

# A Primer of Imaginary Geography

By Brander Matthews

“Ship ahoy!”

There was an answer from our bark—for such it seemed to me by this time—but I could not make out the words.

“Where do you hail from?” was the next question.

I strained my ears to catch the response, being naturally anxious to know whence I had come.

“From the City of Destruction!” was what I thought I heard; and I confess that it surprised me not a little.

“Where are you bound?” was asked in turn.

Again I listened with intensest interest, and again did the reply astonish me greatly.

“Ultima Thule!” was the answer from our boat, and the voice of the man who answered was deep and melancholy.

Then I knew that I had set out strange countries for to see, and that I was all unequipped for so distant a voyage. Thule I knew, or at least I had heard of the king who reigned there once and who cast his goblet into the sea. But Ultima Thule! was not that beyond the uttermost borders of the earth?

“Any passengers?” was the next query, and I noted that the voice came now from the left and was almost abreast of us.

“One only,” responded the captain of our boat.

“Where bound?” was the final inquiry.

“To the Fortunate Islands!” was the answer; and as I heard this my spirits rose again, and I was glad, as what man would not be who was on his way to the paradise where the crimson-flowered meadows are full of the shade of frankincense-trees and of fruits of gold?

Then the boat bounded forward again, and I heard the wash of the waves.

All this time it seemed as though I were in darkness; but now I began dimly to discern the objects about me. I found that I was lying on a settee in a state-room at the stern of the vessel. Through the small round window over my head the first rays of the rising sun darted and soon lighted the little cabin.

As I looked about me with curiosity, wondering how I came to be a passenger on so unexpected a voyage, I saw the figure of a man framed in the doorway at the foot of the stairs leading to the deck above.

How it was I do not know, but I made sure at once that he was the captain of the ship, the man whose voice I had heard answering the hail.

He was tall and dark, with a scant beard and a fiery and piercing gaze, which penetrated me as I faced him. Yet the expression of his countenance was not unfriendly; nor could any man lay eyes upon him without a movement of pity for the sadness written on his visage.

I rose to my feet as he came forward.

“Well,” he said, holding out his hand, “and how are you after your nap?”

He spoke our language with ease and yet with a foreign accent. Perhaps it was this which betrayed him to me.

“Are you not Captain Vanderdecken?” I asked as I took his hand heartily.

“So you know me?” he returned, with a mournful little laugh, as he motioned to me to sit down again.

Thus the ice was broken, and he took his seat by my side, and we were soon deep in talk.

When he learned that I was a loyal New-Yorker, his cordiality increased.

“I have relatives in New Amsterdam,” he cried; “at least I had once. Diedrich Knickerbocker was my first cousin. And do you know Rip Van Winkle?”

Although I could not claim any close friendship with this gentleman, I boasted myself fully acquainted with his history.

“Yes, yes,” said Captain Vanderdecken, “I suppose he was before your time. Most people are so short-lived nowadays; it’s only with that Wandering Jew now that I ever have a chat over old times. Well, well, but you have heard of Rip? Were you ever told that I was on a visit to Hendrik Hudson the night Rip went up the mountain and took a drop too much?”

I had to confess that here was a fact I had not before known.

“I ran up the river,” said the Hollander, “to have a game of bowls with the Englishman and his crew, nearly all of them countrymen of mine; and, by-the-way, Hudson always insists that it was I who brought the storm with me that gave poor Rip Van Winkle the rheumatism as he slept off his intoxication on the hillside under the pines, he was a good fellow, Rip, and a very good judge of schnapps, too.”

Seeing him smile with the pleasant memories of past companionship, I marvelled when the sorrowful expression swiftly covered his face again as a mask.

“But why talk of those who are dead and gone and are happy?” he asked in his deep voice. “Soon there will be no one left, perhaps, but Ahasuerus and Vanderdecken—the Wandering Jew and the Flying Dutchman.”

He sighed bitterly, and then he gave a short, hard laugh.

“There’s no use talking about these things, is there?” he cried. “In an hour or two, if the wind holds, I can show you the house in which Ahasuerus has established his museum, the only solace of his lonely life. He has the most extraordinary gathering of curiosities the world has ever seen—truly a virtuoso’s collection. An American reporter came on a voyage with me fifty or sixty years ago, and I took him over there. His name was Hawthorne. He interviewed the Jew, and wrote up the collection in the American papers, so I’ve been told.”

“I remember reading the interview,” I said, “and it was indeed a most remarkable collection.”

“It’s all the more curious now for the odds and ends I’ve been able to pick up here and there for my old friend,” Vanderdecken declared; “I got him the horn of Hernani, the harpoon with which Long Tom Coffin pinned the British officer to the mast, the long rifle of Natty Bumppo, the letter A in scarlet cloth embroidered in gold by Hester Prynne, the banner with the strange device ‘Excelsior,’ the gold bug which was once used as a plummet,

Maud Muller’s rake, and the jack-knives of Hosea Biglow and Sam Lawson.”

“You must have seen extraordinary things yourself,” I ventured to suggest.

“No man has seen stranger,” he answered, promptly. “No man has ever been witness to more marvellous deeds than I—not even Ahasuerus, I verily believe, for he has only the land, and I have the boundless sea. I survey mankind from China to Peru. I have heard the horns of elfland blowing, and I could tell you the song the sirens sang. I have dropped anchor at the No Man’s Land, and off Lyonesse, and in Xanadu, where Mph the sacred river ran. I have sailed from the still-vexed Bermoothes to the New Atlantis, of which there is no mention even until the year 1629.”

“In which year there was published an account of it written in the Latin tongue, but by an Englishman,” I said, desirous to reveal my acquirements.

“I have seen every strange coast,” continued the Flying Dutchman. “The Island of Bells and Robinson Crusoe’s Island and the Kingdoms of Brobdingnag and Lilliput. But it is not for me to vaunt myself for my voyages. And of a truth there are men I should like to have met and talked with whom I have yet failed to see. Especially is there one Ulysses, a sailor-man of antiquity who called himself Outis, whence I have sometimes suspected that he came from the town of Weissnichtwo.”

Just to discover what Vanderdecken would say, I inquired innocently whether this was the same person as one Captain Nemo of whose submarine exploits I had read.

“Captain Nemo?” the Flying Dutchman repeated scornfully. “I never heard of him. Are you sure there is such a fellow?”

I tried to turn the conversation by asking if he had ever met another ancient mariner named Charon.

“Oh, yes,” was his answer. “Charon keeps the ferry across the Styx to the Elysian Fields, past the sunless marsh of Acheron. Yes—I’ve met him more than once. I met him only last month, and he was very proud of his new electric launch with its storage battery.”

When I expressed my surprise at this, he asked me if I did not know that the underworld was now lighted by electricity, and that Pluto had put in all the modern improvements. Before I had time to answer, he rose from his seat and slapped me on the shoulder.

“Come up with me!—if you want to behold things for yourself,” he cried. “So far, it seems to me, you have never seen the sights!”

I followed him on deck. The sun was now two hours high, and I could just make out a faint line of land on the horizon.

“That rugged coast is Bohemia, which is really a desert country by the sea, although ignorant and bigoted pedants have dared to deny it,” and the scorn of my companion as he said this was wonderful to see. “Its borders touch Alsatia, of which the chief town is a city of refuge. Not far inland, but a little to the south, is the beautiful Forest of Arden, where men and maids dwell together in amity, and where clowns wander, making love to shepherdesses. Some of these same pestilent pedants have pretended to believe that this forest of Arden was situated in France, which is absurd, as there are no serpents and no lions in France, while we have the best of evidence as to the existence of both in Arden—you know that, don’t you?”

I admitted that a green and gilded snake and a lioness with adders all drawn dry were known to have been seen there both on the same day. I ventured to suggest further that possibly this Forest of Arden was the Wandering Wood where Una met her lion.

“Of course,” was the curt response; “everybody knows that Arden is a most beautiful region; even the toads there have precious jewels in their heads. And if you range the forest freely you may chance to find also the White Doe of Rylstone and the goat with the gilded horns that told fortunes in Paris long ago by tapping with his hoof on a tambourine.”

“These, then, are the Happy Hunting-Grounds?” I suggested with a light laugh.

“Who would chase a tame goat?” he retorted with ill-concealed contempt for my ill-advised remark.

I thought it best to keep silence; and after a minute or two he resumed the conversation, like one who is glad of a good listener.

“In the outskirts of the Forest of Arden,” he beo’an ao’ain, “stands the Abbey of Thelema — the only abbey which is bounded by no wall and in which there is no clock at all nor any dial. And what need is there of knowing the time when one has for companions only comely and well-conditioned men and fair women of sweet disposition? And the motto of the Abbey of Thelema is *Fais ce que voudra* — Do what you will; and many of those who dwell in the Forest of Arden will tell you that they have taken this also for their device, and that if von live under the greenwood tree you may spend your life—as you like it.”

I acknowledged that this claim was probably well founded, since I recalled a song of the foresters in which they declared themselves without an enemy but winter and rough weather.

“Yes,” he went on, “they are fond of singing in the Forest of Arden, and they sing good songs. And so they do in the fair land beyond where I have never been, and which I can never hope to go to see for myself, if all that they report be true—and yet what would I not give to see it and to die there.”

And as he said this sadly, his voice sank into a sigh.

“And where does the road through the forest lead, that you so much wish to set forth upon it?” I asked.

“That’s the way to Arcady,” he said—“to Arcady where all the leaves are merry. I may not go there, though I long for it. Those who attain to its borders never come back again— and why should they leave it? Yet there are tales told, and I have heard that this Arcady is the veritable El Dorado, and that in it is the true Fountain of Youth, gushing forth unfailingly for the refreshment of all who may reach it. But no one may find the entrance who cannot see it by the light that never was on land or sea.”

“It must be a favored region,” I remarked.

“Of a truth it is,” he answered; “and on the way there is the orchard where grow the golden apples of Hesperides, and the dragon is dead now that used to guard them, and so any one may help himself to the beautiful fruit. And by the side of the orchard flows the river Lethe, of which it is not well for man to drink, though many men would taste it gladly.” And again he sighed.

I knew not what to say, and so waited for him to speak once more.

“That promontory there on the weather bow,” he began again after a few moments’ silence, “that is Barataria, which was long supposed to be an island by its former governor, Don Sancho Panza, but which is now known by all to be connected with the mainland. Pleasant pastures slope down to the water, and if we were closer in shore von might

chance to see Rozinante, the famous charger of Don Quixote de la Mancha, grazing amicably with the horse that brought the good news from Ghent to Aix.”

“I wish I could see them!” I cried, enthusiastically; “but there is another horse I would rather behold than any—the winged steed Pegasus.”

Before responding, my guide raised his hand and shaded his eyes and scanned the horizon.

“No,” he said at last. “I cannot descry any this afternoon. Sometimes in these latitudes I have seen a dozen hippogriffs circling about the ship, and I should like to have shown them to you. Perhaps they are all in the paddock at the stock-farm, where Apollo is now mating them with night-mares in the hope of improving the breed from which he selects the coursers that draw the chariot of the sun. They say that the experiment would have more chance of success if it were easier to find the night-mares’ nests.”

“It was not a hippogriff I desired to see especially,” I returned when he paused, “although that would be interesting, no doubt. It was the renowned Pegasus himself.”

“Pegasus is much like the other hippogriffs,” he retorted, “although perhaps he has a little better record than any of them. But they say he has not won a single aerial handicap since that American professor of yours harnessed him to a one-boss shay. That seemed to break his spirit, somehow; and I’m told he would shy now even at a broomstick train.”

“Even if he is out of condition,” I declared, “Pegasus is still the steed I desire to see above all.”

“I haven’t set eyes on him for weeks,” was the answer, “so he is probably moulting; this is the time of year. He has a roomy boxstall in the new Augean stable at the foot of Mount Parnassus. You know they have turned the spring of Castaly so that it flows through the stable-yard now, and so it is easy enough to keep the place clean.”

“If I may not see Pegasus,” I asked, “is there any chance of my being taken to the Castle of the Sleeping Beauty?”

“I have never seen it myself,” he replied, “and so I cannot show it to you. Rarely indeed may I leave the deck of my ship to go ashore; and this castle that you ask about is very far inland. I am told that it is in a country which the French travellers call *La Scribie*, a curious land, wherein the scene is laid of many a play, because its laws and its customs are exactly what every playwright has need of; but no poet has visited it for many years. Yet the Grand Duchess of Gerolstein, whose domains lie partly within the boundaries of Scribia, is still a subscriber to the *Gazette do Hollande*—the only newspaper I take himself, by the way.”

This last remark of the Captain’s explained how it was that he had been able to keep up with the news of the day, despite his constant wanderings over the waste of waters; and what more natural in fact than that the Flying Dutchman should be a regular reader of the *Holland Gazette*?

Vanderdecken went forward into the prow of the vessel, calling to me to follow.

“Do you see those peaks afar in the distance?” he asked, pointing over the starboard bow.

I could just make out a saw-like outline in the direction indicated.

“Those are the Delectable Mountains,” he informed me; “and down in a hollow between the two ranges is the Happy Valley.”

“Where Rasselas lived?”

“Yes,” he replied, “and beyond the Delectable Mountains, on the far slope, lies Prester John’s Kingdom, and there dwell anthropophagi, and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders. At least, so they say. For my part, I have never seen any such. And I have now no desire to go to Prester John’s Kingdom, since I have been told that he has lately married Pope Joan. Do you see that grove of trees there at the base of the mountains?”

I answered that I thought I could distinguish weirdly contorted branches and strangely shivering foliage.

“That is the deadly upas-tree,” he explained, “and it is as much as a man’s life is worth to lie down in the shade of its twisted limbs. I slept there, on that point where the trees are the thickest, for a fortnight a century or so ago—but all I had for my pains was a headache. Still I should not advise you to adventure yourself under the shadow of those melancholy boughs.”

I confess at once that I was little prompted to a visit so dangerous and so profitless.

“Profitless?” he repeated. “As to that I am not so certain, for if you have a mind to see the rarest animals in the world, you could there sate your curiosity. On the shore, between the foot-hills and the grove of upas, is a park of wild beasts, the like of which no man has looked upon elsewhere. Even from the deck of this ship I have seen more than once a drove of unicorns, or a herd of centaurs, come down to the water to drink; and sometimes I have caught a pleasant glimpse of satyrs and fauns dancing in the sunlight. And once indeed—I shall never forget that extraordinary spectacle—as I sped past with every sail set and a ten-knot breeze astern, I saw the phœnix blaze up in its new birth, while the little salamanders frisked in the intense flame.”

“The phœnix?” I cried. “You have seen the phœnix?”

“In just this latitude,” he answered, “but it was about nine o’clock in the evening and I remember that the new moon was setting behind the mountains when I happened to come on deck.”

“And what was the phœnix like?” I asked.

“Really,” he replied, “the bird was almost as Herodotus described her, of the make and size of the eagle, with a plumage partly red and partly golden. If we go by the point by noon, perhaps you may see her for yourself.”

“Is she there still?” I asked, in wonder.

“Why not?” he returned. “All the game of this sort is carefully preserved and the law is off on phœnixes only once in a century. Why, if it were not for the keepers, there soon would not be a single griffin or dragon left, not a single sphinx, not a single chimæra. Even as it is, I am told they do not breed as freely now as when they could roam the whole world in safety. That is why the game laws are so rigorous. Indeed, I am informed and believe that it is not permitted to kill the were-wolves even when their howling, as they run at large at night, prevents all sleep. It is true, of course, that very few people care to remain in such a neighborhood.”

“I should think not,” I agreed. “And what manner of people are they who dare to live here?”

“Along the shore there are a few harpies,” he answered; “and now and then I have seen a mermaid on the rocks combing her hair with a golden comb as she sang to herself.”

“Harpies?” I repeated, in disgust. “Why not the sea-serpent also?”

“There was a sea-serpent which lived for years in that cove yonder,” said the Captain, pointing to a pleasant bay on the starboard, “but I have not seen it lately. Unless I am in

error, it had a pitched battle hereabouts with a kraken. I don't remember who got the better of the fight—but I haven't seen the snake since."

As I scanned the surface of the water to see if I might not detect some trace of one or another of these marvellous beasts of the sea, I remarked a bank of fog lying across our course.

"And what is this that we are coming to?" I inquired.

"That?" Captain Vanderdecken responded, indicating the misty outline straight before us. "That is Altruria—at least it is so down in the charts, but I have never set eyes on it actually. It belongs to Utopia, you know; and they say that, although it is now on the level of the earth, it used once to be a flying island—the same which was formerly known as Laputa, and which was first visited and described by Captain Lemuel Gulliver about the year 1727, or a little earlier."

"So that is Altruria," I said, trying in vain to see it more clearly. "There was an Altrurian in New York not long ago, but I had no chance of speech with him."

"They are pleasant folk, those Altrurians," said the Captain, "although rather given to boasting. And they have really little enough to brag about, after all. Their climate is execrable—I find it ever windy hereabouts, and when I get in sight of that bank of fog, I always look out for squalls. I don't know just what the population is now, but I doubt if it is growing. You see, people talk about moving there to live, but they are rarely in a hurry to do it, I notice. Nor are the manufactures of the Altruriatis as many as they were said to be. Their chief export now is the famous Procrustean bed; although the old house of Damocles & Co. still does a good business in swords. Their tonnage is not what it used to be, and I'm told that they are issuing a good deal of paper money now to try and keep the balance of trade in their favor."

"Are there not many poets among the inhabitants of Altruria?" I asked.

"They are all poets and romancers of one kind or another," declared the Captain. "Come below again into the cabin, and I will show you some of their books."

The sky was now overcast and there was a chill wind blowing, so I was not at all loath to leave the deck, and to follow Vanderdecken down the steps into the cabin.

He took a thin volume from the table. "This," he said, is one of their books—'News from Nowhere,' it is called."

He extended it towards me, and I held out my hand for it, but it slipped through my fingers. I started forward in a vain effort to seize it.

As I did so, the walls and the floor of the cabin seemed to melt away and to dissolve in air, and beyond them and taking their place were the walls and floor of my own house. Then suddenly the clock on the mantelpiece struck five, and I heard a bob-tail car rattling and clattering past the door on its way across town to Union Square, and thence to Greenwich Village, and so on down to the Hoboken Ferry.

Then I found myself on my own sofa, bending forward to pick up the volume of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, which lay on the carpet at my feet. I sat up erect and collected my thoughts as best I could after so strange a journey. And I wondered why it was that no one had ever prepared a primer of imaginary geography, giving to airy nothings a local habitation and a name, and accompanying it with an atlas of maps in the manner of the *Carte du Pays do Tendre*.