

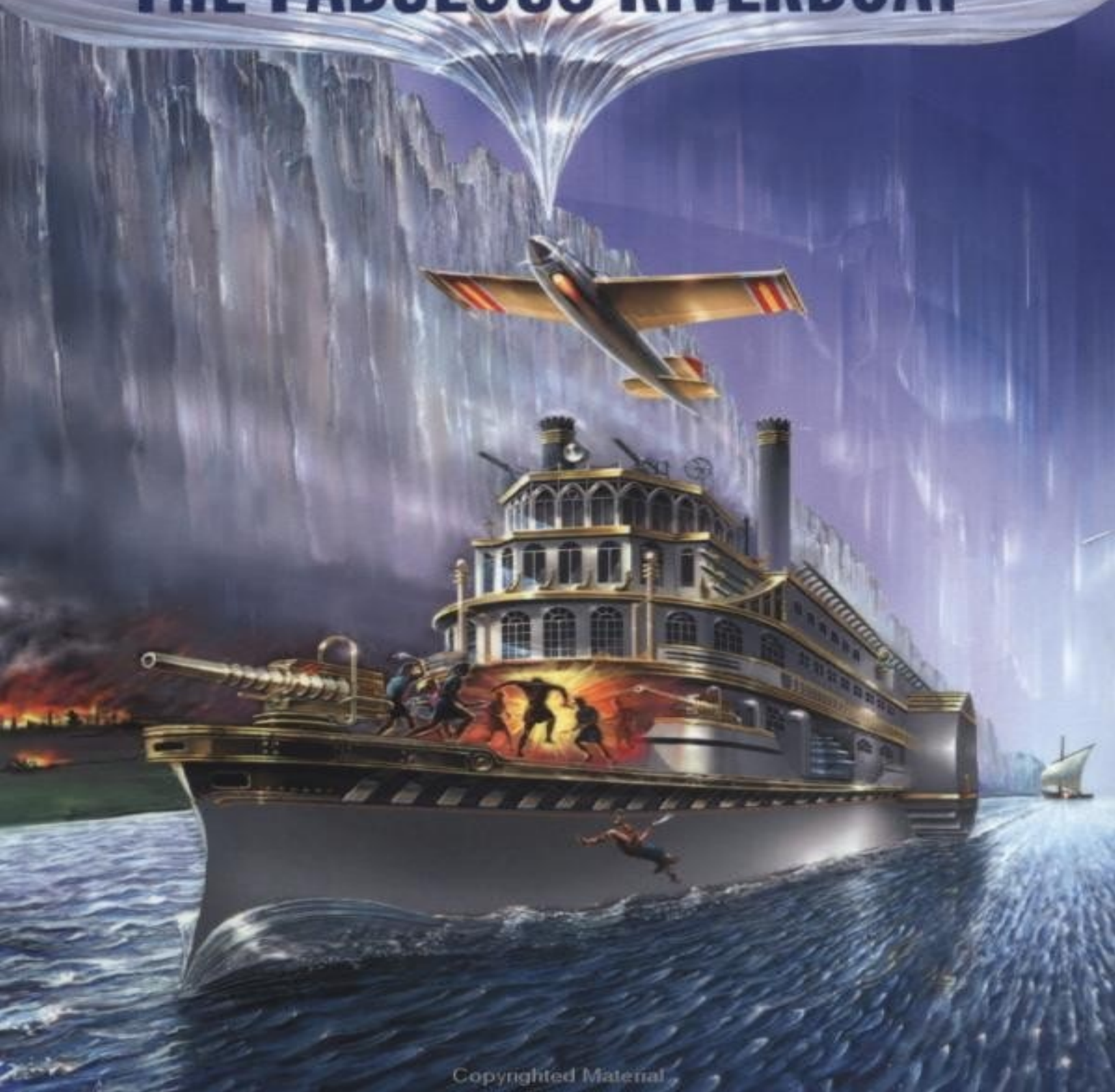
Copyrighted Material

HUGO AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

# PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER

BOOK 2 OF THE LEGENDARY RIVERWORLD SAGA

## THE FABULOUS RIVERBOAT



Copyrighted Material

# **The Fabulous Riverboat**

by

*Philip Jose Farmer*

**Book 2 of the Riverworld Series**

*First published in 1971*

# 1

"Resurrection, like politics, makes strange bedfellows," Sam Clemens said. "I can't say that the sleeping is very restful."

Telescope under one arm, he puffed on a long, green cigar while he paced back and forth on the poopdeck of the Dreyrigr (Bloodstained). Ari Grimolfsson, the helmsman, not understanding English, looked bleakly at Clemens. Clemens translated for him in wretched Old Norse. The helmsman still looked bleak.

Clemens loudly cursed him in English for a dunderheaded barbarian. For three years, Clemens had been practicing tenth-century Norse night and day. And he was still only half intelligible to most of the men and women aboard the Dreyrigr.

"A ninety-five-year-old Huck Finn, give or take a few thousand years," Clemens said, "I start out down The River on a raft. Now I'm on this idiot Viking ship, going upRiver. What next? When will I realize my dream?"

Keeping the upper part of his right arm close to his body so he would not drop the precious telescope, he pounded his right fist into his open left palm.

"Iron! I need iron! But where on this people-rich, metal-poor planet is iron? There has to be some! Otherwise, where did Erik's ax come from? And how much is there? Enough? Probably not. Probably there's just a very small meteorite. But maybe there's enough for what I want. But where? My God, The River may be twenty million miles long! The iron, if any, may be at the other end.

"No, that can't be! It has to be somewhere not too far away, within 100,000 miles of here. But we may be going in the wrong direction. Ignorance, the mother of hysteria, or is it vice versa?"

He looked through the telescope at the right bank and cursed again. Despite his pleas to bring the ship in so that he could scan the faces at a closer range, he had been refused. The king of the Norseman fleet, Erik Bloodaxe, said that this was hostile territory. Until the fleet was out of it, the fleet would stay close to the

middle of The River.

The Dreyrigr was the flagship of three, all alike. It was eighty feet long, built largely of bamboo and resembled a Viking dragonboat. It had a long low hull, an oak figurehead carved into a dragon's head, and a curled-tail stern. But it also had a raised foredeck and poopdeck, the sides of both extending out over the water. The two bamboo masts were fore-and-aft rigged. The sails were a very thin but tough and flexible membrane made from the stomach of the deep-dwelling "riverdragon" fish. There was also a rudder controlled by a wheel on the poopdeck.

The round leather-and-oak shields of the crew hung over the sides; the great oars were piled on racks. The Dreyrigr was sailing against the wind, tacking back and forth, a maneuver unknown to the Norsemen when they had lived on Earth.

The men and women of the crew not handling the ropes sat on the oarsmen benches and talked and threw dice and played poker. From below the poopdeck came cries of excitement or curses and an occasional faint click. Bloodaxe and his bodyguard were shooting pool, and their doing so at this tune made Clemens very nervous. Bloodaxe knew that enemy ships three miles up The River were putting out to intercept them, and ships from both banks behind them were putting out to trail them. Yet the king was pretending to be very cool. Maybe he was actually as undisturbed as Drake had supposedly been just before the battle of the Great Armada.

"But the conditions are different here," Clemens muttered. "There's not much room to maneuver on a river only a mile and a half wide. And no storm is going to help us out."

He swept the bank with the telescope as he had been doing ever since the fleet set out three years ago. He was of medium height and had a big head that made his nonetoo-broad shoulders look even more narrow. His eyes were blue; his eyebrows, shaggy; his nose, Roman. His hair was long and reddish brown. His face was innocent of the mustache that had been so well known during his terrestrial life. (Men had been resurrected without face hair.) His chest was a sea of brown-red curly hair that lapped at the hollow of his throat. He wore only a knee-length white towel secured at the waist, a leather belt for holding weapons and the sheath for his telescope, and leather slippers. His skin was bronzed by the equatorial sun.

He removed the telescope from his eye to look at the enemy ships trailing by a mile. As he did so, he saw something flash in the sky. It was a curving sword of white, appearing suddenly as if unsheathed from the blue. It stabbed downward and then was gone behind the mountains.

Sam was startled. He had seen many small meteorites in the night sky but never a large one. Yet this daytime giant set his eyes afire and left an afterimage on his eyes for a second or two. Then the image faded, and Sam forgot about the falling star. He scanned the bank again with his telescope.

This part of The River had been typical. On each side of the mile-and-a-half-wide River was a mile-and-a-halfwide grass-grown plain. On each bank, huge mushroomshaped stone structures, the grailstones, were spaced a mile apart. Trees were few on the plains, but the foothills were thick with pine, oak, yew and the iron tree. This was a thousand-foot-high plant with gray bark, enormous elephant-ear leaves, hundreds of thick gnarly branches, roots so deep and wood so hard that the tree could not be cut, burned or dug out. Vines bearing large flowers of many bright colors grew over their branches.

There was a mile or two of foothills, and then the abruptness of smooth-sided mountains, towering from 20,000 to 30,000 feet, unscalable past the 10,000-foot mark.

The area through which the three Norse boats were sailing was inhabited largely by early nineteenth-century Germans. There was the usual ten percent population from another place and time of Earth. Here, the ten percent was first-century Persians. And there was also the ubiquitous one percent of seemingly random choices from any time and any place.

The telescope swung past the bamboo huts on the plains and the faces of the people. The men were clad only in various towels; the women, in short towelike skirts and thin cloths around the breasts. There were many gathered on the bank, apparently to watch the battle. They carried flint-tipped spears and bows and arrows but were not in martial array.

Clemens grunted suddenly and held the telescope on the face of a man. At this distance and with the weak power of the instrument, he could not clearly see the man's features. But the wide-shouldered body and dark face suggested familiarity. Where had he seen that face before?

Then it struck him. The man looked remarkably like the photographs of the famous English explorer Sir Richard Burton that he'd seen on Earth. Rather, there was something suggestive of the man. Clemens sighed and turned the eyepiece to the other faces as the ship took him away. He would never know the true identity of the fellow.

He would have liked to put ashore and talk to him, find out if he really was Burton. In the twenty years of life on this river-planet, and the seeing of millions of faces, Clemens had not yet met one person he had known on Earth. He did not know Burton personally, but he was sure that Burton must have heard of him. This man—if he was Burton—would be a link, if thin, to the dead Earth.

And then, as a far-off blurred figure came within the round of the telescope, Clemens cried out incredulously. "Livy! Oh, my God! Livy!"

There could be no doubt. Although the features could not be clearly distinguished, they formed an overwhelming, not-to-be-denied truth. The head, the hairdo, the figure and the unmistakable walk (as unique as a fingerprint) shouted out that here was his Earthly wife.

"Livy!" he sobbed. The ship heeled to tack, and he lost her. Frantically, he swung the end of the scope back and forth.

Eyes wide, he stomped with his foot on the deck, and he bellowed, "Bloodaxe! Bloodaxe! Up here! Hurry!"

He swung toward the helmsman and shouted that he should go back and direct the ship toward the bank. Grimolfsson was taken aback at first by Clemens' vehemence. Then he slitted his eyes, shook his head, and growled out a no.

"I order you to!" Clemens screamed, forgetting that the helmsman did not understand English. "That's my wife! Livy! My beautiful Livy, as she was when she was twentyfive! Brought back from the dead!"

Someone rumbled behind him, and Clemens whirled to see a blond head with a shorn-off left ear appear on the level of the deck. Then Erik Bloodaxe's broad shoulders, massive chest and huge biceps came into view, followed by pillarlike thighs as he came on up the ladder. He wore a green-and-black checked towel, a broad belt holding several chert knives and a holster for his ax. This was of steel, broadbladed and with an oak handle. It was, as far as Clemens knew, unique on

this planet, where stone and wood were the only materials for weapons.

He frowned as he looked over the river. He turned to Clemens and said, "What is it, sma-skitligr? You made me miscue when you screamed like Thor's bride on her wedding night. I lost a cigar to Toki Njalsson."

He took the ax from its holster and swung it. The sun glinted off the blue steel. "You had better have a good reason for disturbing me. I have killed many men for far less."

Clemens' face was pale beneath the tan, but this time it was not caused by Erik's threat. He glared, the windruffled hair, staring eyes and aquiline profile making him look like a kestrel falcon.

"To hell with you and your ax!" he shouted. "I just saw my wife, Livy, there on the right bank! I want... I demand... that you take me ashore so I can be with her again! Oh, God, after all these years, all this hopeless searching! It'll only take a minute! You can't deny me this; you'd be inhuman to do so!"

The ax whistled and sparkled. The Norseman grinned.

"All this fuss for a woman? What about her?" And he gestured at a small dark woman standing near the great pedestal and tube of the rocket-launcher.

Clemens became even paler. He said, "Temah is a fine girl! I'm very fond of her! But she's not Livy!"

"Enough of this," Bloodaxe said. "Do you take me to be as big a fool as you? If I put into shore, we'd be caught between the ground and river forces, ground like meal in Freyr's mill. Forget about her."

Clemens screamed like a falcon and launched himself, arms out and flapping, at the Viking. Erik brought the flat of the ax against Clemens' head and knocked him to the deck. For several minutes, Clemens lay on his back, eyes open and staring at the sun. Blood seeped from the roots of the hair falling down over his face. Then he got to allfours and began to vomit.

Erik gave an impatient order. Temah, looking sidewise with fright at Erik, dipped a bucket at the end of a rope into The River. She threw the water over Clemens, who sat up and then wobbled to his feet. Temah drew another bucket and washed off the deck

and washed off the deck.

Clemens snarled at Erik. Erik laughed and said, "Little coward, you've been talking too big for too long! Now, you know what happens when you talk to Erik Bloodaxe as if he were a thrall. Consider yourself lucky that I did not kill you."

Clemens spun away from Erik, staggered to the railing, and began to climb upon it. "Livy!"

Swearing, Bloodaxe ran after him, seized him around the waist and dragged him back. Then he pushed Clemens so heavily that Clemens fell on the deck again.

"You're not deserting me at this time!" Erik said. "I need you to find that iron mine!"

"There isn't ..." Clemens said and then closed his mouth tightly. Let the Norseman find out that he did not know where the mine—if there was a mine—was located, and he would be killed on the spot. "Moreover," Erik continued cheerfully, "after we find

the iron, I may need you to help us toward the Polar Tower, although I think I can get there just by following The River. But you have much knowledge that I need. And I can use that frost giant, Joe Miller."

"Joe!" Clemens said in a thick voice. He tried to get back onto his feet. "Joe Miller! Where's Joe? He'll kill you!"

The ax cut the air above Clemens' head. "You will tell Joe nothing of this, do you hear? I swear by Odin's blind socket, I will get to you and kill you before he can put a hand on me. Do you hear?"

Clemens got to his feet and swayed for a minute. Then he called, in a louder voice, "Joe! Joe Miller!"

## 2

A voice from below the poopdeck muttered. It was so deep that it made the hairs on the backs of men's necks rise even after hearing it for the thousandth time.

The stout bamboo ladder creaked beneath a weight, creaked so loudly it could be heard above the song of wind through leather ropes, flapping of membranous sails, grind of wooden joints, shouts of crew, hiss of water against the hull.

The head that rose above the edge of the deck was even more frightening than the inhumanly deep voice. It was as large as a half pony of beer and was all bars and arches and shelves and flying buttresses of bone beneath a pinkish and loose skin. Bone circled the eyes, smallseeming and dark blue. The nose was inappropriate to the rest of his features, since it should have been flat-bridged and flaring-nostriled. Instead, it was the monstrous and comical travesty of the human nose that the proboscis monkey shows to a laughing world. In its lengthy shadow was a long upper lip, like a chimpanzee's or comic-strip Irishman's. The lips were thin and protruded, shoved out by the convex jaws beneath.

His shoulders made Erik Bloodaxe's look like pretzels. Ahead of him he pushed a great paunch, a balloon trying to rise from the body to which it was anchored. His legs and arms seemed short, they were so out of proportion to the long trunk. The juncture of thigh and body was level with Sam Clemens' chin, and his arms, extended, could hold, and had held, Clemens out at arm's length in the air for an hour without a tremor.

He wore no clothes nor did he need them for modesty's sake, though he had not known modesty until taught by Homo sapiens. Long rusty-red hair, thicker than a man's, less dense than a chimpanzee's, was plastered to the body by his sweat. The skin beneath the hairs was the dirty-pink of a blond Nordic.

He ran a hand the size of an unabridged dictionary through the wavy, rusty-red hair that began an inch above the eyes and slanted back rapidly. He yawned and showed huge human-seeming teeth.

"I vath thleeping," he rumbled, "I vath dreaming of Earth, of klavulthithmenøbhahaiving—vhat you call mammothth. Thothe vere the good

...that you can handle. There's no good old dayth."

He shuffled forward, then stopped. "Tham! Vhat happened! You're bleeding! You look thick!"

Bellowing for his guards, Erik Bloodaxe stepped backwards from the titanthrop. "Your friend went mad! He thought he'd seen his wife—for the thousandth time—and he attacked me because I wouldn't take him in to the bank to her. Tyr's testicles, Joe! You know how many times he's thought he saw that woman, and how many times we stopped, and how many tunes it always turned out to be a woman who looked something like his woman but wasn't!

"This tune, I said no! Even if it had been his woman, I would have said no! We'd be putting our heads in the wolfs mouth!"

Erik crouched, ax lifted, ready to swing at the giant. Shouts came from middeck, and a big redhead with a flint ax ran up the ladder. The helmsman gestured for him to leave. The redhead, seeing Joe Miller so belligerent, did not hesitate to retreat.

"Vhat you thay, Tham?" Miller said. "Thyould I tear him apart?"

Clemens held his head in both hands and said, "No. He's right, I suppose. I don't really know if she was Livy. Probably just a German hausfrau. I don't know!" He groaned. "I don't know! Maybe it was her!"

Fishbone horns blared, and a huge drum on the middeck thundered. Sam Clemens said, "Forget about this, Joe, until we get through the straits—if we do get through! If we're to survive, we'll have to fight together. Later..."

"You alwayth thay later, Tham, but there never ith a later. Vhy?"

"If you can't figure that out, Joe, you're as dumb as you look!" Clemens snapped.

Tearshields glinted in Joe's eyes, and his bulging cheeks became wet.

"Every time you get thcared, you call me dumb," he said. "Vhy take it out on me? Vhy not on the people that thcare you the thyt outa you, vhy not on Bloodakthe?"

"I don't know, Joe," Clemens said. "Out of the mouths of fish and women..."