

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

Part II. A Momentous Boyhood Incident in Hannibal and Getting Acquainted with Robert Louis Stevenson

THIS was in 1849. I was fourteen years old then. We were still living in Hannibal, Missouri, on the bank of the Mississippi, in the new frame house built by my father five years before. That is, some of us lived in the new part, the rest in the old part back of it—the L. In the autumn my sister gave a party, and invited all the marriageable young people of the village. I was too young for this society, and was too bashful to mingle with young ladies, anyway, therefore I was not invited—at least not for the whole evening. Ten minutes of it was to be my whole share. I was to do the part of a bear in a small fairy play. I was to be disguised all over in a close fitting brown hairy stuff proper for a bear.

About half-past ten I was told to go to my room and put on this disguise, and be ready in half an hour. I started, but changed my mind; for I wanted to practise a little, and that room was very small. I crossed over to the large unoccupied house on the corner of Main and Hill-sts. (that house still stands), unaware that a dozen of the young people were also going there to dress for their parts. I took the little black slave boy Sandy with me, and we selected a roomy and empty chamber on the second floor. We entered it talking, and this gave a couple of half-dressed young ladies an opportunity to take refuge behind a screen undiscovered. Their gowns and things were hanging on hooks behind the door; but I did not see them. It was Sandy that shut the door, but all his heart was in the theatricals, and he was as unlikely to notice them as I was myself.

That was a warty screen, with many holes in it, but as I did not know there were girls behind it, I was not disturbed by that detail. If I had known, I could not have undressed in the flood of cruel moonlight that was pouring in at the curtainless windows. I should have died of shame. Untroubled by apprehensions, I stripped to the skin and began my practice. I was full of ambition; I was determined to make a hit; I was burning to establish a reputation as a bear and get further engagements; so I threw myself into my work with an abandon that promised great things. I capered back and forth from one end of the room to the other on all fours. Sandy applauding with enthusiasm. I walked upright and growled and snarled; I stood on my head, I hung handspikes, I danced a lubberly dance with my paws bent and my imaginary snout sniffing from side to side; I did everything a bear could do, and many things which no bear could ever do, and no bear with any dignity would want to do, anyway; and of course I never suspected that I was making a spectacle of myself to anyone but Sandy. At last, standing on my

head, I paused in that attitude to take a minute's rest. There was a moment's silence, then Sandy spoke up with excited interest and said:

"Marse Sam, has you ever seen a smoked her-ring?"

"No. What is that?"

"It's a fish."

"Well, what of it? Anything peculiar about it?"

"Yes, suh, you bet you dey is. Dey eats 'em guts an' all!"

There was a smothered burst of feminine snickers from behind the screen! All the strength went out of me, and I toppled forward like an undermined tower and brought the screen down with my weight, burying the young ladies under it. In their fright they discharged a couple of piercing screams—and possibly others, but I did not wait to count. I snatched my clothes and fled to the dark hall below, Sandy following. I was dressed in half a minute, and out the back way. I swore Sandy to eternal silence; then we went away and hid until the party was over. The ambition was all out of me. I could not have faced that giddy company after my adventure, for there would be two performers there who knew my secret, and would be privately laughing at me all the time. I was searched for but not found, and the bear had to be played by a young gentleman in his civilized clothes.

The house was still and everybody asleep when I finally ventured home. I was very heavy hearted, and full of a sense of disgrace. Pinned to my pillow I found a slip of paper which bore a line that did not lighten my heart, but only made my face burn. It was written in a laboriously disguised hand, and these were its mocking terms:

"You probably couldn't have played *bear*, but you played *bare* very well—oh, very, very well!"

Boys Have Sensitive Spots

WE think boys are rude, insensitive animals; but it is not so in all cases. Each boy has one or two sensitive spots, and if you can find out

where they are located you have only to touch them and you can scorch him as with fire. I suffered miserably over that episode. I expected that the facts would be all over the village in the morning; but it was not so. The secret remained confined to the two girls and Sandy and me. That was some appeasement of my pain; but it was far from sufficient—the main trouble remained; I was under four mocking eyes, and it might as well have been a thousand, for I suspected all girls' eyes of being the ones I so dreaded. During several weeks I could not look any young lady in the face; I dropped my eyes in confusion when anyone of them smiled upon me and gave me greeting; and I said to myself, "That is one of them!" and got quickly away. Of course I was meeting the right girls everywhere; but if they ever let slip any betraying sign I was not bright enough to catch it. When I left Hannibal four years later, the secret was still a secret; I had never guessed those girls out, and was no longer expecting to do it; nor wanting to, either.

One of the dearest and prettiest girls in the village at the time of my mishap was one whom I will call Mary Wilson, because that was not her name. She was twenty years old; she was dainty and sweet, peach-bloomy and exquisite, gracious and lovely in character, and I stood in awe of her, for she seemed to me to be made out of angel clay and rightfully unapproachable by an unholy ordinary kind of boy like me. I probably never suspected her. But—

Half a Century Afterward

THE scene changes to Calcutta, forty-seven years later. It was in 1896. I arrived there on my lecturing trip. As I entered the hotel a divine vision passed out of it, clothed in the glory of the Indian sunshine—the Mary Wilson of my long vanished boyhood! It was a startling thing. Before I could recover from the bewildering shock and speak to her she was gone. I thought maybe I had seen an apparition; but it was not so, she was flesh. She was the granddaughter of the other Mary, the original



It Was on a Bench in Washington Square That I Saw the Most of Robert Louis Stevenson.