

# THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

## Printer and Pilot in the Fifties

[DICTATED MARCH 28, 1906.]

**A**BOUT 1849 or 1850 Orion severed his connection with the printing house in St. Louis, and came up to Hannibal, and bought a weekly paper called "The Hannibal Journal," together with its plant and its good will, for the sum of five hundred dollars cash. He borrowed the cash at ten per cent. interest, from an old farmer named Johnson who lived five miles out of town. Then he reduced the subscription price of the paper from two dollars to one dollar. He reduced the rates for advertising in about the same proportion, and thus he created one absolute and unassailable certainty—to wit: that the business would never pay him a single cent of profit. He took me out of "The Courier" office and engaged my services in his own at three dollars and a half a week, which was an extravagant wage; but Orion was always generous, always liberal with everybody except himself. It cost him nothing in my case; for he never was able to pay me a penny as long as I was with him.

By the end of the first year he found he must make some economies. The office rent was cheap; but it was not cheap enough. He could not afford to pay rent of any kind, so he moved the whole plant into the house he lived in, and it cramped the dwelling place cruelly. He kept that paper alive during four years; but I have at this time no idea how he accomplished it. Toward the end of each year he had to turn out and scrape and scratch for the fifty dollars of interest due Mr. Johnson, and that fifty dollars was about the only cash he ever received or paid out, I suppose, while he was proprietor of that newspaper, except for ink and printing paper. The paper was a total failure. It had to be that from the start.

Finally he handed it over to Mr. Johnson, and went up to Muscatine, Iowa, and acquired a small interest in a weekly newspaper there. It was not a sort of property to marry on—but no matter. He came across a winning and pretty girl who lived in Quincy, Illinois, a few miles below Keokuk, and they became engaged. He was always falling in love with girls, but by some accident or other he had never gone so far as engagement before. And now he achieved nothing but misfortune by it, because he straightway fell in love with a Keokuk girl. He married the Keokuk girl, and they began a struggle for life which turned out to be a difficult enterprise, and very unpromising.

To gain a living in Muscatine was plainly impossible; so Orion and his new wife went to Keokuk to live, for she wanted to be near her relatives. He bought a little bit of a job-printing plant,—on credit, of course,—and at once put prices down to where not even the apprentices could get a living out of it. And this sort of thing went on.

**I**HAD not joined the Muscatine migration. Just before that happened (which I think was in 1853) I disappeared one night and fled to St. Louis. There I worked in the composing room of "The Evening News" for a time, and then started on my travels to see the world. The world was New York city, and there was a little World's Fair there. It had just been opened where the great reservoir afterward was, and where the sumptuous public library is now being built—Fifth-ave. and 42d-st. I arrived in New York with two or three dollars in pocket change and a ten-dollar bank bill concealed in the lining of my coat. I got work at villainous wages in the establishment of John A. Gray and Green on Cliff-st., and found board in a sufficiently villainous mechanics' boarding house on Duane-st. The firm paid my wages in wildcat money at its face value, and my week's wage merely sufficed to pay board and lodging. By and by I went to Philadelphia, and worked there some months as a "sub" on "The Inquirer" and "The Public Ledger." Finally I made a flying trip to Washington to see the sights there, and in 1854 I went back to the Mississippi Valley, sitting upright in the smoking car two or three days and nights. When I reached St. Louis I was exhausted. I went to bed on board a steamboat that was bound for Muscatine. I fell asleep at once, with my clothes on, and didn't wake again for thirty-six hours.

I worked in that little job office in Keokuk as much as two years. I should say, without ever collecting a cent of wages; for Orion was never able to pay anything; but Dick Higham and I had good times. I don't know what Dick got; but it was probably only uncashable promises.

One day in the midwinter of 1856 or 1857—I think it was 1856—I was coming along the main

street of Keokuk in the middle of the forenoon. It was bitter weather—so bitter that that street was deserted, almost. A light dry snow was blowing here and there on the ground and on the pavement, swirling this way and that way, and making all sorts of beautiful figures, but very chilly to look at. The wind blew a piece of paper past me, and it lodged against a wall of a house. Something about the look of it attracted my attention, and I gathered it up. It was a fifty-dollar bill, the only one I had ever seen, and the largest assemblage of money I had ever encountered in one spot. I advertised it in the papers and suffered more than a thousand dollars' worth of solicitude and fear and distress during the next few days lest the owner should see the advertisement and come and take my fortune away. As many as four days went by without an applicant, then I could endure this kind of misery no longer. I felt sure that another four could not go by in this safe and secure way. I felt that I must take that money out of danger. So I bought a ticket for Cincinnati, and went to that city. I worked there several months in the printing office of Wroughton & Company.

I had been reading Lieutenant Herndon's account of his explorations of the Amazon, and had been mightily attracted by what he said of coca. I made up my mind that I would go to the head waters of the Amazon and collect coca and trade in it and make a fortune. I left for New Orleans in the steamer Paul Jones with this great idea filling my

mind. My sister Pamela, and the Samuel E. Moffett of whom I have been speaking was their son. Within eighteen months I became a competent pilot, and I served that office until the Mississippi River trade was brought to a standstill by the breaking out of the Civil War.

Meantime Orion had gone down the river, and established his little job-printing office in Keokuk. On account of charging next to nothing for the work done in his job office, he had almost nothing to do there. He was never able to comprehend that work done on a profitless basis deteriorates, and is presently not worth anything, and that customers are then obliged to go where they can get better work, even if they must pay better prices for it. He had plenty of time, and he took up Blackstone again. He also put up a sign which offered his services to the public as a lawyer. He never got a case, in those days, nor even an applicant, although he was quite willing to transact law business for nothing and furnish the stationery himself. He was always liberal that way.

Presently he moved to a wee little hamlet called Alexandria, two or three miles down the river, and he put up that sign there. He got no custom. He was by this time very hard aground. But by this time I was beginning to earn a wage of two hundred and fifty dollars a month as pilot, and so I supported him thenceforth until 1861, when his ancient friend, Edward Bates, then a member of Mr. Lincoln's first Cabinet, got him the place of Secretary of the new Territory of Nevada, and Orion and I cleared for that country in the overland stagecoach, I paying the fares, which were pretty heavy, and



He Said He Would Make a Pilot Out of Me for a Hundred Dollars.

mind. One of the pilots of that boat was Horace Bixby. Little by little I got acquainted with him, and pretty soon I was doing a lot of steering for him in his daylight watches. When I got to New Orleans I inquired about ships leaving for Paris, and discovered that there weren't any, and learned that there probably wouldn't be any during that century. It had not occurred to me to inquire about these particulars before leaving Cincinnati; so there I was. I couldn't get to the Amazon. I had no friends in New Orleans, and no money to speak of.

**I**WENT to Horace Bixby and asked him to make a pilot out of me. He said he would do it for a hundred dollars cash in advance. So I steered for him up to St. Louis, borrowed the money from my brother in law, and closed the bargain. I had acquired this brother in law several years before. This was Mr. William A. Moffett, a merchant, a Virginian, a fine man in every way. He had mar-

ried my sister Pamela, and the Samuel E. Moffett of whom I have been speaking was their son. Within eighteen months I became a competent pilot, and I served that office until the Mississippi River trade was brought to a standstill by the breaking out of the Civil War.

carrying with me what money I had been able to save. This was eight hundred dollars, I should say, and it was all in silver coin, and a good deal of a nuisance because of its weight. And we had another nuisance, which was an unabridged dictionary. It weighed about a thousand pounds, and was a rumous expense, because the stagecoach company charged for extra baggage by the ounce. We could have kept a family for a time on what that dictionary cost in the way of extra freight. And it wasn't a good dictionary anyway—didn't have any modern words in it—only had obsolete ones that they used to use when Noah Webster was a child.

**T**HE government of the new Territory of Nevada was an interesting menagerie. Governor Nye was an old and seasoned politician from New York—politician, not statesman. He had white hair; he was in fine physical condition; he had a winningly friendly face, and deep, lustrous brown eyes that