

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

Orion Clemens, "A Strange Human Compound"

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ORION CLEMENS was born in Jamestown, Fentress County, Tennessee, in 1835. He was the family's first-born, and antedated me ten years. Between him and me came a sister, Margaret, who died, aged ten, in 1837, in that village of Florida, Missouri, where I was born; and Pamela, mother of Samuel E. Moffett, who was an invalid all her life and died in the neighborhood of New York a year ago, aged about seventy-five. Her character was without blemish, and she was of a most kindly and gentle disposition. Also there was a brother, Benjamin, who died in 1841, aged ten or twelve.

Orion's boyhood was spent in that wee little log hamlet of Jamestown up there among the "knobs," so-called, of East Tennessee. The family migrated to Florida, Missouri, then moved to Hannibal, Missouri, when Orion was twelve and a half years old. When he was fifteen or sixteen he was sent to St. Louis, and there he learned the printer's trade, one of his characteristics was eagerness. He woke with an eagerness about some matter or other every morning; it consumed him all day; it perished in the night, and he was on fire with a fresh new interest next morning before he could get his clothes on. He exploited in this way three hundred and sixty-five red-hot new eagernesses every year of his life. But I am forgetting another characteristic, a very pronounced one. That was his deep glooms, his despondencies, his despairs; these had their place in each and every day along with the eagernesses. Thus his day was divided—no, not divided, rattled—from sunrise to midnight with alternating brilliant sunshine and black cloud. Every day he was the most joyous and hopeful man that ever was, I think, and also every day he was the most miserable man that ever was.

Unnecessary Argument

WHILE he was in his apprenticeship in St. Louis, he got well acquainted with Edward Bates, who was afterwards in Mr. Lincoln's first Cabinet. Bates was a very fine man, an honorable and upright man, and a distinguished lawyer. He patiently allowed Orion to bring to him each new project; he discussed it with him and extinguished it by argument and irresistible logic—at first. But after a few weeks he found that this labor was not necessary; that he could leave the new project alone, and it would extinguish itself the same night. Orion thought he would like to become a lawyer. Mr. Bates encouraged him, and he studied law nearly a week, then of course laid it aside to try something new. He wanted to become an orator. Mr. Bates gave him lessons. Mr. Bates walked the floor reading from an English book aloud and rapidly turning the English into French, and he recommended this exercise to Orion. But as Orion knew no French, he took up that study and wrought at it like a volcano for two or three days; then gave it up.

During his apprenticeship in St. Louis he joined a number of churches, one after another, and taught in their Sunday schools—changing his Sunday school every time he changed his religion. He was correspondingly erratic in his politics—Whig to-day, Democrat next week, and anything fresh that he could find in the political market the week after. I may remark here that throughout his long life he was always trading religions and enjoying the change of scenery. I will also remark that his sincerity was never doubted; his truthfulness was never doubted; and in matters of business and money his honesty was never questioned. Notwithstanding his forever recurring caprices and changes, his principles were high, always high, and absolutely unshakable.

A Strange Human Mixture

HE was the strangest compound that ever got mixed in a human mold. Such a person as that is given to acting upon impulse and without reflection; that was Orion's way. Everything he did he did with conviction and enthusiasm and with a vainglorious pride in the thing he was doing; and no matter what that thing was, whether good, bad, or

indifferent, he repented of it every time in sackcloth and ashes before twenty-four hours had sped. Pessimists are born, not made. Optimists are born, not made. But I think he was the only person I have ever known in whom pessimism and optimism were lodged in exactly equal proportions. Except in the matter of grounded principle, he was as unstable as water. You could dash his spirits with a single word; you could raise them into the sky again with another one. You could break his heart with a word of disapproval; you could make him as happy as an angel with a word of approval. And there was no occasion to put any sense or any vestige of mentality of any kind into these miracles; anything you might say would answer.

He had another conspicuous characteristic, and it was the father of those which I have just spoken of. This was an intense lust for approval. He was so eager to be approved,—so girlishly anxious to be approved by anybody and everybody, without discrimination,—that he was commonly ready to forsake his notions, opinions, and convictions at a moment's notice in order to get the approval of any person who disagreed with them. I wish to be understood as reserving his fundamental principles all the time. He never forsook those to please anybody. Born and reared among slaves and slaveholders, he was yet an abolitionist from his boyhood to his death. He was always truthful; he was always sincere; he was always honest and honorable. But in light matters—matters of small consequence, like religion and politics and such things—he never acquired a conviction that could survive a disapproving remark from a cat.

He was always dreaming,—he was a dreamer from birth,—and this characteristic got him into trouble now and then.

A Reversed Surprise

ONCE when he was twenty-three or twenty-four years old, and was become a journeyman, he conceived the romantic idea of coming to Hannibal without giving us notice, in order that he might furnish to the family a pleasant surprise. If he had given notice, he would have been informed that we had changed our residence and that that gruff old bass-voiced sailorman, Dr. G., our family physician, was living in the house which we had formerly occupied, and that Orion's former room in that house was now occupied by Dr. G.'s two middle-aged maiden sisters. Orion arrived at Hannibal per steamboat in the middle of the night, and started with his customary eagerness on his excursion, his

mind all on fire with his romantic project, and building and enjoying his surprise in advance. He was always enjoying things in advance; it was the make of him. He never could wait for the event, but must build it out of dream stuff and enjoy it beforehand; consequently sometimes when the event happened he saw that it was not as good as the one he had invented in his imagination, and so he had lost profit by not keeping the imaginary one and letting the reality go.

When he arrived at the house he went around to the back door, and slipped off his boots, and crept up stairs, and arrived at the room of those elderly ladies without having wakened any sleepers. He undressed in the dark, and got into bed, and snuggled up against somebody. He was a little surprised, but not much; for he thought it was our brother Ben. It was winter, and the bed was comfortable, and the supposed Ben added to the comfort; and so he was dropping off to sleep very well satisfied with his progress so far, and full of happy dreams of what was going to happen in the morning.

But something else was going to happen sooner than that, and it happened now. The maid that was being crowded fumed and fretted and struggled, and presently came to a half-waking condition and protested against the crowding. That voice paralyzed Orion. He couldn't move a limb; he couldn't get his breath; and the crowded one discovered his new whiskers and began to scream. This removed the paralysis, and Orion was out of bed and chewing round in the dark for his clothes in a fraction of a second. Both maids began to scream then; so Orion did not wait to get his whole wardrobe. He started with such parts of it as he could grab.

He flew to the head of the stairs and started down, and was paralyzed again at that point, because he saw the faint yellow flame of a candle soaring up the stairs from below, and judged that Dr. G. was behind it; and he was. He had no clothes on to speak of; but no matter, he was well enough fixed for an occasion like this, because he had a butcher knife in his hand. Orion shouted to him, and this saved his life, for the doctor recognized his voice. Then in those deep-sea-going bass tones of his that I used to admire so much when I was a little boy, he explained to Orion the change that had been made, told him where to find the Clemens family, and closed with some quite unnecessary advice about posting himself before he undertook another adventure like that—advice which Orion probably never needed again as long as he lived.

A Suitor Invited to Breakfast

ONE bitter December night, Orion sat up reading until three o'clock in the morning, and then, without looking at a clock, sallied forth to call on a



"Why, Good Land! Aren't You Going to Stop to Breakfast?"