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Sophia Starling, Aboard the Britannia, Bound from New York to London, June, 1874

by Robert Cooperman

My heart crashed like a chandelier
when I boarded the train from Denver:
Mr. Sprockett had stalked off,
a beautiful cougar impatient to kill,
leaving me so alone in that depot
I might have been drifting
on a raft in the middle of a dead-calm ocean.
But the dusty, slow continent,
the boasts of commercial travelers,
their endless card games and oaths
and mud-slides of spat tobacco—
made me long for an English gentleman,
for whom “Land” meant not acreage,
but tramping in Wordsworth’s Lake District,
for whom pistols are not the sole arbiter of taste,
nor whiskey the only source of entertainment.

I can only imagine what my sister—
a minister’s wife and spiritual equal—
would have thought of Mr. Sprockett;
the children he’d entrance with tales
of gunfights, melees with bears,
flights from savage aborigines.
But Aggie would have scowled,
to make me laugh and ask him
to recite some verses, his performance
magicking away the menace and horrid scars
that writhe like asps down his face.

These gentlemen on deck, his superior
in every way that makes society possible.
Yet how I’d love to watch them and their ladies
scramble from his path as he guided his mount
through Hyde Park, intoning poems
like a mad baritone from Wagner,
and then display his marksmanship,
and all the time, I’d clap, a schoolgirl
in love with the first wild actor she ever beheld,
grown giantly gorgeous in the footlights.

