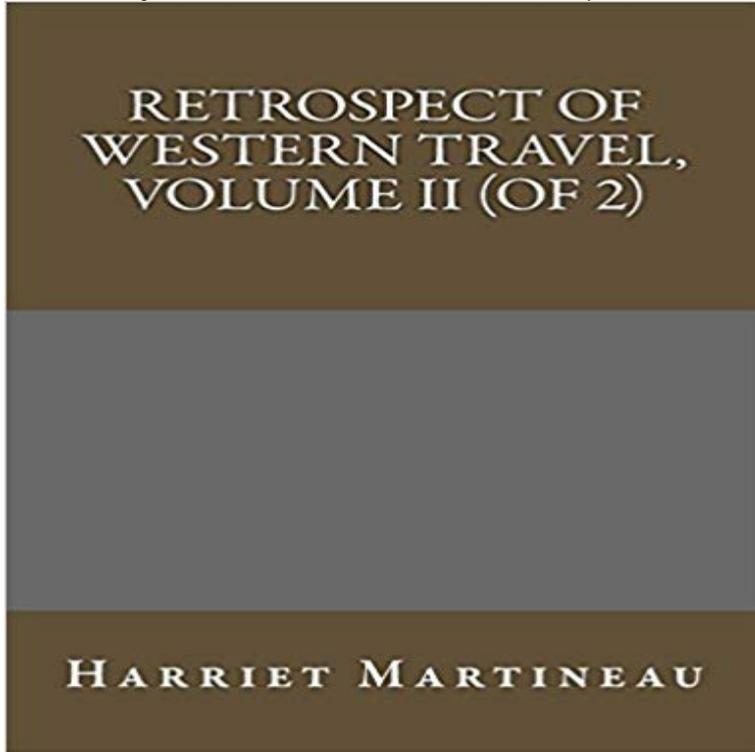


Retrospect of Western Travel, Volume II (of 2)



About four o'clock in the afternoon of the 6th of May we were convoyed, by a large party of friends, to the Henry Clay, on board of which accommodations had been secured for us by great exertion on the part of a fellow-voyager. The Henry Clay had the highest reputation of any boat on the river, having made ninety-six trips without accident; a rare feat on this dangerous river. As I was stepping on board, Judge P. said he hoped we were each provided with a life-preserver. I concluded he was in joke; but he declared himself perfectly serious, adding that we should probably find ourselves the only cabin passengers unprovided with this means of safety. We should have been informed of this before; it was too late now. Mr. E., of our party on board, told me all that this inquiry made me anxious to know. He had been accustomed to ascend and descend the river annually with his family, and he made his arrangements according to his knowledge of the danger of the navigation. It was his custom to sit up till near the time of other peoples rising, and to sleep in the day. There are always companies of gamblers in these boats, who, being awake and dressed during the hours of darkness, are able to seize the boats on the first alarm of an accident in the night, and are apt to leave the rest of the passengers behind. Mr. E. was a friend of the captain; he was a man of gigantic bodily strength and cool temper, every way fitted to be of use in an emergency; and the captain gave him the charge of the boats in case of a night accident. Mr. E. told me that, as we were particularly under his charge, his first thought in a time of danger would be of us. He had a life-preserver, and was an excellent swimmer, so that he had little doubt of being able to save us in any case. He only asked us to come the instant we were called, to do as we were bid, and to be quiet. As we looked at the stately vessel, with her active captain, her two pilots, the

crowds of gay passengers, and all the provision for safety and comfort, it was scarcely possible to realize the idea of danger; but we knew that the perils of this extraordinary river, sudden and overwhelming, are not like those of the ocean, which can be, in a great measure, guarded against by skill and care. The utmost watchfulness cannot here provide against danger from squalls, from changes in the channel of the river, and from the snags, planters, and sawyers (trunks of trees brought down from above by the current, and fixed in the mud under water) which may at any moment pierce the hull of the vessel.

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