in a little flat-boat, we slowly glided along the river of Oblivion. It was a strange, weird spectacle. The flickering torches dimly revealed the dark inclosing walls, which rise abruptly a hundred feet to the black roof. The deep silence was only broken by drops of water, which fell from the roof, striking the stream like the tick of a clock, and the sharp ylp of the paddle, as it was thrust into the wave to guide us. When my companion evoked from his flute strains of slow music, which resounded in hollow echoes through the long vault, it grew so demoniac, that I almost expected the walls to open and reveal a party of fiends, dancing to infernal music around a lurid fire. I never saw any stage effect or work of art that could compare with it. We first saw the Star Chamber with the lights withdrawn. It revealed to us the meaning of "darkness visible. An object within half an inch of them was not in the faintest degree perceptible. If one were left alone here, reason could not long sustain itself. Even a

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few hours, in the absence of light, would probably shake it. In numberless little spots, the dark gypsum has scaled off, laying bare minute sections of the white limestone roof, resembling stars. When the chamber was lighted the illusion became perfect. We seemed in a deep, rock-walled pit, gazing up at the starry firmament. The torch, slowly moved to throw a shadow along the roof, produced the effect of a cloud sailing over the sky; but the scene required no such aid to render it one of marvelous beauty. The Star Chamber is the most striking picture in all this great gallery of Nature. My companion had spent his whole life within a few miles of the cave, but now visited it for the first time. Thus it is always; objects which pilgrims come half across the world to see, we regard with indifference at our own doors. Persons have passed all their days in sight of Mount Washington, and yet never looked upon the grand panorama from its brow. Men have lived from childhood almost within sound of the roar of Niagara, without ever gazing on the vast fountain, where mother Earth, like Rachel, weeps for her children, and will not be comforted. We appreciate no enjoyment justly, until we see it through the charmed medium of magnificent distances. Throughout Kentucky the pending troubles were uppermost in every heart and on every tongue. One gentleman, in conversation, thus epitomized the feeling of the State: But Secession is no remedy. It would be jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire. As we bade them good-by, we never expected to see them again; we thought they were going out of the world. But, after several months, they returned, having come on foot all the way, through the Indian country, packing 1 their blankets and provisions. Now we come from New Orleans in five days. I thank God to have lived in this age—the age of the Railroad, the Telegraph, and the Printing Press. Ours was the greatest nation and the greatest era in history. But that is all past now. The Government is broken to pieces; the slave States can not obtain their rights; and those which have seceded will never come back. If the North, as he believed, was willing to be just, an overwhelming majority of Kentuckians would stand by the Union. Continuing southward, I found the country already "appareled in the sweet livery of spring. The railway led through large cotton-fields, where many negroes, of both sexes, were plowing and hoeing, while overseers sat upon the high, zig-zag fences, armed with rifles or shot-guns. A native Kentuckian, now a young merchant in Alabama, was one of my fellow-passengers. He pronounced the people aristocratic. They looked down upon every man who worked for his living—indeed, upon every one who did not own negroes. The ladies were pretty, and often accomplished, but, he mildly added, he would like them better if they did not "dip. In my own town, Jere Clemens—an ex-United States senator, and one of the ablest men in the State—was elected to the convention on the strongest public pledges of Unionism. When the convention met, he went completely over to the enemy.

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Experiences of a correspondent of the New York Tribune within the Confederate lines in , and later with the Union Armies and in southern prisons.

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