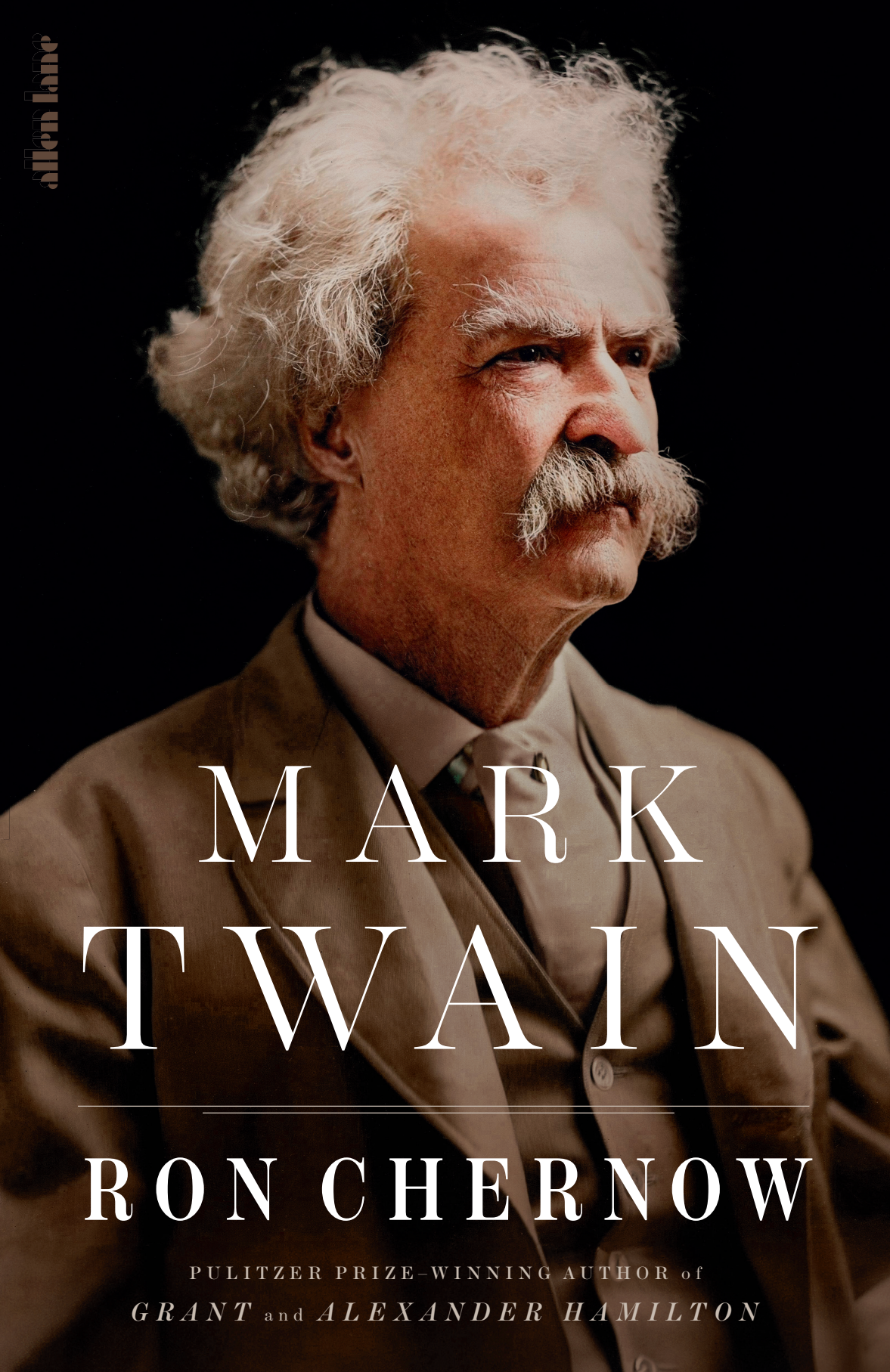
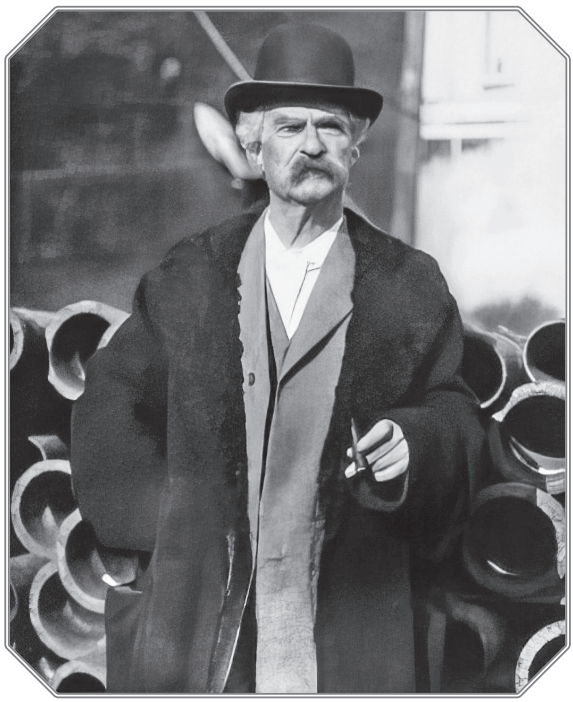

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To my parents,
who somehow had a
crazy faith in their son's
quixotic dream of
becoming a writer

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PRELUDE

The Pilot House

From the time he was a small boy in Hannibal, Missouri, the Mississippi River had signified freedom for Samuel Langhorne Clemens (later known as Mark Twain), a place where he could toss aside worldly cares, indulge in high spirits, and find sanctuary from society's restraints. For a sheltered, small-town youth, the boisterous life aboard the steamboats plying the river, swarming with raffish characters, offered a gateway to a wider world. Pilots stood forth as undisputed royalty of this floating kingdom, and it was the pride of Twain's early years that, right before the Civil War, he had secured a license in just two years. However painstaking it was for a cub navigator to memorize the infinite details of a mutable river with its shifting snags, shoals, and banks, Twain had prized this demanding period of his life. Later he admitted that "I loved the profession far better than any I have followed since," the reason being quite simple: "a pilot, in those days, was the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived in the earth." In contrast, even kings and diplomats, editors and clergymen, felt muzzled by public opinion. "In truth, every man and woman and child has a master, and worries and frets in servitude; but in the day I write of, the Mississippi pilot had *none*."[1] That search for untrammeled truth and freedom would form a defining quest of Mark Twain's life.

For a man who immortalized Hannibal and the majestic river flowing past it, Twain had returned surprisingly few times to these youthful scenes, as if fearful that new impressions might intrude on cherished

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memories. In 1875, as he was about to turn forty, he had published in the *Atlantic Monthly* a seven-part series titled "Old Times on the Mississippi," which chronicled his days as an eager young pilot. Now, in April 1882, he rounded up his publisher, James R. Osgood, and a young Hartford stenographer, Roswell H. Phelps, and set out for a tour of the Mississippi that would allow him to elaborate those earlier articles into a full-length volume, *Life on the Mississippi,* that would fuse travel reportage with the earlier memoir. He had long fantasized about, but also long postponed, this momentous return to the river. "But when I come to write the Mississippi book," he promised his wife, Livy, "*then* look out! I will spend 2 months on the river & take notes, & I bet you I will make a standard work."[2]

Twain mapped out an ambitious six-week odyssey, heading first down the river from St. Louis to New Orleans, then retracing his steps as far north as St. Paul, Minnesota, stopping en route at Hannibal. The three men sped west by the Pennsylvania Railroad in a "joggling train," the very mode of transportation that already threatened the demise of the freewheeling steamboat culture Twain had treasured.[3] By journeying from east to west, he reversed the dominant trajectory of his life, enabling him to appraise his midwestern roots with fresh eyes. "All the R.R. station loafers west of Pittsburgh carry *both* hands in their pockets," he observed. "Further east one hand is sometimes out of doors."[4] Now accustomed to the genteel affluence of Hartford, Connecticut, where he had resided for a decade, he had grown painfully aware of the provinciality of his boyhood haunts. "The grace and picturesqueness of female dress seem to disappear as one travels west away from N. York."[5]

To secure candid glimpses of his old Mississippi world, Twain traveled under the incognito of "Mr. Samuel," but he underestimated his own renown. From St. Louis he informed Livy that he "got to meeting too many people who knew me. We swore them to secrecy, & left by the first boat."[6] After the three travelers boarded the steamer *Gold Dust*—"a vile, rusty old steamboat"—Twain was spotted by an old shipmate, his alias blown again. Henceforth his celebrity, which clung to him everywhere, would transform the atmosphere he sought to recapture. For all

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his joy at being afloat, he carped at the ship's squalor, noting passageways "less than 2 inches deep in dirt" and spittoons "not particularly clean." He dispatched the vessel with a sarcasm: "This boat built by [Robert] Fulton; has not been repaired since." At many piers he noted that whereas steamers in his booming days had been wedged together "like sardines in a box," a paucity of boats now sat loosely strung along empty docks.[7]

Twain was saddened by the backward towns they passed, often mere collections of "tumble-down frame houses unpainted, looking dilapidated" or "a miserable cabin or two standing in [a] small opening on the gray and grassless banks of the river."[8] No less noticeable was how the river had reshaped a landscape he had once strenuously committed to memory. Hamlets that had fronted the river now stood landlocked, and when the boat stopped at a "God forsaken rocky point," disgorging passengers for an inland town, Twain stared mystified. "I couldn't remember that town; couldn't place it; couldn't call its name . . . couldn't imagine what the damned place might be." He guessed, correctly, that it was Ste. Genevieve, a onetime Missouri river town that in bygone days had stood "on high ground, handsomely situated," but had now been relocated by the river to a "town out in the country."[9]

Once Twain's identity was known—his voice and face, his nervous habit of running his hand through his hair, gave the game away—the pilots embraced this prodigal son as an honored member of their guild. In the ultimate compliment, they gave him the freedom to guide the ship alone—a dreamlike consummation. "Livy darling, I am in solitary possession of the pilot house of the steamer Gold Dust, with the familiar wheel & compass & bell ropes around me . . . I'm all alone, now (the pilot whose watch it is, told me to make myself entirely at home, & I'm doing it)." He seemed to expand in the solitary splendor of the wheelhouse and drank in the river's beauty. "It is a magnificent day, & the hills & levels are masses of shining green, with here & there a white-blossoming tree. I love you, sweetheart."[10]

Always a hypercritical personality, prone to disappointment, Mark Twain often felt exasperated by everyday life. By contrast, the return to

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the pilot house cast a wondrous spell on him, retrieving precious moments of his past when he was still young and unencumbered by troubles. The river had altered many things beyond recognition. "Yet as unfamiliar as all the aspects have been to-day," he recorded in his copious notes, "I have felt as much at home and as much in my proper place in the pilot house as if I had never been out of the pilot house."[11] It was a pilot named Lem Gray who had allowed Twain to steer the ship himself. Lem "would lie down and sleep, and leave me there to dream that the years had not slipped away; that there had been no war, no mining days, no literary adventures; that I was still a pilot, happy and care-free as I had been twenty years before."[12] One morning he arose at 4 a.m. to watch "the day steal gradually upon this vast silent world . . . the marvels of shifting light & shade & color & dappled reflections that followed, were bewitching to see."[13] The paradox of Twain's life was that the older and more famous he became and the grander his horizons, the more he pined for the vanished paradise of his early years. His youth would remain the magical touchstone of his life, his memories preserved in amber.

Mark Twain has long been venerated as an emblem of Americana. Posterity has extracted a sanitized view of a humorous man in a white suit, dispensing witticisms with a twinkling eye, an avuncular figure sporting a cigar and a handlebar mustache. But far from being a soft-shoe, cracker-barrel philosopher, he was a waspish man of decided opinions delivering hard and uncomfortable truths. His wit was laced with vinegar, not oil. Some mysterious anger, some pervasive melancholy, fired his humor—the novelist William Dean Howells once told Twain "what a bottom of fury there is to your fun"—and his chronic dissatisfaction with society produced a steady stream of barbed denunciations.[14] Holding nothing sacred, he indulged in an unabashed irreverence that would easily create discomfort in our politically correct age. In a country that prides itself on can-do optimism, Mark Twain has always been an anomaly: a hugely popular but fiercely pessimistic man, the scourge of fools and frauds. On

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the surface his humor can seem merely playful—the caprice of a bright, mischievous child—but the sources of his humor are deadly serious, rooted in a profound critique of society and human nature that gives his jokes their staying power.

Mark Twain discarded the image of the writer as a contemplative being, living a cloistered existence, and thrust himself into the hurly-burly of American culture, capturing the wild, uproarious energy throbbing in the heartland. Probably no other American author has led such an eventful life. A protean figure who played the role of printer, pilot, miner, journalist, novelist, platform artist, toastmaster, publisher, art patron, pundit, polemicist, inventor, crusader, investor, and maverick, he courted controversy and relished the limelight. A ferocious bargainer and shameless self-promoter, he sought fame and fortune without hesitation, and established the image of the author as celebrity. In fact, Mark Twain fairly invented our celebrity culture, seemingly anticipating today's world of social analysts and influencers.

With his inexhaustible commentary, he bestrode a larger stage than any other American writer, coining aphorisms that made him the country's most-quoted person. He created a literary voice that was wholly American, capturing the vernacular of western towns and small villages where a new culture had arisen, far from staid eastern precincts. Starting with an earthy brand of country humor, he mastered an astonishing variety of literary forms—the novel, short stories, essays, travelogues, burlesques, farces, political tracts, and historical romances—publishing thirty books and pamphlets plus thousands of newspaper and magazine articles. To that he added twelve thousand extant letters written by him or his immediate family, fifty notebooks crammed with ideas, and six hundred still-incomplete manuscripts.

Whether Twain was our greatest writer may be arguable, if not doubtful, but there's little question that he was our foremost talker. His oral output—recorded speeches, toasts, and interviews—is no less bountiful than his written record. A nonpareil among platform artists, he spent a lifetime perfecting a beguiling voice that elevated talk into an art form and made audiences yearn for more. For all his erudition, this many-sided

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man employed a folksy charm and disarming wit that could appeal to mass audiences. He was so funny that people laughed in spite of themselves, his droll comments slipping past their defenses and shocking them into a recognition of their true beliefs. Even as he railed bitterly against the human race, kicking out the psychological props that sustained it, that race reveled in his biting depictions of its behavior. What any biography of Mark Twain demands is his inimitable voice, which sparkled even in his darkest moments.

No less essential for any life is to capture the massive breadth of Twain's interests and travels. Not simply the bard of America's heartland, he was a worldly, cosmopolitan figure who spent eleven years abroad, crossing the Atlantic twenty-nine times. His mind was broadened by an around-the-world lecture tour as well as years of enforced exile in Europe. One of our great autodidacts, he had a far-reaching intelligence that led him to consume history and biography and devour tomes on subjects ranging from astronomy to geology to entomology. Our contemporary recollection of Mark Twain—mostly a sketchy memory of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* and *Life on the Mississippi*—doesn't begin to encompass the scope of his interests.

Beyond literature, Mark Twain engaged in an active business life, which was a constant, often damaging, distraction. He raged against plutocrats even as he strove to become one. "All through my life I have been the easy prey of the cheap adventurer," he confessed sheepishly.[15] A compulsive speculator and a soft touch for swindlers, he spent a lifetime chasing harebrained schemes and failed business ventures. His mind would seize upon an idea with an obsessive tenacity that made him oblivious to contrary arguments. Again and again, he succumbed to money-mad schemes he might have satirized in one of his novels. He embodied the speculative bent of the Gilded Age (which he named) with its fondness for new inventions, quick killings, and high-pressure salesmanship.

After his early days in Hannibal, Nevada, and California, Twain reinvented himself as a northeastern liberal, even, at times, a radical. Preoccupied with the notion that only the dead dare speak the truth, he thought our need to make a living turned us all into cowards. There

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were some large, controversial topics, such as Reconstruction and the Ku Klux Klan, that he shamefully ducked for the most part. Nevertheless, one is struck by the number of intrepid stands he took. He expressed quite radical views on religion, slavery, monarchy, aristocracy, and colonialism; supported women's suffrage; contested anti-Semitism; and waged war on municipal corruption in New York. A foe of jingoism, he also took up an array of global issues, including American imperialism in the Philippines, the despotism of czarist Russia, and the depredations of Belgium's King Leopold II in Africa. Indifferent to politics as a young man, he increasingly emerged as a gadfly and a reformer, acting as a conscience of American society. Even as his novelistic powers faded, his polemical powers only strengthened.

Twain proved fierce in his loves and loyalties. Perhaps his one source of unalloyed happiness came from his intimate relations with his adored wife and three daughters. The cynicism he reserved for others was offset by his implicit faith in Livy—the linchpin of his life—and his deep, if often more complicated, love for his three offspring, Susy, Clara, and Jean. His family life was shadowed by a staggering number of calamities. The saga of the Clemens clan, so full of joy and heartache, lies at the very core of this narrative.

If exemplary in marriage, Twain could be implacable in his hatreds and grudges. A man who thrived on outrage, he had a tendency to lash out at people, often deservedly, but sometimes gratuitously and excessively. He once admitted to his sister that he was a man of "a fractious disposition & difficult to get along with."[16] A master of the vendetta, he would store up potent insults and unload them in full upon those who had disappointed him. He could never quite let things go or drop a quarrel. With his volcanic emotions and titanic tirades, he constantly threatened lawsuits and fired off indignant letters, settling scores in a life riddled with self-inflicted wounds. Faced with his frequent inability to govern his temper, the gentle, loving Livy tried gamely to tamp down his fury. Mark Twain was often rescued by his wife—she was the necessary ballast of his life—and, consequently, could never quite regain his equilibrium once she was gone.

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In our own heightened time of racial reckoning, Twain poses special challenges to biographers and readers alike. Though perhaps the greatest antislavery novel in the English language, *Huck Finn* has been banned from most American secondary schools, and its repetitive use of the N-word has cast a shadow over Twain's reputation. Born into a slave-owning family, he transcended his southern roots to a remarkable degree, shaking off most, but never all, of his boyhood racism. No other white American writer in the nineteenth century engaged so fully with the Black community or saw its culture as so central to our national experience. From boyhood, he treated Black people with notable warmth, affection, and sympathy. He experienced tremendous growth in his attitudes, graduating from the crude racist gibes of his early letters and notebooks to a friendship with Frederick Douglass, financing a Black law student at Yale, promoting the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and denouncing racial bigotry in a wide variety of forms. William Dean Howells termed him "the most desouthernized southerner I ever met. No man more perfectly sensed and more entirely abhorred slavery."[17] "Perhaps the brightest side of his whole intellectual career is his progress away from racism," one scholar has noted, and the statement is true despite some significant lapses.[18] From unpromising beginnings, Twain's striking evolution in matters of racial tolerance will be traced throughout this book.

Twain's late-life fascination with teenage girls presents yet another disturbing topic for contemporary readers. In many ways a Victorian man, he tended to place women on a pedestal and treated his wife with unfailing reverence. There was never the least hint of scandal in his married life. Yet, after Livy's death, Twain pursued teenage girls with a strange passion that, while it always remained chaste, is likely to cause extreme discomfort nowadays. Like many geniuses, Twain had a large assortment of weird sides to his nature, and this account will try to make sense of his sometimes bizarre behavior toward girls and women.

To portray Mark Twain in his entirety, one must capture both the light and the shadow of a beloved humorist who could switch temper in a flash, changing from exhilarating joy to deep resentment. He is a fascinating, maddening puzzle to anyone trying to figure him out: charming,

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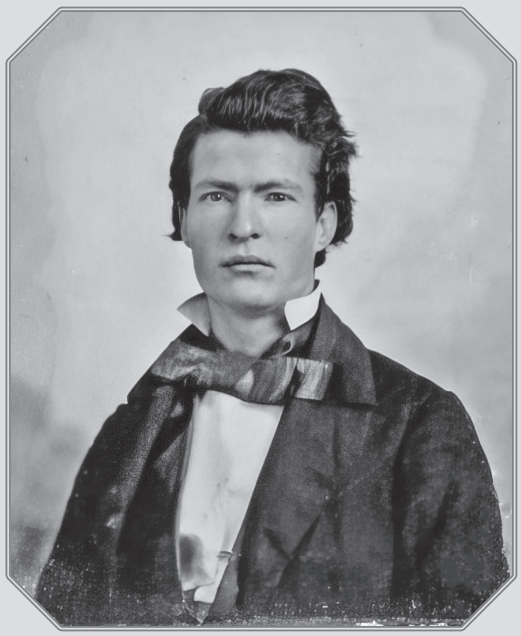
funny, and irresistible one moment, paranoid and deeply vindictive the next. As he once observed ruefully, the "periodical and sudden changes of mood in me, from deep melancholy to half-insane tempests and cyclones of humor, are among the curiosities of my life."[19] Perhaps we should not be surprised that America's funniest man harbored ineffable sadness and displayed a host of contradictions. In a life of staggering variety, he managed to soar and plunge in emotional extremes. In the last analysis, Mark Twain's foremost creation—his richest and most complex gift to posterity—may well have been his own inimitable personality, the largest literary personality that America has produced.

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PART ONE

Afloat



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CHAPTER ONE

Loveless Marriage

Given the fine gusto with which Mark Twain flayed hereditary privilege, it seems fitting that he delighted in tracing his paternal ancestry to one Gregory Clement, who had served in the Parliament of England under Oliver Cromwell and joined in signing the death warrant of King Charles I. Twain confessed to being "wholly ignorant" of his forebears but applauded Gregory's action.[1] "He did what he could toward reducing the list of crowned shams of his day."[2] When the monarchy was restored, Gregory was declared guilty of regicide, his severed head posted as a warning atop Westminster Hall. Characteristically, Twain found pungent humor in his fate, declaring that Gregory was "much thought of by the family because he was the first of us that was hanged."[3] Unfortunately, Twain's descent from Gregory Clement was entirely fictitious, but it was hard to deprive him of a good story with such rich potential for laughter.

The earliest known English ancestor of Mark Twain was Richard Clements of Leicestershire, who lived in the early sixteenth century. In 1642 his great-grandson Robert boarded a ship for the American colonies and aided in founding the town of Haverhill, Massachusetts. Over the years the family drifted south to Pennsylvania and Virginia, where in 1770 it spawned Samuel B. Clemens, grandfather of our author. On October 29, 1797, he married Pamela Goggin in Bedford County in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. In 1742 her grandfather Stephen Goggin, Sr., had emigrated to Virginia from Queen's County, Ireland.

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Samuel and Pamela Clemens, a prosperous young couple, were fully enmeshed in slavery, their ten workers toiling on four hundred acres in Bedford County. The couple brought forth a brood of five children, the eldest being John Marshall Clemens. Born on August 11, 1798, and named after the future chief justice of the United States, John Marshall, he was destined to be the author's father. When he was seven, his father died in a freak accident—crushed by a falling log during a house-raising—and at some point before adulthood he labored in an iron foundry. Thus robbed of a carefree childhood, he developed a grim, driven personality, with little levity in his nature. He clung to pretensions of supposed descent from the "First Families of Virginia"; what his son labeled "a sumptuous legacy of pride in his fine Virginia stock." Having inherited three enslaved people, he settled in Columbia, Kentucky—his widowed mother had moved to Adair County, near the Tennessee border, and remarried—where he earned a license to practice law.

It was there that he met Jane Lampton, who had grown up in the town. On May 6, 1823, at twenty-four, he married Jane, who was pretty and gregarious, just shy of twenty, and brought a dowry of three more enslaved people. Her father, Benjamin Lampton, was a prominent local citizen, having served as a lieutenant colonel during the War of 1812. As a skilled brick mason, he had constructed many fine buildings in town. Jane's maternal grandfather, William Casey—Indian fighter extraordinaire and Kentucky legislator—was so illustrious that the state named an adjoining county after him. A lively young woman, Jane enjoyed the social opportunities available to the daughter of two prominent families. "During her girlhood Jane Lampton was noted for her vivacity and her beauty," her eldest son said.[4] "She was a great horsewoman when she was young and riding parties were a feature of Kentucky life . . . she was known as the best dancer in Kentucky," a descendant added.[5] Her famous son would inherit her wealth of red hair as well as her spunk, gift for language, and sprightly spirit.

Jane Lampton proudly claimed ancestry from the British Lambtons of Durham, giving her a dubious connection to a string of earls. As her famous son noted, "I knew that privately she was proud that the Lamb-

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tons, now Earls of Durham, had occupied the family lands for nine hundred years; that they were feudal lords of Lambton Castle and holding the high position of ancestors of hers" at the Norman Conquest.[6] Twain later poked fun at this family vanity, especially when one of Jane's relatives cooked up a preposterous claim to being the genuine Earl of Durham. Such genealogical pretensions would set up Mark Twain as a perfect satirist for big talkers, delusional dreamers, social climbers, and inflated windbags of every description.

The marriage of John Marshall Clemens and Jane Lampton was fated to be a loveless affair, and not solely because of strikingly dissimilar personalities. Jane had been jilted by a young doctor whom she loved and in retribution married John Marshall on the rebound. In a thinly veiled portrait of his father, Twain sketched the tragic consequences: "Stern, unsmiling, never demonstrated affection for wife or child. Had found out he had been married to spite another man."[7] Though his parents behaved in dignified fashion, making a point of mutual courtesy, Twain recalled no signs of outward affection, just a frosty arrangement that substituted handshakes for hugs at bedtime. This arid match would foster in Mark Twain a huge craving for affection in his own marriage.

After a year or two, the newlyweds moved across the border to Gainesboro in northeastern Tennessee. Plagued by headaches and a weak chest, John Marshall Clemens hoped the salubrious mountain air might strengthen his health. Their first son, Orion—pronounced *Or*-ee-on—was born in 1825, his astral name a reflection of Jane's taste for the occult. Although John Marshall was an ambitious man, it soon grew apparent that the backwoods hamlet lacked any hint of a future. When Orion visited the cheerless spot more than forty years later, he encountered the "melancholy spectacle of doors closed with signs over them indicating past business; windows broken; houses faded or guiltless of paint."[8]

The young family pushed forty miles farther east to Jamestown, in Fentress County, a scenic hinterland of low, rolling mountains called the Knobs, where the career of John Marshall Clemens seemed briefly to flourish. Unlike Gainesboro, this new town breathed an air of possibility,

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having recently been named the county seat, and John emerged as a model citizen, serving as the county commissioner and clerk of the circuit court and even taking a hand in building the county courthouse and jail. He erected an impressive house that set envious tongues wagging. With their future more secure, the Clemenses expanded their progeny to include two daughters—Pamela (pronounced Pa-*mee*-la) born in 1827 and Margaret in 1830—and another son, Benjamin, in 1832; a first son, named Pleasant, died in infancy.

As he strode about town in a blue coat with brass buttons, John Marshall seemed to have satisfied his hunger for respectability. He even branched out into land speculation, amassing virgin forest at a time when real estate could be acquired for less than a penny an acre. Of his total investment, his author son Sam would later bandy about a figure of seventy-five thousand acres, while Orion could only establish title to thirty thousand acres.[9] With an overheated imagination, John Marshall daydreamed that his forest of yellow pine would someday yield a cornucopia of iron ore, coal, copper, and timber. This inheritance of the "Tennessee land" would assume mythic proportions in his children's minds, alternately teasing and tormenting them with hopes of future grandeur. The beckoning mirage of phantom wealth would make ordinary riches seem paltry in comparison. For Sam Clemens, it would breed lifelong fantasies of king-size wealth and countless schemes to attain it. He later pronounced this grim epitaph on the Tennessee land: "It kept us hoping and hoping, during forty years . . . It put our energies to sleep and made visionaries of us—dreamers, and indolent. We were always going to be rich next year—no occasion to work."[10]

The time in Tennessee set a tragic pattern for John Marshall Clemens, who would attempt to scratch out a living as a lawyer and public servant only to be forced, for survival's sake, into the humdrum routine of keeping a store. When his business faltered, he was required to abandon the fine house in town—he was now land-rich but cash-poor—and move nine miles north to a secluded spot in the woods, Three Forks, where his family occupied a cramped log cabin, an abrupt comedown from their previous high status in town. This solitary place at the junction of three

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rivers preyed on his sociable young wife, who had grown accustomed to material comfort and a buoyant party life in Kentucky. "I had always been in society," Jane Clemens later complained, and was "very fond of company."[11] In this bleak backwater, John Marshall kept a store and served as the local postmaster at the nearby hamlet of Pall Mall.

In 1834 financial austerity brought on by Andrew Jackson's clash with the Second Bank of the United States snuffed out John Marshall Clemens's tenuous standing in Tennessee. Although Sam had not yet been born, the mood of that sudden wreckage must have formed the mental weather of his childhood; the specter of downward mobility shadowed his father, spawning constant status insecurity. As Twain recalled, "From being honored and envied as the most opulent citizen of Fentress county . . . he suddenly woke up and found himself reduced to less than one-fourth of that amount. He was a proud man, a silent, austere man, and not a person likely to abide among the scenes of his vanished grandeur."[12] Stymied by ill luck, battered by hardship, John Marshall became a dour, defeated character, his ambitions thwarted in the wilderness. As Mark Twain wrote, in a character patterned after his father in *The Gilded Age,* Squire Hawkins was "not more than thirty-five" but with "a worn look that made him seem older."[13] Between the two of them, John and Jane Clemens had inherited six enslaved people, but by the time they left Tennessee, austerity had thinned that number down to one—a young woman named Jennie.

Twice disappointed in Tennessee, John Marshall Clemens uprooted his family again in 1835, piled them into a two-horse carriage, and headed north to Louisville, Kentucky, where they boarded a steamer and rode down the Ohio River to St. Louis. "They had intended to settle in St. Louis, but when they got there they were horrified to hear that a Negro boy had recently been lynched," one Clemens descendant reported. "Moreover, there was cholera in the city. So they moved on to Florida [Missouri]."[14] A more likely story was that the Clemenses had planned to settle in Florida all along since Jane's brother-in-law, John A. Quarles, had warmly encouraged them to join him there. The new town of Florida, born four years earlier in the state's northeast corner, stood

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on the ragged edge of western settlement. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 had thrown the state wide open to slavery, spurring migration from Kentucky and Tennessee and lending the territory a southern character in the run-up to the Civil War.

Orion recalled their dismal first Florida residence as "a little white frame [house], one-story, with two small rooms, or a room and a shed under the same roof."[15] Since Jane Clemens was pregnant with Sam during the westward journey, Orion would tease his brother that this early "travel had something to do with your roving disposition."[16] With as sharp a tongue as her famous son, Jane Clemens later derided the frail house as "too small for a baby to be born in," yet she gave birth, two months prematurely, to Samuel Langhorne Clemens on November 30, 1835. The baby was named after his paternal grandfather, while John Marshall Clemens supplied the middle name in homage to a boon companion from his Virginia youth. With a flair for showmanship, mother and son converted Sam's birth into a cosmic event, marked by the appearance of Halley's Comet, which revisits the Earth at seventy-five-year intervals. Later endowed with a quip for every occasion, Twain remarked of his birth: "The village contained a hundred people and I increased the population by 1 per cent . . . There is no record of a person doing as much—not even Shakespeare."[17]

At a time of rampant infant mortality, the baby proved a runt with a sickly nature, and his parents grew concerned. "When I first saw him [I] could see no promise in him," Jane admitted in afteryears. "But I felt it my duty to do the best I could . . . But he was a poor-looking object to raise."[18] When she was in her eighties, her son asked about his troubled infancy. "I suppose that during all that time you were uneasy about me." "Yes, the whole time," she agreed. Twain persisted: "Afraid I wouldn't live?" With a perfect deadpan worthy of her son, Jane retorted, "No, afraid you would."[19]

Mark Twain would lampoon "the almost invisible village of Florida," evoking a settlement of two unpaved streets and scattered lanes. "Both the streets and the lanes were paved with the same material—tough black mud, in wet times, deep dust in dry." With flimsy houses made of logs,

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even the church was propped up on timber, allowing local hogs to root around underneath and squeal noisily during services. John Marshall entered into a partnership with John Quarles in a dry goods shop that sold a bit of everything: calico and coffee, shovels and brooms, hats and bonnets, even offering a swig of corn whiskey to every customer. Because John Marshall was a rigid man, he didn't cotton to the easygoing ways of John Quarles. Soon the partnership was dissolved and Clemens set up a rival store across the street.

As in Tennessee, John Marshall Clemens strove to lift a nascent town from obscurity and set it on the high road to progress. A political Whig, with an abiding faith in internal improvements, he was appointed president in 1837 of the Salt River Navigation Company, assembled to dredge the nearby river and open it to steamboat commerce from the Mississippi River. He was likewise made a commissioner of the Florida & Paris Railroad, both projects wiped out by the Panic of 1837 and a dearth of political support. John Marshall did land one coveted accolade: he was named a judge of the Monroe County Court, forever after bearing the proud title of Judge Clemens. He traded up to a larger house—three rooms and a kitchen—where Sam Clemens's beloved younger brother, Henry, was born in 1838.

The following year, Twain's sister Margaret died at age nine of a bilious fever. One day she returned from school in a delirious state and lay dead within a week. Jane Clemens always maintained that the girl "was in disposition & manner like Sam full of life" and enjoyed taunting her sister, Pamela.[20] As she lay dying, Sam glided fast asleep into her room one night and stroked her bedclothes, exhibiting the somnambulism that would mark his childhood. Perhaps, if informed of the episode, it was his first intimation that he harbored an inner self free from his conscious control—a spiritual twin—which would form a recurrent theme in his later writings.

The next year Judge Clemens concluded that the tiny village of Florida would never shake off its rustic slumber. Once again he had hitched his luckless fate to a dying town. In Mark Twain's mordant view, "He 'kept store' there several years, but had no luck, except that I was born to

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him."[21] When Sam was nearly four in 1839, the judge turned his eyes to the Mississippi port town of Hannibal, thirty-five miles to the northeast. Then a raw and relatively new country town with a vigorous, enterprising people and a diversified economy, Hannibal was a thriving metropolis compared to Florida. It already had the hallmarks of a genuine town, including sawmills, blacksmith shops, saloons, and a distillery. A fast-growing commercial hub, it exported wheat and tobacco harvested from inland farms while drovers herded swine through its streets to two slaughterhouses. As Orion later observed in the town paper, "Our people have a horrid aversion to the jury box and the witnesses' stand. They greatly prefer the study of pork and flour barrels, tape, cordwood, and the steamboat's whistle."[22] For Sam Clemens, the move to Hannibal was monumentally important, for it is impossible to picture his career without the front-row seat that Hannibal afforded for the abundant traffic steaming by on the Mississippi River.

After selling his farm acreage and house in Florida, Judge Clemens plowed the proceeds into purchasing a cluster of buildings in downtown Hannibal, including a corner hotel at the foot of sloping Hill Street, where his family first lived. He commenced yet another general store, facing the nearby Mississippi wharves, and stocked it with dry goods and groceries bought on credit from St. Louis merchants. The teenage Orion, clad in a brand-new suit of clothes, worked as a clerk. By autumn 1841, the judge's congenital bad luck and poor head for business ushered in yet another commercial collapse as economic conditions exhausted his credit in St. Louis. Orion remembered the store's chief creditor ruthlessly stripping the shelves bare for repayment—"all the dry goods, groceries, boots and shoes and hardware in his store"—so that his father "began his first acquaintance with poverty."[23] To help support the family, a resentful Orion was apprenticed to the *Hannibal Journal* before being shipped off to St. Louis to work as a printer.

The embarrassment of ingrained failure must have seeped deep into the pores of John Marshall Clemens. Snappish, moody, and temperamental, he wasn't the sort to be amused by the comic relief of his son Sam's compulsive pranks and mischief. His few surviving letters portray a man

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riddled with anxiety and ground down by monetary stress; they are devoid of gaiety, charm, or humor. To raise cash in 1842, he traveled down the Mississippi and sent home a letter that reeked of desperation. "I do not know yet what I can commence at for a business in the spring. My brain is constantly on the rack with the study, and I can't relieve myself of it—The future taking its complexion from the state of my health, or mind, is alternately beaming in sunshine, or overshadowed with clouds; but mostly cloudy, as you will readily suppose."[24] When he got home and Jane berated him for the costly but fruitless trip, John Marshall pleaded that he meant well, saying plaintively, "I am not able to dig in the streets." Orion always remembered the "hopeless expression of his face."[25]

Adding to the fatalistic mood, Benjamin Clemens, nearly ten, died on May 12, 1842, and his parents' grief was so profound that Orion saw them kiss for the first time. The experience disclosed to Sam the depths of emotional pain bottled up inside Jane Clemens. As she and Sam knelt beside the dead boy stretched on the bed, she erupted in tears and moans of "dumb" sorrow that startled her son. "The mother made the children feel the cheek of the dead boy," Sam recalled, "and tried to make them understand the calamity that had befallen."[26] Childhood mortality, however commonplace, was still exquisitely painful for parents. This was the third child John Marshall and Jane Clemens had lost, and the harrowing scene was forever lodged in the memory of Sam Clemens, who, for some nameless reason, believed he had treacherously betrayed his dead brother.

There was both nobility and futility in the striving of Judge Clemens, who could never establish abiding security for his family and exhibited the bone-deep fatigue of a desperate man. Orion spoke of irritability from "disordered nerves" as he strained to find his elusive niche in the world.[27] His fortunes rebounded modestly as he picked up fees from practicing law, and around 1844 was named Justice of the Peace, which meant settling civil complaints and lawsuits over debt. He also oversaw slavery disputes and twice ordered lashes meted out to enslaved offenders. In his humble courtroom, he sat squarely on a three-legged stool, with dry goods boxes serving as his desk, rapping out decisions with a mallet and recording them with "his sharp pen," recalled Orion.[28] Though a

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respectable man, Judge Clemens could be forbiddingly humorless, the antithesis of the waggish Sam. One newspaper painted him thus: "He was a stern unbending man of splendid common-sense . . . the autocrat of the little dingy room on Bird Street, where he held his court . . . and preserved order as best he could in the village."[29] With his finances in somewhat better shape, Judge Clemens constructed a house for his family on the steeply inclined Hill Street, a two-story white frame, narrow but deep, with Sam likely occupying the last bedroom on the upper floor. Outside stood a certain fence that would be immortalized in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.*

From a fictional portrait Twain wrote of his father, we know that he was tall and lean with lank black hair drooping to his shoulders, showed "courtly, old-fashioned" manners, and was impeccably honest.[30] He scrupulously adhered to social convention and got precious little for it. Oppressed by worry, his face unsmiling, he walked the streets with such extreme formality that he cringed when someone accosted him and slapped his back. His scholarly bent made him a stickler for grammar—he shipped Orion an entire course of twenty lessons on the subject—and he presided as president of the Hannibal Library Institute. Hannibal's citizenry viewed him with respect, not warmth, and nicknamed him "Squire," suggestive of his superior airs. A local minister claimed he was "a grave, taciturn man, a foremost citizen in intelligence and wholesome influence." A local school principal called him "never a practical man, but an energetic dreamer . . . courteous, well-educated . . . a good conversationalist."[31] For all his moralistic zeal, Judge Clemens shied away from church attendance, and this may be the one trait that endeared him to Sam and influenced his later freethinking ways.

The father who found humor in nothing spawned a son who found humor in everything. It is easy to see how the aloof Judge Clemens, who hated disorder and was emotionally remote, produced a rebellious, devil-may-care son and left him with an enduring ambivalence toward authority figures. At thirty-four, Mark Twain recalled the "judicial frigidity" of a father who could discover no charm in his juvenile antics. Never cruel toward his children, John Marshall nonetheless threw a distinct

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chill in the air around him. As Twain said, he was "ungentle of manner toward his children," though he "never punished them—a look was enough, and more than enough." Father and son circled each other warily. "My father and I were always on the most distant terms when I was a boy—a sort of armed neutrality, so to speak."[32] Another time Twain said that "my own knowledge of him amounted to little more than an introduction."[33] He remembered only a single time when his father hazarded a joke. They had come upon a room full of loaves of bread moldy with blue cobwebs, and the startled boy asked where they came from. "From Noah's Ark," the judge responded.[34] Curiously enough, it is a very Mark Twain line. If there is a source of the rage that informed Mark Twain's career, it probably originated with a repressed fear of his father, whom he never dared to confront directly. Instead that rage expressed itself indirectly, played out in boyhood hijinks and a cynical defiance toward elders. Humor proved a survival strategy with a humorless father. Where Judge Clemens gravitated to the safety of courts, railroads, and libraries, his son would become a confirmed renegade against institutions and pride himself on a wild, lawless streak.

Luckily, with her joie de vivre, Jane Lampton Clemens provided compensatory warmth and brightness in her son's life. From her he derived all his emotional sustenance. Slim and pretty, with the erect carriage of a dancer and keen blue eyes, she moved through her day with good-humored energy and was a popular figure around town. If Sam carried the Clemens name, he clearly manifested the Lampton genes. "He is all 'Lampton,'" Orion's wife, Mollie, said, "and resembles his mother strongly in person as in mind."[35] Mother and son bore a comical resemblance, especially in their sharp but slightly melancholy eyes and exaggerated drawls. From his mother Sam inherited a storytelling passion and an insatiable curiosity about people. However kindly she was, Jane Clemens also exhibited a certain midwestern reserve, never kissing her children and maintaining a ladylike sense of propriety. Her puritanical side was observed by her son on a trip to New Orleans as a teenager. "Ma was delighted with her trip, but she was disgusted with the girls for allowing me to embrace and kiss them."[36]

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With tender solicitude, Jane Clemens watched Sam perpetrate one outrageous prank after another. She adored but was bemused by this wayward son, taking an exasperated pride in his constant skylarking. He captured her ambivalence in his affectionate portrayal of Aunt Polly in *Tom Sawyer*. "My mother had a good deal of trouble with me," Mark Twain confessed, "but I think she enjoyed it."[37] Even as he got older, Twain relished prodding and teasing her, much like Tom with Aunt Polly. Whenever Jane, with a straight face, lectured Sam for some misdeed, he would rebut her with an unexpected witticism that made her break down in laughter. Early on she recognized his instinctive tendency to embellish the truth, and though she made an effort to quash it, she came to accept him on his own terms. "I discount him ninety per cent," she remarked of Sam's tall tales. "The rest is pure gold."[38] From his mother, Mark Twain learned that he could trust women and express a richer spectrum of emotion than with men. With his father, Sam had to suppress his personality; with his mother, he could flaunt it.

With her broad sympathies, Jane Clemens was likely to spy redeeming traits even in hardened sinners and outcasts. As her son expressed it, she had the "larger soul that God usually gives to women."[39] Despite struggles with her husband and the death of several children, she kept darkness at bay with a ready friendliness, her high-spirited and fun-loving nature reflected in her passion for the color red. "Grandma's room was always a perfect riot of red; carpets, chairs, ornaments, were all red," said a granddaughter. "She would have worn red, too, if she had not been restrained."[40] "She was of a sunshine disposition," agreed Twain, "and her long life was mainly a holiday for her. She always had the heart of a young girl."[41] Jane flocked to spectacles: circuses, Fourth of July parades, theatrical performances, and church revivals, and she boasted of never skipping a funeral. To those mystified by her fondness for funerals, she explained that "if she didn't go to other people's funerals they wouldn't go to hers!"[42] Sam's life would reflect his mother's love of pageantry. Her curiosity was also piqued by anything that savored of the occult, spirituality, or mysticism.

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Another area where Jane Clemens left a profound imprint on her au-

thor son lay in the realm of language. She wasn't literary or sophisticated, and read little beyond Bibles and newspapers, yet she had a plainspoken eloquence when protesting injustice or indulging in pathos. She preferred short, simple words and flavored her conversation with banter in a way reminiscent of her son. A natural raconteur, she could spin large tales by embroidering scanty facts. When Twain later said his mother had "the ability to say a humorous thing with the perfect air of not knowing it to be humorous," he described his own trademark technique.[43] From her he also learned how the right manner could make the matter more affecting. In a story called "Hellfire Hotchkiss," he sketched this picture of Jane as a speaker, saying, "there was a subtle something in her voice and her manner that was irresistibly pathetic, and perhaps that was where a great part of the power lay; in that and in her moist eyes and trembling lip. I know now that she was the most eloquent person I have met in all my days, but I did not know it then."[44] Often Jane Clemens was inadvertently funny. When a distraught neighbor informed her that a man had died when a calf raced in front of him, throwing him from his horse, Jane responded unexpectedly, "What became of the calf?"[45]

Jane Clemens communicated to her son a deep love of animals, most notably cats. Unable to resist strays, she at one point had collected nineteen cats, a fondness for animals that moved her granddaughter to protest, "Grandma, I believe you like cats better than babies." A bit miffed, Jane defended her behavior: "When you're tired of a cat you can put it down."[46] She would never swat a fly, punished cats sneaking off with mice, and forbade caged pets in her household. As Twain put it, "An imprisoned creature was out of the question—my mother would not have allowed a rat to be restrained of its liberty."[47] This sympathy for living creatures would be amply reflected in the animal rights activism of her son and granddaughters.

Mark Twain retailed stories of his mother's bravery in standing up for the oppressed, how she blocked a Corsican father pursuing his grown daughter with a rope and scolded a St. Louis driver lashing his poor horse. She also showed sympathy for the enslaved of Hannibal that never extended to outright criticism of the institution itself. At one point, the

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Clemenses hired for housework an enslaved boy, Sandy, whose incessant singing drove Sam (always hypersensitive to noise) to distraction. When he complained to his mother, she lectured him in terms of simple humanity. "Think; he is sold away from his mother; she is in Maryland, a thousand miles from here, and he will never see her again, poor thing. When he is singing it is a sign that he is not grieving . . . it would break my heart if Sandy should stop singing."[48]

Yet this same Jane Clemens could mistreat their house slave, Jennie, tended to badmouth "Yankees," and grumbled about "black Republicans."[49] When Twain attempted to trick Jane and her friend Betsey into staying at a Black minstrel show in St. Louis, saying they would hear African missionaries, the ladies were not amused by the stunt. Instead, they "began to question the propriety of their countenancing the industries of a company of negroes, no matter what their trade might be."[50] Because Hannibal was a slave-owning town, its institutions all conspired to certify the justice and legality of involuntary servitude. "Kind-hearted and compassionate as she was," Twain reflected of his mother, "I think she was not conscious that slavery was a bald, grotesque, and unwarranted usurpation . . . As far as her experience went, the wise, the good, and the holy were unanimous in the belief that slavery was right, righteous, sacred, the peculiar pet of the Deity, and a condition which the slave himself ought to be daily and nightly thankful for."[51] Few, if any, contrary voices were heard on Hannibal's streets, and children were taught to dread abolitionists as sinister bogeymen who preyed on God-fearing, slave-owning folk. That the compassionate Jane Clemens could be trained to regard slavery as a humane system instead of a monstrosity would serve as an object lesson for Mark Twain in the terrifying power of environment to shape and distort human behavior.

While Twain maintained that his father opposed slavery in principle, deeming it "a great wrong," it is difficult to square that with his actions.[52] In September 1841, John Marshall Clemens served as foreman on a jury that convicted three abolitionists who had crossed the Mississippi to emancipate five slaves, and they were sentenced to twelve years' hard labor. The following year, during the Mississippi River trip that so upset

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Jane Clemens, Judge Clemens tried to scrounge up money by selling a Black man named Charley for "whatever he will bring where I take water again, *viz,* at Louisville or Nashville."[53] Reading this letter late in life, Mark Twain was dismayed by the sickening way his father talked about the man as if he were "an ox—and somebody else's ox. It makes a body homesick for Charley, even after fifty years."[54] Even when Judge Clemens did not own enslaved people, he rented them from others.

As the years passed and darker truths about slavery surfaced in his memory, Twain remembered savage punishments inflicted upon the Black population and how such cruelty was so embedded in the society that nobody protested or even seemed to notice. In 1896, while traveling in India, Twain recorded how his father had struck him only twice in childhood, yet "he commonly cuffed our harmless slave boy Lewis for any little blunder or awkwardness, even gave him a lashing now & then, which terrified the poor thing nearly out of his wits. My father passed his life among the slaves from his cradle up, & his cuffings proceeded from the custom of the time, not from his nature."[55]

The following year, while summering in Switzerland, Twain had another flashback of how his father had brutalized the enslaved Jennie, who had nursed the Clemens children. As Jane Clemens was about to whip her for insubordination, Jennie dared to grab the whip from her hand, and Judge Clemens was promptly summoned. "Judge whipped her once, for impudence to his wife—whipped her with a bridle."[56] It may have been this notorious act of cruelty that led Jennie to plead for what was commonly seen as the worst punishment: to be sold down the river by a hated slave trader named William Beebe, who had, said Twain, beguiled "her with all sorts of fine and alluring promises."[57] Jane consented to this and persuaded her husband, who badly needed the money. Mark Twain remembered that the sale of Jennie was "a sore trial, for the woman was almost like one of the family."[58] Years later, he saw Jennie working as a chambermaid on a steamboat and she "cried and lamented."[59] Such barbarism toward Blacks was Hannibal's underlying reality, and Twain would spend the rest of his life seeking to acknowledge and understand how people could have accepted it.

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In later years, yet another terrifying memory of slavery surged to the forefront of Mark Twain's mind: "When I was 10 I saw a man fling a lump of iron ore at a slaveman [*sic*] in anger—for merely doing something awkwardly, as if that were a crime. It bounded from his skull & the man fell & never spoke again. He was dead in an hour. I knew the man had a right to kill his slave if he wanted to, and yet it seemed a pitiful thing and somehow wrong . . . Nobody in the village approved of that murder, but of course no one said much about it."[60] Mark Twain registered these fleeting impressions as a boy, but only with the benefit of hindsight would he fully fathom their true horror.

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CHAPTER TWO

A Wild and Mischievous Boy

In his fiction, Mark Twain would memorably evoke Hannibal as "the white town drowsing in the sunshine of a summer's morning," a place where it never seemed to snow despite fierce Missouri winters.[1] He presented it as an earthly paradise where youngsters went barefoot in summer and gorged on cornmeal cakes and catfish. "Well, it was a beautiful life, a lovely life," he once told a dinner audience in his drollest vein. "There was no crime. Merely little things like pillaging orchards and watermelon patches and breaking the Sabbath—we didn't break the Sabbath often enough to signify—once a week perhaps."[2] The town's children may have been poor, but they didn't know it. "To get rich was no one's ambition—it was not in any young person's thoughts . . . It was an intensely sentimental age, but it took no sordid form."[3] He argued that the California gold rush in 1848, when he turned thirteen late in that year, introduced "the lust for money which is the rule of life to-day, and the hardness and cynicism which is the spirit of to-day."[4] He forever remembered the cavalcade of eager townspeople streaming westward in canvas-covered wagons—"We were all there to see and to envy"—and even the local schoolteacher, John D. Dawson, flocked to join the exodus with the money-hungry horde.[5]

That Twain could portray his boyhood in such sunlit terms shows the extent to which his frolics with friends enabled him to escape the grueling insecurity of family life and his father's financial woes. The carefree sprees stood in stark contrast to the gloom that enveloped his household,

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and he later traced his dread of debt to the monetary setbacks the Clemens clan endured. Fifty years later, he could still summon up, beneath the air of nostalgia, the "sordidness and hatefulness and humiliation" of those early days.[6]

Even as a boy, Sam Clemens had a pronounced streak of nonconformity—he hated being hemmed in by social rules—expressed in constant clowning as he mocked the conventional piety of the townspeople. "Sam was always full of fun," said one cousin. "He could play more pranks and escape with less punishment than anybody I ever knew."[7] With his intelligence concealed behind a mask of insouciance, he revolted against schoolhouse discipline and rote learning and Jane Clemens's valiant efforts to tame him. She recollected: "Sam was always a good-hearted boy, but he was a very wild and mischievous one, and do what we would we could never make him go to school. This used to trouble his father and me dreadfully, and we were convinced that he would never amount to as much in the world as his brothers, because he was not nearly so steady and sober-minded as they were . . . Finally his father and the teacher both said it was of no use trying to teach Sam anything, because he was determined not to learn."[8] In many ways, he was a lazy boy, disorganized and easily bored, always craving novelty, but he could focus intensely on things that dearly interested him—especially outside the schoolhouse.

In the manner of all autodidacts, Sam Clemens educated himself by reading from passion, not duty. He retained his boyhood fondness for *The Adventures of Robin Hood,* both the "quaint & simple . . . fragrant & woodsy England" as well as its characters, "the most darling sweet rascals that ever made crime graceful in this world."[9] He and close friend Will Bowen would "undress & play Robin Hood in our shirt-tails, with lath swords, in the woods on Holliday's Hill on those long summer days."[10] Confined in the remote little town, Sam escaped into the faraway exploits of *Robinson Crusoe, The Arabian Nights,* and *The Count of Monte Cristo,* which gave intimations of the boundless world "curtained away" beyond Hannibal.[11]

This willful boy had a penchant for doing shocking things, whether

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teasing girls with garter snakes or leaving dead bats for his mother to find. With his friends he rolled a giant boulder dangerously down Holliday's Hill, fed a tobacco plug to a visiting elephant, and jumped off a ferry into the river. With pardonable exaggeration, he claimed that he had nearly drowned nine times in the Mississippi River or Bear Creek, and on one occasion remembered an enslaved woman grasping his wriggling fingers and fishing him free from the water. Sam was a sweet burden to Jane Clemens, who nursed him back to health. "I guess there wasn't much danger," she warned him. "People born to be hanged are safe in water."[12]

Sam's reputation as a trickster and troublemaker likely came from a desire to be noticed; being funny was the best way to attract boys, impress girls, and ward off his father's looming presence. "Celebrity is what a boy or a youth longs for more than for any other thing," he observed in his *Autobiography*. "He would be a clown in a circus; he would be a pirate, he would sell himself to Satan, in order to attract attention and be talked about and envied."[13] Later on he came up with an aphorism: "There are no grades of vanity, there are only grades of ability in concealing it."[14] The naughty child grew up to be the naughty adult author, with the same ceaseless need to attract attention by spouting scandalous commentary. The older Mark Twain pointedly noted that the "appetite for notice and notoriety" had lingered in his adult life.[15]

Twain was fond of recounting a story about a measles epidemic that swept Hannibal when he was ten, killing many children. He was so steeped in fear that he decided to end the suspense by contracting the disease on purpose. So he sneaked into the bed of a friend with measles and duly came home with the disease. Far from suffering, Sam Clemens found the situation "most placid and tranquil and sweet and delightful . . . I was the centre of all this emotional attention and was gratified by it and vain of it."[16]

Early on the boy learned that he could monopolize people's attention and cast a hypnotic spell thanks to his unusual facility with language. When her granddaughter once asked Jane Clemens what distinguished Sam from other children, she said that "when he had gone anywhere, if only downtown, when he came home all the children would gather

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around to hear what he had to tell. He knew even then how to make things interesting. She also said that when she saw a crowd running, she didn't ask what was the matter, but 'what has Sam done now?'"[17]

If Sam excelled at taunts, sometimes showing flashes of cruelty, he was also credited with a warm heart, a mixture of moods that persisted into adulthood. Orion praised his younger brother as "a rugged, brave, quick-tempered, generous-hearted fellow," with an outsize "capacity of enjoyment . . . and of suffering" who felt "the utmost extreme of every feeling."[18] Like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, Sam exhibited an outlaw spirit, preferring to tarry on the fringes of town, Holliday's Hill and McDowell's Cave, but most of all on the river with its mysterious, isolated islands, where he gloried in a sense of freedom. On Glasscock's Island, Sam and his comrades fished and swam, searched for turtle eggs, and smoked corncob pipes. He was especially enamored of a guttersnipe named Tom Blankenship, who resided a block from his home in a rude dwelling dark with poverty. A master of petty thefts, especially of turkeys and onions, Tom was scruffy and dirty, a stranger to baths and schools, and thoroughly happy despite being the son of the town drunkard. Tom's company was forbidden to Sam, which greatly enhanced his appeal. In Sam's view, Tom was "the only really independent person—boy or man—in the community."[19] This fascination with marginal and taboo figures previews the radical vision of Twain's fiction in which he found virtue in the low born and vice in the well bred, lending a dark glamour to boys who flouted parental strictures.

Mark Twain was born with a natural attraction for the disapproved thing. "There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable," he wrote. "It was not that A[dam] ate the apple for the apple's sake, but *because* it was forbidden."[20] A self-styled enfant terrible, he began to smoke by age eight, a habit that remained surreptitious while his father was alive. He believed devoutly in his later aphorism "Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example."[21] He could never abide obedient, apple-polishing classmates who toadied to parents, teachers, and preachers, and he reserved a special animus for Theodore Dawson, the schoolteacher's son. "In fact he was inordinately

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good, extravagantly good, offensively good, detestably good—and he had pop-eyes—and I would have drowned him if I had had a chance."[22] His hatred for these model boys came from a feeling that they were priggish and empty, all show but no substance in their subservience.

If Hannibal was a sleepy town, it was galvanized into startling life twice daily by the arrival of a steamboat either traveling upriver from St. Louis or down from Keokuk, Iowa. The boat would paint a distant spot of black smoke in the sky that was usually noticed first by a Black drayman who uttered a jubilant cry: "S-t-e-a-m-boat a-comin'!" In *Life on the Mississippi,* Twain reported the tonic effect on the town. "The town drunkard stirs, the clerks wake up, a furious clatter of drays follows, every house and store pours out a human contribution, and all in a twinkling the dead town is alive and moving."[23] From the steamboat issued everything from carriages to traveling salesmen to minstrel shows to itinerant circuses. Sam Clemens enjoyed instant access to this excitement: he simply had to exit his Hill Street house, turn left, and there, just a block or two away, lay the vast, shining Mississippi, three-quarters of a mile wide, looking especially magnificent with a steamboat moored at the dock. From Holliday's Hill, three hundred feet up, he could obtain panoramic, unobstructed views of the river as it meandered through the rich flat farmland in northeast Missouri and western Illinois.

The daily advent of the steamboats planted the first ambition that took root in Sam Clemens: to be a pilot. He craved attention, and nobody drew more than the pilot, who wore fancy duds and enjoyed an "exalted respect" as he strutted about town.[24] Of no less interest was the "princely salary" that the pilot pocketed each month: "Two months of his wages would pay a preacher's salary for a year."[25] The river held many wonders beyond steamboats, especially the annual arrival of a massive fleet of rafts floating to markets downriver with "an acre or so of white, sweet-smelling boards in each craft," manned by "a crew of two dozen men or more."[26] Sam and his friends would plunge into the river, swim to the rafts, and hitch a thrilling ride.

In the meantime, the future author had to suffer through something called school, which he viewed as the centerpiece of an unspoken adult

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conspiracy to deprive children of fun. At age four he trudged off to a private school run by Elizabeth Horr, who commenced class with a prayer and a New Testament selection. On his first day, Sam, the class clown, got into trouble and was punished with strokes from a switch. He would attend three private schools, one a log schoolhouse with girls on one side, boys on the other, and wrote scornfully of "what passed for a school in those days: a place where tender young humanity devoted itself for eight or ten hours a day to learn incomprehensible rubbish by heart out of books and reciting it by rote, like parrots."[27] Restless in school, a born truant, he yearned on warm days for the barefoot freedom of the surrounding countryside. Perhaps this scanty education enabled him to develop a literary voice that was fresh and original, unspoiled by any European or Eastern Seaboard influences.

The most-perceptive observations of young Sam Clemens came from a very pretty girl named Laura Hawkins, who lived directly across Hill Street but in a more imposing house, which signaled a step up the economic ladder, her father having owned a large mill and slave plantation further inland. She would figure as the model for Becky Thatcher in *Tom Sawyer.* Twain sentimentalized her as his first sweetheart and never lost his soft spot for her. At age five, he said, "I had an apple, & fell in love with her & gave her the core."[28] Her first glimpse of her attention-grabbing young neighbor was indelible: a barefoot boy who "came out of his home, opposite mine, and started showing off, turning handsprings and cutting capers just as described in Tom Sawyer." Sam had "long golden curls hanging over his shoulders at the time."[29] His comic persona, she saw, concealed a sensitive boy of natural refinement, who was "gentle . . . and kind of quiet," with a conspicuous drawl reminiscent of his mother.[30] Even though Sam "played hooky from school" and "cared nothing at all for his books . . . I never heard a coarse word from him in all our childhood acquaintance."[31]

From his first encounter with the female sex, Sam Clemens was courtly and gallant, as in future years. "He used to carry my books to school every morning," recalled Laura, "bring them home for me in the afternoon, and occasionally he would treat me to apples, oranges and such

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things, or divide his candy with me."[32] From Sam, she must have heard the family saga of past Virginia gentility—aristocrats down on their luck—for she noted that the Clemenses "came from very fine stock, but were very poor."[33] Appreciative of his special humor, she noted his ability to discern the absurdity in situations and said his success in telling a funny story lay not so much in its content than in his "drawling, appealing voice."[34]

School wasn't the only adult institution that Sam Clemens had to put up with: the Church also conspired against the pleasures coveted by small boys. In later years, Mark Twain came to believe that the creation of humanity, with its deeply flawed nature, was nothing for the Lord to boast about and would inveigh against "the superstitions in which I was born & mistrained."[35] That perspective came later. In Hannibal, atheists were about as popular as abolitionists, and Sam's boyhood was saturated with religious training. By age twelve he was steeped in the Old and New Testaments, which left their mark on his writings. While the skeptical John Marshall Clemens evaded church services, Jane Clemens was a fervent Presbyterian, and Sam was affected by all the fire-and-brimstone sermons about the afterlife. As he phrased it, "The Presbyterian hell is all misery; the heaven all happiness."[36] So far did early religious experience permeate his mind that heaven and hell became lifelong fixtures in his humorous repertoire, with Satan his best comic character. The only profession that ever vied with piloting in Sam Clemens's fantasy life was that of becoming a preacher, which seemed a sure way to forestall damnation. "It looked like a safe job," he confirmed.[37] Another time he confessed about being a preacher that he lacked "the necessary stock in trade—i.e., religion."[38]

Though he suffered through services in the Presbyterian church with its high pulpit, Bible on a red plush pillow, and congregants sitting in stiff pews, he still regarded himself as an incorrigible sinner, headed straight to hell. Every time a boy in town drowned, Sam chalked it up to an angry deity who was coming for him next. Although he consoled himself by day, saying God would be patient, dark fears of retribution sneaked up on him at night. "With the going down of the sun my faith

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failed, and the clammy fears gathered about my heart. It was then that I repented. Those were awful nights, nights of despair, nights charged with the bitterness of death."[39]

One thing, in retrospect, that weakened Mark Twain's faith in the church of his childhood was its unswerving endorsement of slavery. The evidence of slavery's misery stood scattered all around him—"the saddest faces" Sam Clemens ever saw were those of a dozen shackled slaves on Hannibal's dock awaiting shipment farther south—but he heard no condemnation from religious leaders.[40] Nearly half the families in Marion County held at least one person in bondage, almost invariably with a clear conscience. "In my schoolboy days," Twain said, "I had no aversion to slavery . . . the local pulpit taught us that God approved it, that it was a holy thing, and that the doubter need only look in the Bible if he wished to settle his mind."[41] Beyond preaching slavery, pastors practiced it unashamedly. Twain remembered one Methodist minister who sold an enslaved child to a fellow minister, who then profited by later selling the child downriver. As the steamboat departed with her offspring, the child's mother wept inconsolably at the dock.[42] As he got older and developed into an avid student of history, Twain came to believe that the Church had endorsed slavery for centuries and reformed its position only *after* congregants turned against it. Church complicity on slavery came to illustrate for him how social institutions could collude in a "lie of silent assertion . . . that nothing is going on which fair and intelligent men are aware of and are engaged by their duty to try to stop."[43]

When it came to slavery, the forces of repression were especially virulent in northern Missouri, settled mostly by people from slave states. Even though Missouri lay at the intersection of the free states of Illinois and Iowa and the mixed Kansas Territory, it had a heavily enslaved population in counties strung along the Mississippi River. In fact, the proximity of free Illinois right across the waterway only heightened the dread in Hannibal that dastardly abolitionists would sneak across and spirit slaves away. "In that day," Twain wrote, "for a man to speak out openly and proclaim himself an enemy of negro slavery was simply to proclaim

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himself a madman. For he was blaspheming against the holiest thing known to a Missourian, and could *not* be in his right mind."[44]

As much as he had warmed to the lowly Tom Blankenship, Sam Clemens gravitated to the company of the enslaved, and for someone attracted to pariahs, the human chattel were the ultimate outcasts of society. For many years, his brain stuffed with early stereotypes, he would refer to Blacks in derogatory language—after all, he grew up in a town that still had slave auctions and minstrel shows with racist impersonations of Banjo and Bones—yet his boyish affection for Black people was also unmistakable. By some instinct he reveled in their company. Of having Black children as playmates, he contended that he preferred "their society to that of the elect, I being a person of low-down tastes from the start, notwithstanding my high birth."[45]

Sam spent two or three months of every summer at his uncle John Quarles's homestead, set on the crest of a beautiful hill, four miles outside of Florida. Populated by eight Quarles children and about a dozen enslaved people, it represented an emotional haven for the boy and would reappear as the Phelpses' farm in *Huck Finn*. "It was a heavenly place for a boy," Mark Twain recalled, "that farm of my uncle John's."[46] The meals served were hearty and irresistible—"the corn bread, the hot biscuits and wheatbread, and the fried chicken"—never to be surpassed in northern years.[47] Nor was it a small thing that, in contrast to his father's severity, John Quarles showed a winning geniality.

The plantation's foremost appeal lay in the smokehouse and a cluster of small log cabins that made up the "negro quarter," a place redolent with an atmosphere of magic, mystery, and folklore. Here the future novelist found figures of inexhaustible fascination, including "Aunt" Hannah, "a bedridden white-headed slave woman whom we visited daily, and looked upon with awe, for we believed she was upwards of a thousand years old and had talked with Moses."[48] It was thought "she had lost her health in the desert, coming out of Egypt. The bald spot on her head was caused by fright at seeing Pharaoh drowned."[49] The language, folkways, songs, and religion of the enslaved left lasting traces on Sam Clemens's

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imagination. He absorbed their dialects into his bloodstream and they became a part of him. Often the older Black children would chaperone younger whites, but, stepping outside their roles, they could also act as companions and co-conspirators. These unions, however pleasant, were illusory in nature. "We were comrades, and yet not comrades"; Twain remembered, "color and condition interposed a subtle line which both parties were conscious of, and which rendered complete fusion impossible."[50]

The high point each summer came at night by the kitchen fire, when the enslaved Old Uncle Dan'l would deliver a ghost story called the "Golden Arm" amid a flickering blaze. From Mark Twain's luminous memories of these performances, it grows clear that he encountered in the elderly Black man his first platform virtuoso, expert in tone and pacing. "We would huddle close about the old man, & begin to shudder with the first familiar words; & under the spell of his impressive delivery we always fell a prey to that climax at the end when the rigid black shape in the twilight sprang at us with a shout."[51] In his many years on the lecture circuit, Mark Twain would constantly reprise the Golden Arm story along with many tricks of delivery he had learned at the feet of his first mentor.

With his kindness, warmth, and intelligence, Uncle Dan'l would serve as inspiration for many characters in Mark Twain's fiction. As he admitted, "I . . . staged him in books under his own name and as 'Jim,' and carted him all around—to Hannibal, down the Mississippi on a raft, and even across the Desert of Sahara in a balloon—and he has endured it all with the patience and friendliness and loyalty which were his birthright."[52] Due to prolonged exposure to slavery at the Quarleses' farm, Twain had a fondness for Black people that didn't stem from polite tolerance or enforced familiarity. It was deep and personal, and he was never afraid to say so, distinguishing him from many white people of his era. "It was on the farm that I got my strong liking for [Uncle Dan'l's] race and my appreciation of certain of its fine qualities. This feeling and this estimate have stood the test of sixty years and more and have suffered no impairment. The black face is as welcome to me now as it was then."[53]

Sometimes it can be hard to reconcile Twain's varied memories of

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slavery in Hannibal, which he once termed "the mild domestic slavery, not the brutal plantation article. Cruelties were very rare, and exceedingly and wholesomely unpopular."[54] Of course, "mild domestic slavery," if such ever existed, was still slavery. Yet it was Twain himself who told the story of the lump of iron flung at a Black man that killed him and how his own parents had been corrupted by this system into cruel and unnatural behavior.

The situation that implicated the entire community in the crime of chattel slavery was the problem of runaway slaves. No white person who came into contact with a fugitive was spared responsibility. "To help steal a horse or a cow was a low crime," Mark Twain said, "but to help a hunted slave, or feed him or shelter him, or hide him, or comfort him, in his troubles, his terrors, his despair, or hesitate to promptly betray him to the slave-catcher . . . was a much baser crime, & carried with it a stain, a moral smirch which nothing could wipe away."[55] While Twain understood why slave owners pursued runaways in such ferocious fashion, he was always puzzled that "the loafers[,] the tag-rag & bobtail of the community" took up the hunt with equal zeal. "It shows that that strange thing, the conscience . . . can be trained to approve any wild thing you *want* it to approve if you begin its education early & stick to it."[56]

Sam Clemens experienced direct exposure to at least one fugitive slave, which became the genesis of *Huck Finn.* In the summer of 1847, Benson Blankenship, the older brother of Tom, happened upon a runaway from Missouri hiding in the swamp of an island on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River. Spurning the reward for returning runaways and defying the law, Benson smuggled food to the man and helped to sustain and safeguard him for several weeks. Then a band of woodcutters stumbled upon the Black man and gave chase until he disappeared and drowned. A few days later, Sam Clemens and his companions were present when the mutilated corpse, like some ghostly apparition, suddenly rose straight up from the water, scattering the boys in terror—a nightmarish moment that burned the episode into the future author's memory.

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CHAPTER THREE

Printer's Devil

The fragile bark of John Marshall Clemens's career always seemed to struggle upstream against a heavy tide as his finances turned perilous again in 1845–46. To supplement his erratic, meager income as justice of the peace, he had been forced into an unwanted sideline, clerking at a local produce house. Mark Twain believed his father's final ruin came at the hands of a villain named Ira Stout, who defaulted on a loan of several thousand dollars guaranteed by his father. If the details remain murky, it seems clear that the straitened finances of the Clemens family forced them to relinquish their home and move across the street, occupying second-story rooms above Grant's Drug Store. This must have been a crushing blow to family pride: in lieu of rent, Jane Clemens, the erstwhile Kentucky belle, now had to cook for the family of Orville Grant.

Ever admirable in his civic projects, John Marshall Clemens cooperated on plans to build a railroad that would connect the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers and also lobbied for the creation of a state Masonic college in Hannibal. No project, however, materialized in time to pluck him from the depths of misfortune. His most promising prospect was a job as clerk of the circuit court, a position to be chosen at the next election in August 1847. Apart from its considerable prestige, the post would at last ensure the Clemens clan a steady income, with Judge Clemens considered a front-runner in the race. During the winter of 1846–47, he mounted his horse and rode from house to house to drum up support for his

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candidacy. In late February 1847, riding back twelve miles from Palmyra, the county seat north of Hannibal, he was drenched by sleet and rain, and in his chilled, sodden state succumbed to pleurisy and then pneumonia.

As the forty-eight-year-old patriarch lay dying, surrounded by his family, he uttered words that suggested he had learned little from his short, unhappy stay on earth. "I believe if I had stayed in Tennessee," he insisted, "I might have been worth twenty thousand dollars today."[1] He returned to the obsession that had cruelly beckoned for so many years: the Tennessee land, which he had insisted bulged with fabulous mineral deposits. "I shall not live to see these acres turn to silver and gold," he had prophesied, "but my children will."[2] "Cling to the land," he now urged them in a feeble voice. "Cling to the land, and wait. Let nothing beguile it away from you."[3] Instead of bequeathing a fortune to his children, he left them with the bane of imaginary riches. "He went to his grave in the full belief that he had done us a kindness," said Mark Twain. "It was a woeful mistake, but fortunately he never knew it."[4] At the end, he motioned to his daughter Pamela to approach, laced his arms around her neck, and gave her his first kiss in years. "Let me die" were his parting words on March 24, 1847.[5] Sam Clemens saw only a rebuke in his father's farewell kiss to Pamela: "He did not say good-bye to his wife, or to any but his daughter."[6] If Mark Twain became the quintessential American writer, it may have been because his father left such a poignant example of failure in a land obsessed with money and success. Twain would suffer the lifelong financial anxiety of someone whose family fortunes had crashed in early life.

With his father's death, the burden of family support now settled squarely on Orion, who yearned for a career as an orator or politician, but dutifully returned to his printing job in St. Louis. With more than a tincture of bitterness, he blamed his father for hastening his own demise. "He doctored himself from my earliest remembrance," he later said. "During the latter part of his life he bought Cook's pills by the box, and took some daily. He was very dexterous at throwing a pill to the root of his tongue, washing it down with a sip of water."[7] While it is impossible

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to verify Orion's suspicions, Cook's Pills were a blend of potent laxatives that included mercury chloride, which can have toxic effects on bodily organs. The pills were also used to treat syphilis. Sketchy evidence suggests that an autopsy was performed on Judge Clemens with Sam bending down to peer through a keyhole. At least one Mark Twain biographer has suggested that the autopsy disclosed shocking news: that Judge Clemens suffered from syphilis.[8] If so, the world knew nothing of this shame, and the local paper lauded Judge Clemens for his "public spirit" and "high sense of justice and moral rectitude."[9]

The whole troubled saga of John Marshall Clemens must have had a nightmarish quality for Sam, only eleven at the time of his father's death. The business failures, the harrowing plunge in social status, the ghastly fiscal strain, the early death perhaps brought on by bad habits, the keyhole autopsy—it was horror heaped on horror for the young boy, made especially galling by his father's cold, aloof attitude toward him. And it had all ended badly given that the judge's death condemned "his heirs to a long and discouraging struggle with the world for a livelihood."[10] So traumatic was his father's death that Mark Twain marked the date, sometimes with tears, for the rest of his life.[11]

The emotional toll was soon evident, for the night following his father's funeral and for several nights thereafter, Sam, cloaked in a sheet, reverted to sleepwalking—a sight that unnerved his mother and sister—as if all the nervous energy gathered by day exploded in his mind at night. His cousin Tabitha Quarles recalled Sam as "a pale, sickly boy" and said his sleepwalking proved an ongoing terror to his family, who feared he would harm himself in his nocturnal wanderings. One night at the Quarleses' farm, his uncle discovered Sam "out in the stable in his night gown. He was astride the old gray horse. He was yelling like a wild Indian and thought he was running a race, while old Gray just pricked up his ears and paid no more attention to Sam's tricks than the rest of us."[12]

That John Marshall Clemens had been so emotionally absent from his son's life only made it more difficult for Sam to accept his death since he no longer had a chance to repair relations and tortured himself with memories of disrespect toward his father. Jane Clemens escorted him into

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the room where the coffin rested, and as they stood on either side, she attempted to soothe him. "It is all right, Sammy. What's done is done, and it does not matter to him any more."[13] She used the occasion to broach the subject of his uncertain future. "I had some serious requests to make of him, and . . . I knew his word once given was never broken . . . He turned his streaming eyes upon me and cried out, 'Oh, mother, I will do anything, anything you ask of me except to go to school; I can't do that!' That was the very request I was going to make. Well, we afterward had a sober talk, and I concluded to let him go into a printing office to learn the trade, as I couldn't have him running wild."[14] Sam swore to his mother that he would behave himself and never break her heart.

After Judge Clemens's death, his family mostly survived on money Orion sent from St. Louis and income Pamela brought in from teaching piano and guitar. As it turned out, Sam wasn't immediately freed from homework and attended school part-time until John D. Dawson fled to California in 1849. In the meantime, he performed assorted part-time labor, including a stint as an apprentice printer at the *Hannibal Gazette* and an errand boy for the paper's owner, as well as short-term, menial assignments in a grocery, bookstore, and drugstore. Then he landed an apprentice job around May 1848 with the *Missouri Courier,* a Democratic paper headed by Joseph P. Ament, and by the next year he was sprung from hated schooling forever. With his shortened education, it is amazing how cultured, literate, and worldly Mark Twain would become as he continued to educate himself and far transcended his provincial upbringing.

An apprentice's job then stood only a notch above indentured servitude, entitling the occupant to no wages, only board in the owner's residence and two suits of cheap clothes. Mark Twain scoffed that he never saw the second suit and that the first, composed of worn garments discarded by the bigger Ament, made him feel "as if I had on a circus tent. I had to turn the trousers up to my ears to make them short enough."[15] Sometimes he slept on a pallet on the print shop floor, sometimes at Ament's house, and he dismissed his boss four years later as a "diminutive chunk of human meat."[16] Even though he was already hypercritical of people, others shared this derisory view of Ament, one editor railing

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at him as "the most fretful, peevish, cross-grained, ill-natured, sour-tempered, scolding obscure little brat we have met with."[17]

At the time no clear line demarcated the printing and editorial sides of a newspaper, which meant that Sam Clemens had now ventured, willy-nilly, into the writing world. This bleak existence was lightened by the uproarious company of apprentice Wales McCormick and journeyman printer Pet McMurry, who depicted Sam as "a little sandy-haired boy" who sat crooning ditties or smoked "a huge cigar or a diminutive pipe" as he sat "mounted upon a little box" setting type.[18] For all his self-deprecating jokes about his printing skills—"I had always been such a slow compositor that I looked with envy upon the achievements of apprentices of two years' standing"—he became quite agile at his craft.[19] The office factotum, he went around dunning subscribers and delivering newspapers at dawn. "The carrier was then an object of interest to all the dogs in town. If I had saved up all the bites I ever received, I could keep M. Pasteur busy for a year."[20] Sam stuck to his lazy, messy habits, as one old pressman learned when he tried to sweep around him. "He would rather die in the dust than uncross his legs."[21] Despite the fond feelings he had shown toward Blacks at the Quarleses' farm, he now resented being assigned to eat in the kitchen alongside an old enslaved cook and her mulatto daughter.

While working as a printer's devil, Twain betrayed his first spark of literary interest when he supposedly scooped up a scrap of paper lying in the street. This fugitive sheet came from a biography of Joan of Arc, and it blew open a window into another world. The passage in question chronicled Joan's imprisonment in a cage at Rouen and the two coarse English soldiers who mocked her and absconded with her clothes. The story spoke to Sam's chivalric side, his need to save young maidens in distress, especially those on the eve of womanhood, and he began to read eagerly about Joan. He found more mental nourishment reading on his own than in insipid school texts. For an author who would compose the classic ode to small-town American boyhood, it is also revealing that his first literary crush was a historical tale set on another continent in distant times. Sam was soon studying German, and within a few years, perhaps

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bewitched by Joan's mystique, he would be teaching himself French and filling notebooks with phrases.

Aside from reading, he also flirted briefly with the Cadets of Temperance, a group dedicated to stamping out drinking, smoking, and gambling—all pastimes dear to Mark Twain's heart. Sam's main attraction to the group was strictly sartorial: he liked the bright red merino scarves they sported during church parades. "I was clothed like a conflagration," he recalled. "I have never enjoyed any dress so much as I enjoyed that 'regalia.'"[22] Like Tom Sawyer, the proud, self-confessed sinner couldn't keep up the charade very long and lasted only three or four months in the group. Already wedded to his vices, Sam Clemens would forever nurse a healthy contempt for moral crusaders who tried to improve him.

In what proved a mixed blessing for Sam, Orion returned to Hannibal in the summer of 1850 and purchased a weekly newspaper, the *Western Union,* recruiting his brothers Sam and Henry as typesetters. Within a year he would purchase a second paper and merge it with the first, the resulting hybrid called the *Hannibal Journal*. When Orion worked in St. Louis as a journeyman printer, he had won a powerful patron in attorney Edward Bates, who advised him to study law and remembered him fondly as "a good boy, anxious to learn, using all means in his power to do so."[23] Studious and eager to improve himself, Orion led an austere life, poring over Benjamin Franklin's life in his boardinghouse, but he chafed at printing work as unsatisfying. While he dreamed of being a public orator, "that had been forbidden by my father who had placed me at the toil of printing and editing, because his own preference was in that direction."[24] Ten years older than Sam, Orion had been wounded more by Judge Clemens's severity, and the shadow of his father's hardship fell heavily across his life. Given the siblings' age difference and Orion's protracted stay in St. Louis, he arrived in Hannibal as something of an unknown entity to Sam.

Thanks to the sale of some Tennessee land and borrowed money, Orion was able to move the family from Grant's Drug Store back to the Hill Street frame house, where Jane took in boarders to bolster income. Like

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his deceased father, Orion was a confirmed Whig who penned editorials that protested talk of southern secession, even as he opposed the Free Soil movement and endorsed the Fugitive Slave Law. "We are entirely conservative," he reassured his readers, "and while our contempt for the Abolitionists of the North knows no bounds, we are loath to claim brotherhood with the 'Fire-eaters' of the South."[25] Newspapers were then expected to be highly partisan and opinionated, a hyperbolic style that would play to the strength of young Sam Clemens, who soon published "A Gallant Fireman," his first known piece, in which he mocked the antics of a printer's devil in his office when a fire broke out next door.

Like another famous apprentice printer, Ben Franklin, Sam squirmed under the arbitrary rule of his older brother. After starting work around January 1851, at fifteen, Sam awaited the handsome weekly wage of $3.50 that Orion promised him, only to discover that his older brother "never was able to pay me a single penny as long as I was with him."[26] Again he was reduced to involuntary servitude. Orion would admit that he only furnished Sam with "poor, shabby clothes," and Sam's anger toward his brother festered.[27] Perhaps in a case of sublimated rage, Sam taunted an apprentice, Jim Wolfe, until the latter retaliated and punched him in the nose.

Cruel pranks seemed to occupy a large portion of Sam Clemens's life. He was a wisecracking kid who never entirely shed that smart-alecky side of his personality. But where the young Sam Clemens could appear heartless in mocking people, the later Mark Twain would display a profound wit suffused with a much deeper humanity. The first known photo of Sam Clemens, taken in 1850 as he was turning fifteen and graduated from apprentice to printer, is striking for the turbulent gaze and the forceful intelligence of his expression. It is a mature look, as if this teenager were already somewhat hardened by experience. Whether as a joke or a form of bombastic self-promotion, he held the name "SAM," set up in the type of a "composing stick," at his belt.

Much like his father before him, Orion proved a hopeless businessman, who lowered the price of the *Journal* and its advertising rates until profits vanished and the paper had to operate from the Clemens home.

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Not for the last time, his ambition far exceeded his reach, and he "began to yearn for a chance to get away from the office, and rest and breathe fresh air."[28] Both Orion and Sam were dreamers, but Sam had a tough, hardheaded practicality that would enable him to succeed, whereas Orion was an endearing oddball whose naivete would always serve as a whetstone that sharpened his younger brother's cynicism. In his frustration, Orion took out his bad humor on Sam. Basically fair and decent, Orion recognized belatedly that he had been a harsh taskmaster. "I was tyrannical and unjust to Sam. He was as swift and as clean as a good journeyman. I gave him tasks, and if he got through well I begrudged him the time and made him work more. He set a clean proof, and Henry a very dirty one . . . Once we were kept late, and Sam complained with tears of bitterness that he was held till midnight on Henry's dirty proofs."[29] Orion's tyranny left its lasting scars on Sam Clemens, who seldom resisted chances to exact revenge in later life.

Even though Sam entered printing with no literary ambitions, as a compositor "acres of good and bad literature" passed beneath his gaze daily and trained his eye to discriminate between the good stuff and the bad.[30] Almost by accident he crossed over from printer to writer. Short of money, Orion went to Tennessee to try to squeeze some money from the Tennessee land, leaving Sam as the paper's foreman. When Sam heard that the lovelorn editor of a rival paper had tramped down to the river in a botched effort to drown himself, he skewered him with the same irreverence that he had deployed throughout childhood. A skillful cartoonist, he drew the cautious editor creeping gingerly into the river and testing the water's depth. This was a natural step for Sam Clemens, who would take his schoolboy japes and convert them into literature. He would relish the combative image of the journalist as a gladiator battling opposing papers and trading insults with them.

The editor in question reacted with fury to the satire, and his newspaper upbraided Sam for not having "the decency of a gentleman nor the honor of a blackguard."[31] Orion wasn't amused when he returned from Tennessee. His impulse was always to pacify and conciliate whereas Sam's was to stir up and provoke. To placate the rival editor, Orion wrote of

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him as "a young man, recently come amongst us, with a design of occupying a respectable position in society, by industry and by propriety and straightforwardness of conduct."[32] Orion was so busy apologizing that he missed the cosmic significance of what had occurred: the birth of one of the premier literary talents in American history. For the first time, the future Mark Twain had served up a scathing portrait of human foibles. As Orion ruefully admitted later, "I could have distanced all competitors even then, if I had recognized Sam's ability and let him go ahead, merely keeping him from offending worthy persons."[33]

Sam would enjoy sporadic forays into print during his two years at Orion's paper. Perhaps still smarting from his father's treatment, he railed at one contribution against a husband guilty of "unmercifully beating and maltreating his wife and children" and opined that he ought "to be ducked, ridden on a rail, tarred and feathered, and politely requested to bundle up his 'duds' and make himself scarce."[34] The item was written in the chivalric mode that Mark Twain would develop to the brim with Joan of Arc. In another piece, he defended local culture from East Coast snobs who thought the interior peopled by philistines. "Your Eastern people seem to think this country is a barren, uncultivated region, with a population consisting of heathens."[35] If he gloried in the West's rough, lawless culture, he also wanted to show easterners they were dead wrong about it.

The paper sorely needed direction under the indecisive Orion, whom Sam likened to a human weathervane. Orion, rather pathetically, agreed: "I followed all the advice I received. If two or more persons conflicted with each other, I adopted the views of the last."[36] With this passive character, Orion lacked not only Sam's brash talent but also his instinctive sense of conviction. He couldn't settle on fixed prices for advertisements or subscriptions, and accepted everything from cabbages to cordwood as payment. Sam deplored the paper's amateur appearance, "a wretchedly printed little sheet, being very vague and pale in spots, and in other spots so caked with ink as to be hardly decipherable."[37]

By 1853 Orion realized that he had to cool off Sam's simmering discontent and so briefly gave him a slot in the paper called "Our Assistant's

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Column"—a space Sam filled only three times. In one of his last efforts, he wrote a paean to redheaded people like himself, arguing that not only Thomas Jefferson but likely Jesus and Adam had been redheads. Then came the inevitable break with Orion. Sam asked him for money to purchase a used gun, and Orion flew into a rage at what he deemed an unreasonable request. Disgusted, Sam went to his mother, said Orion hated him, and announced he was leaving home. Fearing the sinful world beyond Hannibal, Jane Clemens made him swear on a Bible that he wouldn't "throw a card or drink a drop of liquor" while away. When he agreed, she planted a kiss, saying, "Remember that, Sam, and write to us."[38] Though he abided by his pledge, he later reflected, "The instant a person pledges himself not to drink, he feels the galling of the slave-chain he has put upon himself; & if he be wise . . . he will go instantly and break that pledge."[39] We can roughly date Sam's departure from Hannibal because on May 27, 1853, Orion ran a notice: "Wanted! An Apprentice to the Printing Business. Apply Soon."[40]

As he contemplated future moves, Sam gave a clue as to a possible destination in his valedictory "Assistant's Column," referring to crowds "continually congregated around the new Crystal Palace in New York City," where "drunkenness and debauching are carried on to their fullest extent."[41] He narrowly missed a Hannibal lynching, when an accused slave, "a demon in human shape," according to Ament's paper, was hunted down by a mob and "*burned at the stake.*"[42] Given Sam Clemens's budding interest in Joan of Arc, one wonders what he would have made of this modern example of medieval barbarity.

Sam left Hannibal bruised, not hopeful, later telling William Dean Howells that there was "not much satisfaction in it, even as a recollection."[43] For someone of his energy, Hannibal seemed a drowsy backwater. "Half the people were alive and the other half were dead," he later wrote. "A stranger could not tell them apart."[44] He must have felt that Orion had kept him in a state of peonage, of penniless labor and a threadbare existence, even as he awakened to a sense of his own proficiency as a printer and wordsmith. Orion, having bungled his relationship with Sam, understood in retrospect that Sam went wandering in search of

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that comfort and that advancement and those rewards of industry which he had failed to find where I was—gloomy, taciturn, and selfish. I not only missed his labor; we all missed his bounding activity and merriment."[45] Sam's departure damaged the paper, and Orion had trouble getting it out after he left. Jane Clemens fumed at Sam's betrayal. Before the year was over, Orion packed up and traveled north to Muscatine, Iowa, where he bought a stake in a local paper, the *Muscatine Journal,* taking Jane and Henry Clemens with him.

When Sam Clemens departed from Hannibal, he bore a world of pain, but also a cargo of precious memories preserved intact in his mind, ready for future retrieval. The abrupt break with his boyhood had this advantage: there would be no overlay of later experience to mar the perfection of his recollections. Sam boarded a boat to St. Louis, as his first port of call, and stayed with Pamela, who had married a well-to-do commission merchant, William Moffett, and had a baby named Annie. Sam had a tendency to make fun of Pamela's piety and her "notorious Sunday school proclivities," but she was a true and loyal sister, and he owed her a great deal.[46]

At seventeen, Sam was fortunate to have a portable skill as a journeyman typesetter, affording him unusual freedom for an adolescent, and he soon obtained a job with the printing firm that had employed Orion. For a Hannibal boy, St. Louis shimmered as a teeming metropolis of one hundred thousand souls, with hospitals and libraries and fancy homes. As Mark Twain would observe, whenever anyone in those days traveled to St. Louis, "He talked St Louis, and nothing but SL and its wonders for months and months afterward."[47]

As far as Jane Clemens knew, Sam was to stay put in that town with Pamela. She didn't reckon on his restless, roving spirit; even as a teenager, he would embrace broad swaths of the country, as if soaking up all of the American experience for future use. "All I do know or feel," he later wrote his mother, "is, that I am wild with impatience to move—move—Move!"[48] In a similar mood, he said, "I love stir & excitement; &

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so the moment the spring birds begin to sing . . . I want to pack off somewhere where there's something going on."[49] Without telling Jane, the headstrong Sam decided to decamp to New York City in a personal declaration of independence. By breaking loose from his family, he was both asserting his autonomy and satisfying his innate, nomadic craving for adventure.

Traveling by rail to the city, he stopped in Syracuse, a hotbed of abolitionist fervor and a key stop in New York on the Underground Railroad. Two years earlier, a Hannibal man named John McReynolds had discovered in Syracuse his runaway slave Jerry, who had fled there years earlier, adopting the surname Henry. McReynolds sent slave-catchers to recapture him and, invoking the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, enlisted local law enforcement to cooperate. When Jerry was held in the town courthouse, outraged abolitionists besieged the building and had the captive released in a notable victory for antislavery advocates. In Frederick Douglass's view, "the rescue of Jerry did most to bring the fugitive slave bill into contempt and to defeat its execution everywhere."[50]

Once in Syracuse, Sam Clemens immediately associated it with the McReynolds case. Not surprisingly, the racism of his boyhood society had not deserted him, and he exhibited all the nasty biases one might expect from a boy of his background. As he told his mother on August 24, 1853, "when I saw the Court House in Syracuse, it called to mind the time when it was surrounded with chains and companies of soldiers, to prevent the rescue of McReynolds' nigger, by the infernal abolitionists. I reckon I had better black my face, for in these Eastern States niggers are considerably better than white people."[51] Sam's first exposure to the North brought to the surface proslavery sympathies as yet untouched by residence outside Missouri. Hungry for copy after Sam's departure, Orion printed the letter in the *Hannibal Journal,* informing readers, "The free and easy impudence of the writer of the following letter will be appreciated by those who recognize him. We should be pleased to have more of his letters."[52]

Sam knew his mother would be furious that her footloose son at seventeen had traveled such a distance on his own. In effect, he had run

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away from home. "MY DEAR MOTHER: you will doubtless be a little surprised, and somewhat angry when you receive this, and find me so far from home"; he wrote, "but you must bear a little with me, for you know I was always the best boy you had, and perhaps you remember the people used to say to their children, 'Now don't do like Orion and Henry Clemens but take Samuel for your guide.'"[53] This last, of course, ironically inverted the truth. Once in New York City, he found in record time a room in a boardinghouse and a printing job at John A. Gray's at 97 Cliff Street, where he worked alongside forty compositors. He was enchanted by the vista from his fifth-floor office, where "from one window I have a pretty good view of the city, while another commands a view of the shipping beyond the Battery; and the 'forest of masts,' with all sorts of flags flying, is no mean sight."[54] After work, he frequented the free printers library at 3 Chambers Street, where he would settle in to "spend my evenings most pleasantly."[55]

However entranced by city views, Sam Clemens was still blinkered by small-town bias and revolted by the racial and ethnic mix in lower Manhattan. Shaped by Hannibal, he spewed forth prejudice. His daily stroll to work led him through the tough, immigrant neighborhood of Five Points, and he gazed with sheer loathing at the diverse inhabitants. "Niggers, mulattoes, quadroons, Chinese, and some the Lord no doubt originally intended to be white, but the dirt on whose faces leaves one uncertain as to that fact, block up the little, narrow street; and to wade through this mass of human vermin, would raise the ire of the most patient person that ever lived."[56] Such ugliness formed part of a youthful bravado that bespoke his own insecurity and provinciality. There was still a giant, unresolved conflict inside Sam between his warm feeling toward Blacks he knew personally in Hannibal and his fear-ridden antipathy toward Black strangers in the East.

Free of his father's disposition and his brother's despair, Sam Clemens sampled the city's murky charms. He had sufficient curiosity to attend a "model artist show" on Chatham Street, although prudery prevented him from savoring glimpses of female flesh provided by this early version of striptease. Even sixteen years later, he said how "everybody growled about

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it," denouncing it as "horrid" and "immoral."[57] Nonetheless, the city opened a wealth of new sights and sounds to his youthful curiosity, and his opinion of the town was revised favorably. "I have taken a liking to the abominable place," he confided to Pamela in October, "and every time I get ready to leave I put it off a day or so, from some unaccountable cause."[58]

Showing remarkable confidence in his own ability to earn a living, Sam pushed on to Philadelphia and obtained temporary work as a printer for the *Philadelphia Inquirer,* alerting Orion that, "unlike New York, I like this Philadelphia amazingly, and the people in it."[59] In his spare time he frequented art galleries and libraries, even though he still sounded like a hayseed in the metropolis. A massive tide of German and Irish immigration had spawned the nativist Know-Nothing Party in the 1850s, and Sam echoed their xenophobia, squawking to Orion that "there are so many abominable foreigners here (and among printers, too) who hate everything American."[60] He again voiced a lengthy litany of complaints. "I always thought the eastern people were patterns of uprightness; but I never before saw so many whisky-swilling, God-despising heathens as I find in this part of the country. I believe I am the only person in the Inquirer office that does not drink."[61] Nor did he shy away from further swipes at abolitionists and independent Black people. "How do you like 'free-soil?' I would like amazingly to see a good, old-fashioned negro."[62] Since Sam sent these letters with a view to having them reprinted by Orion, he was evolving, gradually, into a newspaper correspondent.

Before heading west again, Sam toured Independence Hall and recorded his feelings of "awe and reverence" as he entered the room where the Declaration of Independence was drafted.[63] He went on to Washington, D.C., where he marveled at the "fine specimens of architecture" and visited the halls of Congress, sending back vivid sketches of William Seward of New York and Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. "Mr. Seward is a slim, dark, bony individual, and looks like a respectable wind would blow him out of the country . . . Mr. Benton sits silent and gloomy in the midst of the din, like a lion imprisoned in a cage of monkeys, who, feeling his superiority, disdains to notice their chattering."[64] Pretty good prose for an adolescent writer.

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One spring morning in 1854, Orion, Jane, and Henry Clemens were having breakfast when Sam suddenly materialized, brandishing a gun in a menacing fashion. "You wouldn't let me buy a gun," he exclaimed, "so I bought one myself, and I am going to use it, now, in self-defense."[65] Jane Clemens was alarmed by this threat until her son dissolved in typical laughter at his prank.

Orion tried to tempt Sam with a job at the *Muscatine Journal.* He accepted the offer for a few months then ended up back at his former printing job in St. Louis. It should be mentioned that Orion had undergone a political conversion in reaction to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise and might open the western territories to slavery. Liberated by the free state atmosphere of Iowa, Orion editorialized in his paper that "the 'inevitable hour' for slavery has come . . . Slavery has culminated, and from the present, now, its decay may be dated."[66] Not yet an unabashed abolitionist, Orion was referred to locally as a "black Republican."

By his late teens, Sam Clemens had shown flashes of talent, intermixed with rank bigotry. Twenty years later he left a withering portrait of his youthful self as "a callow fool, a self-sufficient ass, a mere human tumblebug, stern in air, heaving at his bit of dung and imagining that he is remodeling the world & is entirely capable of doing it right. Ignorance, intolerance, egotism, self-assertion, opaque perception, dense & pitiful chuckle-headedness—& an almost pathetic unconsciousness of it all. That is what I was at 19–20."[67] With hindsight he attributed these unattractive features to his southern upbringing.

Whatever his grievances with Orion, Sam happily sought his protection in moments of need. After leaving his printing post in St. Louis, he went to work with Orion again, this time in Keokuk, Iowa. In December 1854, Orion had married Mary Stotts—always referred to as "Mollie"—who bore him a daughter named Jennie. Mollie seems to have induced her husband to unload his half interest in the *Muscatine Journal* and move to Keokuk, her hometown, and he set up shop in June 1855.

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Situated a bare fifty miles from Hannibal, Keokuk was a tiny town of 650 residents, with muddy streets and wooden plank sidewalks. From its third-floor office on Main Street, Orion's business, styled the Ben Franklin Book and Job Office, performed pretty banal work, printing business cards and forms—not something to set Sam's heart on fire. Sam was wooed with a promise of decent wages and a junior partnership, only to have it turn into a throwback to the bad times he had suffered with Orion in Hannibal.

Nor did the low-caliber work provide any offsetting satisfactions. With Henry Clemens and Dick Higham serving as his assistants, Sam worked on the Keokuk City Directory and other mundane projects, and blamed Orion for undermining his efforts. "They take Henry and Dick away from me too . . . they throw all my plans into disorder by taking my hands away from their work," he protested to his family. "I can't work blindly—without system."[68] By now an experienced typesetter, he had seen many professional print shops only to stumble back into the dreary tumult of working for the inept Orion.

Still, there were modest milestones to celebrate. As he sat up smoking in bed at night, Sam Clemens read voraciously and became acquainted with Charles Dickens and Edgar Allan Poe. On January 17, 1856—the 150th anniversary of Ben Franklin's birth—he stood up at Ivins House and debuted as a speaker at a printers' banquet, revealing a latent talent that must have surprised audience and speaker alike. "Blushing and slowly getting upon his feet, stammering in the start," one listener recollected, "he finally rallied his powers, and when he sat down, his speech was pronounced by all present a remarkable production of pathos and wit, with the latter, however, predominating, convulsing his hearers with round after round of applause."[69] Most significantly, Sam Clemens would soon publish three travel letters in a Keokuk paper under the pen name "Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass" and for the first time would be paid for his prose. The reading, the speaking, the writing—the faint outlines of a promising literary career were beginning to emerge.

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CHAPTER FOUR

"Darling Existence"

Throughout his life, Sam Clemens would be attracted both to moneymaking ventures that promised to yield colossal fortunes and to nostrums that would rescue humankind from disease and suffering. Before he left Keokuk in October 1856 and went off to work for a Cincinnati printer, he happened upon a book, recently published, that held forth the possibility of accomplishing both miracles in one fell swoop. Written by William L. Herndon, it was titled *Exploration of the Valley of the Amazon, Made Under Direction of the Navy Department,* and it described a glorious four-thousand-mile trek that, Mark Twain recalled, passed "through the heart of an enchanted land, a land wastefully rich in tropical wonders, a romantic land where all the birds and flowers and animals were of the museum varieties, and where the alligator and the crocodile and the monkey seemed as much at home as if they were in the Zoo."[1]

The exotic beauty of this place, however, was not the book's chief draw so much as Herndon's discussion of how Incas in the Andes chewed coca leaves, rendering them "silent and patient" as they performed prodigious feats of labor in silver mines.[2] Sam came to believe that the coca plant held extraordinary powers that he could harness. Pretty soon, he had concocted a plan to sail to the Amazon's headwaters in a quest to monopolize the coca trade and ascend into the ranks of the global rich. He felt "a longing to open up a trade in coca with the world. During months I dreamed that dream, and tried to conjure ways to get to Pará

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[a Brazilian state] and spring that splendid enterprise upon an unsuspecting planet."[3] The moment previewed much of Twain's future business career, with its grandiose schemes that often obscured practical pitfalls, treading a fine line between inspiration and pure folly.

The would-be coca mogul recruited two allies, a Keokuk physician named Martin and a youthful businessman named Ward. In August 1856, Sam told his brother Henry, in strictest confidence, that he and Ward would start for Brazil in six weeks. Sam had deliberately misled Orion, telling him Ward would venture alone to Brazil while he waited patiently in New York or New Orleans to receive a favorable report from him. "But that don't suit me," Sam confided to Henry. "My confidence in human nature does not extend quite that far. I won't depend upon Ward's judgment, or anybody's else—I want to see with my own eyes, and form my own opinion. But you know what Orion is. When he gets a notion into his head, and more especially if it is an erroneous one, the Devil can't get it out again . . . Ma knows my determination but *even she* counsels me to keep it from Orion." Orion had been talking "grandly about furnishing me with fifty or a hundred dollars in six weeks," but Sam, knowing his brother's changeable nature, did not trust a word of it.[4]

After a winter spent in Cincinnati and with only thirty dollars in his pocket, the cocksure Sam Clemens hopped a steamer to New Orleans on April 15, 1857, in an "ancient tub" christened the *Paul Jones.*[5] By this time, Martin and Ward had jettisoned the project. Always careless with details, Sam was shocked to discover a critical flaw in his thinking. In New Orleans, he "inquired about ships leaving for Pará and discovered there weren't any and learned that there probably wouldn't be any during that century."[6] Indeed, it turned out no ship had *ever* traveled from New Orleans to Pará. Looking back, Mark Twain blamed his own impulsive nature, plunging headlong into new projects, bedazzled by their supposed worth. "I have been punished many and many a time, and bitterly, for doing things and reflecting afterward, but these tortures have been of no value to me."[7]

As it happened, fate had more interesting things awaiting the twenty-one-year-old Sam Clemens than cornering the coca market. Onboard

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the *Paul Jones,* he became acquainted with its young pilot, Horace Bixby, who was so adept at his craft that he was licensed to work both the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Sam claimed he and Bixby hit it off and "pretty soon I was doing a lot of steering for him in his daylight watches."[8] Bixby would remember his first impression of Sam as "a big, shaggy-haired youth with a slow, drawling speech that was provoking to anyone that happened to be in a hurry."[9] When his Amazonian adventure proved a boondoggle, Sam begged Bixby to teach him the piloting trade on the lower Mississippi between St. Louis and New Orleans. Here lay the supreme ambition of any Hannibal boy—to be a riverboat pilot, with a salary equal to that of the U.S. vice president or a Supreme Court justice. Bixby agreed on the condition that Sam would pay him a hefty five hundred dollars, with one hundred laid out in advance, a sum Sam borrowed from his brother-in-law, William Moffett. This decision of Sam's disturbed Jane Clemens, who knew the disreputable types working the river and feared the worst for her son. "I gave him up then, for I always thought steamboating was a wicked business and was sure he would meet bad associates."[10] Jane extracted a fresh pledge that he would abstain from intoxicating liquors.

A blunt man who spat out rapid-fire instructions, the thirty-one-year-old Bixby immediately told Sam, "My boy, you must get a little memorandum-book, and every time I tell you a thing put it down right away. There's only one way to be a pilot, and that is to get this entire river by heart. You have to know it just like A B C."[11] For all his affection for Sam, he brooked no frivolity. "When I say I'll learn a man the river, I mean it," he warned Sam. "And you can depend on it, I'll learn him or kill him."[12]

Although Sam entered the job full of youthful bravado, it was a formidable undertaking: he had to master river sites and landmarks, both their nocturnal and daytime appearances, over twelve or thirteen hundred miles of broad, muddy river. He had to memorize innumerable shores, bends, reefs, snags, and sandbars, and study subtle shifts in the water's surface. "There is a light line of ripples, which no amateur can understand; a harmless-looking line of ripples, quiet and easy," which

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alerted the pilot to "the death of his ship if she gets there."[13] Nights were especially treacherous. As Bixby observed, "There were no signal-lights along the shore in those days . . . and on a dark, misty night . . . a pilot's judgment had to be founded on *absolute certainty*."[14]

Nobody had ever challenged Sam like this before. Overwhelmed with river details, he was awakened from his youthful slumber and thrust into a world of adult responsibility. The rigorous training gave structure and discipline to his vagabond character. An impossibly tough but understanding taskmaster, Bixby was impressed that Sam rose to the challenge. "Sam was always good-natured, and he had a natural taste for the river. He had a fine memory and never forgot anything I told him."[15] On another occasion, Bixby said of Sam, "In all my time I never knew a man who took to the labor of piloting with so little effort. He was born for it, just as some men are born to make poetry and some to paint pictures . . . Clemens kept on improving, and he went from one boat to another, getting better all the time."[16] This was the first time that Sam had ever really *stuck* to something. As river life weaned him from a lackadaisical adolescence, he was immeasurably proud of his progress, later boasting to Orion that "the young pilots who used to tell me, patronisingly, [*sic*] that I could never learn the river, cannot keep from showing a little of their chagrin at seeing me so far ahead of them. Permit me to 'blow my horn,' for I derive a *living* pleasure from these things."[17]

Such was the exalted status of a riverboat pilot that the Clemens clan basked in the glory of Sam becoming a cub pilot. Orion had sold his printing business in Keokuk and gone off to Tennessee with Mollie to study law and, if possible, unload some of the vaunted Tennessee land. Jane Clemens had moved in with Pamela and William Moffett in St. Louis, and Sam stayed with them whenever his boat docked there. Sam's niece Annie remembered the thrill they all felt about Sam's good fortune. "It seemed to me as if everyone was running up and down stairs and sitting on the steps to talk over the news. Piloting in those days was a dramatic and well-paid profession, and in a river town it was a great honor to have a pilot in the family."[18] Annie later told how Sam would thump the piano and sing by the hour. "He wore sideburns and had

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chestnut hair, though some call it red. It was very curly. My grandmother said that as a boy he would soak his hair in a tub of water and plaster it down to try and make it straight."[19]

Mark Twain always felt indebted to Pamela for her exceptional hospitality, for the "thousand affectionate kindnesses & services" she showed in his St. Louis days.[20] When the twenty-four-year-old Pamela married William, a man ten years her senior, he had scorned it as a match between an "old maid" and a "mouldy [*sic*] old bachelor" who was well-off.[21] A photo of Pamela shows a prim, matronly-looking woman with rimless glasses. Even when she became a semi-invalid late in life, Twain could never detect a blemish in her character, considered her incapable of deceit, and credited her with "a most kindly & gentle disposition."[22] A strict Presbyterian, she chided Sam for poaching on sacred topics and ridiculing the respectable things in life. Sam, an incorrigible tease, tried to tread gingerly with her, but often ended up upsetting her instead. On one occasion, in 1886, he wrote a revealing letter of apology. "I love you, & I am sorry for every time I have ever hurt you; but God Almighty knows I should keep on hurting you just the same if I were around; for I am built so, being merely in the image of God, but not otherwise resembling him enough to be mistaken for him by anybody but a very near-sighted person."[23] One clearly needed a rather thick skin to survive as Mark Twain's sister.

On the river Sam could escape family complications and fully emerge from Orion's shadow. With his restless soul, he found the mighty, rushing river his natural element and would long insist that his four years on the water were his life's most enjoyable. He began to perfect his deadpan storytelling style, letting punch lines explode in the listener's mind, not on the speaker's face, and his companions were often convulsed with laughter. "Piloting on the Mississippi River was not work to me; it was play—delightful play, vigorous play, adventurous play—and I loved it," he said.[24] The river never relinquished a drop of its romance. He spoke so nostalgically about it that his housekeeper later declared that "he loved the Mississippi almost as much as he loved a person, and he was always talking about it—what a wonderful river it was."[25] Those Mississippi

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years became the rapturous interlude of his life, distilling all the freedom of youth. "Oh! that was the darling existence," he pronounced forty years later. "There has been nothing comparable to it in my life since."[26]

This idyllic period left little time to spare for literary endeavors. "I cannot correspond with a newspaper," he explained to Orion and Mollie, "because when one is learning the river, he is not allowed to do or think of anything else."[27] He did manage, nonetheless, to publish some pieces in the St. Louis *Missouri Republican* and the New Orleans *Daily Crescent*. Commenting on the Lincoln-Douglas Senate race in Illinois, he leaned toward conservative positions, noting that Know-Nothings, ex-Whigs, and Democrats concurred that Stephen Douglas "ought to be" the winner.[28] He found time to read John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and was already taken with "the Arch-Fiend's terrible energy!"[29] After reading *The Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine, still a taboo volume, he began to toy with more unorthodox views on religion. "Disgusted by hypocrisy and bigotry," he later said of Paine, "he made war upon religion, fully believing that he was doing a good work."[30] Luckily for Twain, he befriended a pilot named George Ealer who "would read Shakespeare to me; not just casually but by the hour, when it was his watch, and I was steering."[31] Around this time, Sam Clemens also encountered the iconoclastic view of Delia Salter Bacon, expressed in her book *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded,* that Francis Bacon and others had written the plays attributed to the actor William Shakespeare. He also ducked behind a barrel to read *The Fortunes of Nigel* by Sir Walter Scott—a writer he came to detest cordially.

First as a printer, then as a pilot, Sam Clemens had chosen two professions that promised to broaden his vision. With a true writer's instincts, he had already begun cramming a notebook with jottings that gave a glimpse into his busy mind. He had started tutoring himself in French, transcribing long lists of words and phrases. In a preview of his varied interests, he wrote out classifications of human appearance made by phrenologists, who believed that bodily constitutions conformed to psychological types. Describing the hot-blooded "sanguine" temperament, he penned a self-portrait of his own mercurial personality. "It is very

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sensitive and is first deeply hurt at a slight, the next emotion is violent rage, and in a few moments the cause and the result are both forgotten for the time being. It often forgives, but never entirely forgets an injury."[32]

Sam wasn't the only Clemens brother plying the Mississippi River: in 1858 he had wangled his brother Henry, almost twenty, a job as a "mud clerk"—a subordinate purser—on his sidewheeler, the *Pennsylvania*. However testy he could be toward Orion and Pamela, Sam lavished a selfless love on Henry. Three years younger than Sam, the witty Henry enjoyed reading, had a retentive memory, and exhibited a well-stocked mind. Docile, obedient, he was the adorable blue-eyed boy, the clear family favorite. Even though Henry sometimes tattled to their mother about Sam's misdeeds, when it came to Henry, Sam's usual cynicism seemed suspended. Henry was his confidant, his best comrade, and he later said that, except for his wife, Livy, he was never in such "entire sympathy" with a human being.[33] "He was the best boy in the whole region," Mark Twain recalled. "He never did harm to anybody, he never offended anybody. He was exasperatingly good. He had an overflowing abundance of goodness."[34] A model boy, but lovable. Orion noted the tight bond between his two younger brothers, describing Henry as "quiet, observing, thoughtful, leaning on Sam for protection."[35]

Sam's protective impulse toward Henry was palpable. In *Life on the Mississippi,* Twain tells how, on a trip aboard the *Pennsylvania,* the brutal pilot William Brown unfairly accused Henry of lying, grabbed a huge chunk of coal, and was ready to smash it over Henry's head when Sam rushed between them. According to Sam's account, he "hit Brown a good honest blow which stretched him out. I had committed the crime of crimes—I had lifted my hand against a pilot on duty . . . I stuck to him and pounded him with my fists a considerable time . . . but in the end he struggled free and jumped up and sprang to the wheel."[36] A contemporaneous letter Sam sent to Mollie Clemens gives a slightly different version of what happened on June 3: Henry started out of the pilothouse—

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Brown jumped up and collared him—turned him half way around and *struck him in the face!*—and him nearly six feet high—struck my little brother. I was wild from that moment."[37] Sam, though ordered off the boat, had made a point about the need for people to respect his younger brother. He would now take a different boat, hoping to rejoin the *Pennsylvania* when Brown left.

One night in New Orleans, before the *Pennsylvania* departed, the two brothers sat on a levee and discussed a topic never broached before—steamboat disasters. With brotherly solicitude, Sam advised Henry: "In case of accident, whatever you do, don't lose your head—the passengers will do that. Rush for the hurricane deck and to the life-boat . . . When the boat is launched, help the women and children into it. Don't get in yourself. The river is only a mile wide. You can swim ashore easily enough."[38] While the chief pilot bore the main responsibility for safeguarding passengers, the brothers agreed that subordinates should "at least stick to the boat, and give such minor service as chance might throw in the way."[39] Sam would soon wonder about the repercussions of this conversation as the *Pennsylvania,* with Henry aboard, began its journey upriver, while Sam followed in the *Alfred T. Lacey* two days later. Fifty years afterward, Twain reported that around the time of the voyage he had an eerie dream in St. Louis of amazing vividness: he saw Henry's corpse stretched out in a metal casket propped on two chairs, dressed in his clothing. A bouquet of white roses rested on his chest, with a lone crimson flower planted in the middle.

At dawn on June 13, 1858, the *Pennsylvania* blew up and burned near Helena, Arkansas. Three or four of its eight boilers exploded with such fierce intensity that the front part of the boat whirled into the sky, only to collapse back onto the stricken craft and set it aflame. The inferno claimed scores of lives, including that of pilot William Brown. Among those severely injured was Henry Clemens. Sam heard of the calamity when the *Alfred T. Lacey* reached Greenville, Mississippi, and someone hollered from the dock: "The *Pennsylvania* is blown up just below Memphis, at Ship Island! One hundred and fifty lives lost!"[40] That evening a shaken Sam Clemens learned from a Memphis paper that Henry was

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wounded but still alive. As he pieced together the story, he learned that Henry and a Mr. Wood had been blown into the water by the tremendous blast and had "struck out for shore, which was only a few hundred yards away; but Henry presently said he believed he was not hurt, . . . and therefore would swim back to the boat and help save the wounded. So they parted, and Henry returned."[41] Later on, Mark Twain tortured himself with the thought that Henry, by heading back to the disaster, had heeded his counsel and paid a terrible price.

But a letter that Sam wrote to Mollie Clemens five days afterward suggests that Henry could not possibly have returned to the burning craft. "Henry was asleep—was blown up—then fell back on the hot boilers, and I suppose that rubbish fell on him, for he is injured internally. He got into the water and swam to shore, and got into the flatboat with the other survivors. He had nothing on but his wet shirt, and he lay there burning up with a southern sun and freezing in the wind till the Kate Frisbee came along. His wounds were not dressed till he got to Memphis, 15 hours after the explosion. He was senseless and motionless for 12 hours after that."[42] There is no mention here of Henry heroically returning to the boat. Was this the accurate version, or did Sam Clemens alter the story to conceal his complicity in Henry's fate? Or did he later feel the need to find some redeeming feature and impose a heroic narrative on Henry?

By June 15, Sam reached the Cotton Exchange in Memphis, which had been turned into a makeshift hospital for the thirty-two scalded victims laid out on pallets on the floor. One observer recorded Twain's dramatic response to seeing his stricken brother, saying that as he "approached the bedside of the wounded man, his feelings so much overcame him, at the scalded and emaciated form before him, that he sunk [*sic*] to the floor overpowered."[43] Twain himself later wrote, "The sight I saw when I entered the large hall was new and strange to me. Two long rows of prostrate forms—more than forty, in all—and every face and head a shapeless wad of loose raw cotton. It was a grewsome [*sic*] spectacle. I watched there six days and nights, and a very melancholy experience it was . . . I saw many poor fellows removed to the 'death-room,' and saw them no

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more afterward."[44] With his lungs burned by steam, his body singed by flames, Henry had been brought to Memphis "in a senseless and almost lifeless condition."[45] Even though his face was not disfigured, the sight of his charred body unnerved his older brother. In the coming days, Henry would be only fitfully conscious and coherent, leaving Sam alone with his terrible thoughts.

Sam was impressed by the ministrations of Dr. Thomas Peyton—"What a magnificent man he was!"—who tended Henry with such devotion that, by the sixth night after the accident, it looked as if he might recover.[46] "I believe he is out of danger and will get well," he assured Sam before leaving for the evening.[47] Since he wanted Henry to sleep undisturbed and feared moaning patients might awaken him, Dr. Peyton entrusted Sam with a mission: if Henry woke up, he should have the doctor on duty give him an eighth of a grain of morphine. The scenario Dr. Peyton envisioned did occur, and Henry was roused from sleep by groans. When Sam approached the young medical student on duty, the latter grew flustered. "I have no way of measuring," he protested. "I don't know how much an eighth of a grain would be." As Henry's agitation worsened, Sam was beside himself. "If you have studied drugs," he told the medical student, "you ought to be able to judge an eighth of a grain of morphine."[48] Prodded by Sam, the young man measured a small amount of morphine onto the tip of a knife and administered it to Henry. Although Henry fell asleep, he was dead by morning, and Sam always suspected that an excessive morphine dose had hastened his brother's tragic demise.

Even before Henry died, an overwrought Sam poured out his grief to Mollie Clemens. "Long before this reaches you, my poor Henry,—my darling, my pride, my glory, my *all,* will have finished his blameless career, and the light of my life will have gone out in utter darkness," he wrote, sounding more like a father or lover than a brother. "The horrors of three days have swept over me—they have blasted my youth and left me an old man before my time. Mollie, there are grey hairs in my head to-night. For forty-eight hours I labored at the bedside of my poor burned and bruised, but uncomplaining brother, and then the star of my hope went out and left me in the gloom of despair."[49] With aching sadness, he

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prayed to God to spare Henry and "to pour out the fulness of his just wrath upon my wicked head, but have mercy, mercy, mercy upon that unoffending boy."[49] Religious feeling still lay buried somewhere deep inside Sam Clemens, but such savage hurts as this would shake his faith.

In the immediate aftermath of his brother's death, Sam, exhausted from his harrowing vigil, slept for hours. Then he rose and went to view Henry's remains. Touched by his youthful beauty, some Memphis ladies had chipped in for a metal casket for Henry instead of the standard wooden model. Sam was startled to enter the room and see Henry just as he had pictured him in the dream, minus one detail: there were no white flowers on his chest. Then an elderly lady appeared with a large white bouquet, containing a red rose at its center, to complete the scene. The entire Clemens clan trooped back to Hannibal for the funeral at the First Presbyterian Church, and Henry was laid to rest beside Judge Clemens in the Old Baptist Cemetery. The stoical Jane Clemens had now suffered staggering losses: her husband and four of her seven children. In 1847 a Hannibal paper estimated that only half the children in town lived into adulthood, so her sad plight was not entirely atypical.

Of course, the story of Henry's death—his allegedly heroic but doomed behavior in returning to a burning ship, the uncanny dream and its realization—relies on Mark Twain's later and ever-fallible memory, yet it formed part of family lore. As Pamela's daughter Annie recalled, people in Memphis "had sent a young man up to St. Louis with Uncle Sam, who was so overcome with grief that they were afraid he would go insane. He was shadowed for years by the feeling that he was in a measure responsible for Henry's death." Twain expunged the dream story from *Life on the Mississippi* for fear of upsetting his mother, but Annie later testified that he needn't have worried. Sam had already told of the dream "before they started on the fatal trip," so that Jane Clemens knew of the dream "and often talked about it. He had told them about it before he went away but the family were not impressed; indeed they were amused that he took it so seriously."[50]

Mark Twain was never reconciled to his beloved brother's loss. As late as 1879 he even visited a medium and sought to communicate with

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Henry. His reaction to the death revealed much about Sam Clemens at twenty-two: his melodramatic emotions, his capacity for guilt bordering on self-flagellation, his tendency to brood endlessly on past errors. Compounding his difficulty was that instead of his pure, loving feelings for Henry, he was left grappling with his ongoing psychodrama with Orion. The pangs of guilt never deserted him. In 1876 Twain published a story, "The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut," in which a hideous dwarf, representing the narrator's conscience, torments him with sadistic glee and accuses him of betraying his younger brother's trust. "He always lovingly trusted in you with a fidelity that your manifold treacheries were not able to shake. He followed you about like a dog, content to suffer wrong and abuse if he might only be with you." The narrator, he says, had pushed his brother into an ice-covered brook, then roared with laughter as the boy struggled in freezing water. "Man, you will never forget the gentle, reproachful look he gave you as he struggled shivering out, if you live a thousand years!"[51] For Mark Twain, when it came to hellish torments of conscience, there existed no statute of limitations. In later years, he told a friend that his entire life was "one long apology," with him down on his knees pleading for forgiveness.[52]

Right before the steamboat debacle, Sam Clemens, a "heedless and giddy lad," enjoyed a romantic adventure that would exert a mysterious grip on his imagination until his death.[53] In May 1858, while awaiting departure of a steamboat in New Orleans, he wandered over one night to another boat, the *John J. Roe,* one of whose officers he knew, William Youngblood. The ship had a piano and a big deck for dancing, and there Sam met fourteen-year-old Laura Wright of Warsaw, Missouri (not to be confused with Laura Hawkins of Hannibal), who had come downriver on the ship with her uncle Youngblood. The daughter of a rich Missouri judge, she was entrancing to Sam, who found her irresistible. In his frankly romantic retelling, he evoked the "enchanted vision" of "that

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comely child, that charming child . . . that unspoiled little maid, that fresh flower of the woods and the prairies." He limned an idealized girl "in the unfaded bloom of her youth, with her plaited tails dangling from her young head and her white summer frock puffing about in the wind."[54] Twenty years later, in a more circumspect mood, he described Laura, by then a teacher, to one of her pupils: "She was a very little girl, with a very large spirit, a long memory, a wise head, a great appetite for books, a good mental digestion, with grave ways, & inclined to introspection—an unusual girl."[55]

Sam Clemens—and then Mark Twain—found a special charm in beautiful young girls who trembled on the brink of womanhood, and Laura's appeal was instantaneous. "I was not four inches from the girl's elbow during our waking hours for the next three days."[56] At the end of this delirious encounter, they parted with a prophecy—"We shall meet again 30 years from now"—and Laura gave Sam a small gold ring as a gift.[57] Mark Twain would commemorate their parting date—May 6, 1858—as sacred for the rest of his days.

With his penchant for rewriting history, Mark Twain made it sound as if he had never met Laura again after this intoxicating meeting. Yet his correspondence makes clear that he swapped letters with Laura for a while and visited her at least once at her home in Warsaw. As they corresponded, some misunderstanding arose that led to hurt feelings, and both were too proud to hazard the first move toward a rapprochement. We know all this because in February 1861, Sam consulted a fortune teller in New Orleans named Madame Caprell, who read horoscopes. She got many things wrong, Sam believed, but described the contretemps with Laura with astonishing accuracy, claiming Mrs. Wright had sabotaged the relationship.

Afterward Sam wrote in detail to Orion and Mollie about the session: "But that about that girl's [mother] being 'cranky,' and playing the devil with me, *was* about the neatest thing she performed—for although I have never spoken of the matter, I happen to know that she spoke truth. The young lady has been beaten by the old one, though, through the romantic agency of intercepted letters, and the girl still thinks *I* was in fault—

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and always will, I reckon, for I don't see how she'll ever find out the contrary . . . But drat the woman, she *did* tell the truth, and I won't deny it. But she said *I* would speak to Miss Laura first—and I'll stake my last shirt on it, she missed it there."[58] Sam had listened to Madame Caprell in silence for half an hour, transfixed by the "very startling things" and "wonderful guesses" she had made.[59] Three years later, he inquired of his mother and sister, "What has become of that girl of mine that got married? I mean Laura Wright"—now Laura Dake.[60] Not long after, he had a dream of meeting Laura when she was out driving in a carriage and they "said good bye and shook hands."[61] Still monitoring her doings in 1867, he wrote that one of the "old sweethearts I have been dreaming of so long has got five children now."[62]

The image of Laura Wright would never fade from Mark Twain's highly susceptible imagination, tantalizing him with an imperishable ideal of love. She would become the model for his future fascination with young girls who hovered on the borderline between girlhood and womanhood—chaste, pure, perfect—virginal girls on the eve of puberty. The whole relationship was as insubstantial as a dream, yet Mark Twain, an arch romantic, hung weighty memories on this slender wisp of reality. Laura would appear as a character in *The Gilded Age* and would reappear as his "dream-sweetheart" in the 1898 piece "My Platonic Sweetheart." As with his wife, Mark Twain romanticized and spiritualized his pursuit of a considerably younger female. In his rosy memories, Laura Wright would stay eternally young, never facing the tougher test of real human relationships, fraught with difficulties. Instead, she was allowed to float high above any conceivable reality in a gauzy sphere of untouched, ethereal perfection.

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CHAPTER FIVE

"A Ragged and Dirty Bunch"

On April 9, 1859, after an impressively short two-year span of learning navigation, Samuel Clemens, at twenty-three, received his license as a steamboat pilot for journeys between St. Louis and New Orleans, a credential that catapulted him upward in the river world and for which his tutor, Captain Horace Bixby, was justly proud. "There never was a better boy," he declared. "He was bound to be great, whatever his course in life. I believe that he would have owned a line of steamboats had he kept to the river."[1] After the disapproving attitudes of Judge Clemens and Orion, Sam needed an older male figure who believed in him implicitly, and he had found that man in Horace Bixby. After his first run on the *Alfred T. Lacey,* Sam was assigned a pilot job on the *City of Memphis,* the largest boat operating on the river. Then, in October, he assumed the helm of the *A. B. Chambers,* winning general admiration. "He was not a great pilot, but he was a brave fellow," said first mate Grant Marsh. "He didn't know what fear was . . . When the steamboat went aground north of Cairo . . . Twain braved ice floes to lead a party scavenging for fuel."[2]

With his new financial security and a fair measure of status, Sam Clemens grew cocky, sprouting muttonchop whiskers and trading in his old garments for fancy new ones, including patent leather shoes, striped shirts, and white duck pants. Enjoying the role of big shot, he made a point of flashing large bills. In a bit of braggadocio, he told Orion about paying his pilot dues at the Western Boatmen's Benevolent Association,

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where he liked "to let the d–d rascals get a glimpse of a hundred dollar bill peeping out from amongst notes of smaller dimensions, whose faces I do *not* exhibit! You will despise this egotism, but I tell you there is a 'stern joy' in it."[3]

Even though Sam Clemens published little during his four-year stint on the river, he squandered nothing from a literary standpoint. He harvested the anecdotal riches of serving on more than a dozen boats and was so content that he foresaw a peaceful, never-ending life afloat. "Time drifted smoothly and prosperously on, and I supposed—and hoped—that I was going to follow the river the rest of my days, and die at the wheel when my mission was ended."[4]

Then the sudden outbreak of the Civil War shut traffic on the Mississippi and started the slow demise of the steamboat world Sam had cherished. The river that had witnessed so many joyous scenes was now stripped of color and brimmed with menacing black gunboats. Painfully ambivalent about the war, Sam Clemens reflected the manifold cross-currents roiling Missouri. "It was hard for us to get our bearings," he admitted.[5] In general, he opposed secession, but that didn't mean he opposed slavery. In the 1860 presidential race, he had favored John Bell and the Constitutional Union Party, which was dedicated to preserving the Union and was neutral on slavery, and he would flip-flop on whether to side with the North or the South. When South Carolina seceded in December 1860, he and a copilot fell into a heated argument. "My pilot-mate was a New Yorker. He was strong for the Union; so was I . . . A month later the secession atmosphere had considerably thickened on the Lower Mississippi, and I became a rebel; so did he."[6]

Sam Clemens happened to be in New Orleans on January 26, 1861, when Louisiana left the Union, and he later recorded this impression in his notebook: "Great rejoicing. Flags, Dixie, soldiers."[7] The next day he sent a note to a friend, his oldest surviving letter written to somebody outside his family. In a wild, anarchic style, sprinkled with humor, he showed an early skill at comic prose, but also an ability to shroud—and evade—grave subjects in a blizzard of jokes. There is scarcely a serious word about secession, just yoshing about a pup named "Secession" and a

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hodgepodge of gossip about girls and trivia.[8] Sam sidestepped entirely the historic significance of the moment.

While steaming south on the Mississippi aboard the *Alonzo Child,* he first heard tidings at Vicksburg of the firing on Fort Sumter. His crew, captained by secessionist John De Haven, rejoiced, leaving no doubt of their Confederate leanings: "We hoisted stars & bars & played Dixie," Twain wrote.[9] A few days later, when the boat steamed into New Orleans, the Confederate flag fluttered from its jack staff, with Sam serving as one of its pilots. All romance was suddenly drained from the job, superseded by peril. As his niece Annie Moffett recalled of her uncle, "He was obsessed with the fear that he might be arrested by government agents and forced to act as a pilot on a government gunboat while a man stood by with a pistol ready to shoot him if he showed the least sign of a false move."[10] In traveling the river, Sam had passed by a string of secessionist states, disproportionately exposing him to the southern viewpoint.

At this stage of his life he was largely apolitical but abruptly found himself in a situation where he no longer enjoyed the luxury of straddling both sides. One pilot reckoned that of 128 pilots on the lower Mississippi, only five favored the Union, and they were threatened with being blackballed from future work if they served the North. The following year, when Jane Clemens tried to collect a $200 debt that Will Bowen owed to Sam, Bowen grumbled that "no secesh [i.e., secessionist] ever should have $1.00 of his money . . . I said Mr. B, Sam is no secesh." Jane reminded him that when they were on the *Alonzo Child* together "they quarreled and Sam let go the wheel to whip Will for talking secesh and made Will hush."[11]

Sam found himself on the last boat to slip through the Union blockade at Memphis, shutting the lower Mississippi to commercial traffic. The ship was shelled by batteries at Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis, shattering glass and shredding smokestacks on the voyage's last night. As Bixby observed of Sam, "He had tasted a bit of the difficulties of war; blockades were to be run, and hazard was to take the place of another charm the river had . . . His boat's smokestacks had bullet-holes in them—and the Civil War had only begun." Yet Sam Clemens swallowed

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hard, reflecting on the grim choices he faced. "I'm not very anxious to get up into a glass perch and be shot at by either side," he said. "I'll go home and reflect on the matter."[13] As a Confederate pilot, he would be exposed to ceaseless danger, but as a Union pilot, he would also face the double jeopardy of being suspected of southern sympathies. Describing her uncle's profound quandary, Annie Moffett observed that while he showed reverence for the Union and the American flag, "he was a Southerner, his friends were all Southern, his sympathies were with the South."[14] His river experiences had only deepened his ties to the South as he worked with predominantly southern pilots and plied the *lower* stretch of the Mississippi between St. Louis and New Orleans.

With Jane Clemens favoring secession and Orion strong for the Union, Annie noted Sam's "divided loyalty and the emotional strain he was under."[15] She said that when he came to St. Louis he was "almost afraid of leaving the house" and began to hide with a neighbor.[16] Barring nosy intruders, Jane Clemens issued "strict orders that if anyone called and asked for Mr. Clemens she was to be called."[17] Sam returned to Hannibal only to discover that federal troops occupied a town only recently bedecked with Confederate flags. At the wharf, he and two other pilots were swiftly approached by a Union lieutenant, taken under arrest, and brought to St. Louis. According to pilot Absalom C. Grimes, Union general John B. Gray attempted to coax them into serving as pilots on Union troop ships. When Gray got sidetracked by female visitors, the three pilots skedaddled out a side door and escaped to safety.

In terribly fractured Missouri, with families fiercely split over the war, the state contributed soldiers to both northern and southern armies. Mark Twain later evoked the violent, internecine dissension that engulfed Missouri, a border state riven "between Unionist and Confederate occupations, sudden maraudings and bush-whackings and raids."[18] The pro-southern governor, Claiborne Jackson, tried futilely to push through a bill of secession and flouted Washington's call for troops, telling Lincoln, "Not one man will Missouri furnish to carry on any such unholy crusade against her Southern sisters," and he interpreted the entry of Union troops as an "invasion."[19] Around the time Sam malingered in

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St. Louis, Captain Nathaniel Lyon and pro-Union troops swooped down on Camp Jackson, an encampment of pro-southern state militia established by the governor, who were poised to seize a huge cache of weapons at the federal arsenal. When Lyon publicly marched his captives through the streets, it provoked two days of riots, but the bloody encounter left the federal government in full control of the city.

To counter this foray, Governor Jackson passed a bill that transformed the old militia into the Missouri State Guard. It was not aligned with the Confederacy but was clearly designed to resist any federal incursion. It was headed by General Sterling Price and commanded in northeast Missouri by Thomas A. Harris, who had operated the Hannibal telegraph. One day a stranger under the assumed name of Smith arrived at the Moffett residence in St. Louis with a specific mission. "He had come," recalled Annie, "with the wild project of forming a company to join General Price. Uncle Sam, tired of his life of inaction and the role of semi-prisoner, joyously agreed to the plan."[20] Debarred from his river job and cooped up with his family, Sam may have seen no plausible alternative. Nothing in his behavior typed him as a rabid, fire-eating Confederate, although he was probably more enthusiastic than he later let on. It was likely Sam who printed a letter in the *Hannibal Messenger* that reported: "The boys are responding bravely to the call of the Governor" and were ready "to strike when the proper time comes."[21]

With Union forces patrolling Hannibal, Sam and other young men met secretly one night and formed a militia in response to Governor Jackson's call for fifty thousand troops to beat back Yankee invaders. For two memorable weeks, Sam would serve as a second lieutenant in a Missouri State outfit known as the Marion Rangers (also called the Ralls County Rangers) composed of his Hannibal compatriots. Talkative on almost every conceivable topic, Mark Twain withheld a full account of his experience until December 1885 when he knew he had dodged this touchy subject long enough and penned a semifictional article for the *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* called "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed."[22] Technically a member of a volunteer company, he had never served in the Confederacy, but he would admit numerous

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times to having been a "rebel" in the Missouri State Guard, whose Confederate tenor was transparent. Later on, the Missouri State Guard was absorbed into the Confederate army.

In "The Private History," Twain minimized his weeks with the pro-Confederate militia by playing it mostly for laughs, sometimes reducing his service to a rollicking jaunt by harmless, overaged boys who knew nothing of combat. For years he would employ clowning to mask the gravity of the situation and lampoon himself as a laughable coward. He followed this strategy in private correspondence too, writing after the war to Confederate general M. Jeff Thompson: "I was a soldier in the rebel army in Missouri for two weeks once, we never won any victories to speak of. We never could get the enemy to stand still when we wanted to fight, & we were generally on the move when the enemy wanted to fight."[23] In another letter, he explained facetiously that he was "incapacitated by fatigue" through persistent retreating.[24]

"The Private History" starts as a boyish lark, with Twain contending that he was "grateful to have a change, new scenes, new occupations, a new interest. In my thoughts that was as far as I went."[25] In slapstick style, he describes the contingent of bumbling young men setting out from Hannibal on a dark night and heading toward Ralls County, ten miles away, where they swore allegiance to Missouri, their heads stuffed with noble legends of southern chivalry. According to one participant, the group had no "tents, arms or commissary stores," while Jane Clemens remembered a "ragged and dirty bunch."[26] The young men poach peaches and melons and curl up in corncribs at night. Twain seasons his story with funny bits about stubborn horses and mules. In later notes, he portrayed his youthful self thus: "Sam took mosquito blisters for a mortal disease. Used to sit on his horse in prairie on picket duty & cry & curse & go to sleep in the hot sun."[27] He suffered a troublesome saddle boil and sprained his ankle tumbling from a hayloft. In "The Private History," the playful romp is punctuated now and then by somber thoughts. When Union soldiers approach, the Marion Rangers crouch in a ravine on a rainy night and the author reflects: "The drenching we were getting was misery enough, but a deeper misery still was the reflection

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that the halter might end us before we were a day older. A death of this shameful sort had not occurred to us as being among the possibilities of war. It took the romance all out of the campaign."[28] After more episodes of "horse-play and school-boy hilarity," a Union soldier, dimly visible in the night, though not in uniform, appears in the forest.[29] Twain fires at the man and is horrified to see him sprawled dead in a puddle of blood. "The thought shot through me that I was a murderer; that I had killed a man—a man who had never done me any harm."[30]

It turned out that Sam was one of six people who fired simultaneously on the unarmed man, so the burden of guilt was equally shared. From its earlier, jocular tone, the reminiscence darkens into a searing indictment of war's cruelty. Sam can't banish thoughts of the death because "the taking of that unoffending life seemed such a wanton thing. And it seemed an epitome of war—the killing of strangers against whom you feel no personal animosity . . . My campaign was spoiled . . . I resolved to retire from this avocation of sham soldiership while I could have some remnant of my self-respect."[31]

However eloquent and heartfelt, the elegiac antiwar message concerned war in general, avoiding the critical question of what *this* war was all about: the preservation of the Union and, ultimately, slavery's extinction. In the end, "The Private History" is unsatisfying because it is devoid of any political or ideological content. Instead of rectifying Twain's twenty-four-year omission of what he did during the war, it left many critical questions dangling in the air—the sure sign of an unresolved conflict. The piece was Twain at his best and at his worst: one part sage, one part buffoon. It is also impossible to credit the story of the shot soldier. One of Sam's fellow soldiers, Absalom Grimes, said nobody was killed, only a horse, and that Mark Twain invented the human killing—a conclusion echoed by most Twain biographers.[32] Twain ends "The Private History" with a witticism: "I knew more about retreating than the man that invented retreating."[33]

Twain's misadventure with the Marion Rangers ends when the detachment receives word of a Union regiment bearing down on them. "So about half of our fifteen, including myself, mounted and left on the

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instant"; Twain wrote, "the others yielded to persuasion and staid—staid through the war."[34] To add spice to his tale, Twain claimed that the Union colonel in hot pursuit was Ulysses S. Grant, but the latter's thrust into Missouri against General Thomas Harris came somewhat later. Making light of his wartime experience, Mark Twain insisted that the company crumbled because they "ran out of Worcestershire sauce."[35] Its early dissolution enabled him to claim he had not deserted, but he was never quite sure of that. As he told a friend sixty years later, he was "troubled in my conscience a little, for I had enlisted, and was not clear as to my lawful right to disenlist."[36] His brief war tenure later left Mark Twain with an agonizing dilemma. He knew northerners would look suspiciously on his service on the Confederate side, while southerners would be no less contemptuous of his overly hasty desertion. Clearly Sam Clemens held glaringly ambivalent feelings about the war. He believed enough in secession to join a militia but opted out with a convenient speed that suggests something less than stern devotion to the southern cause. It is telling that Twain should have left such a welter of confusion about one of his life's most consequential decisions.

Luckily for Sam, Orion never wavered in his fealty to the Union or its war aims. While Sam mocked his brother's mutable views on politics, he conceded, with some overstatement, his consistency on one all-important issue: "Born and reared among slaves and slave-holders, he was yet an abolitionist from his boyhood to his death."[37] If Orion was a figure of fun, he was also high-minded. Of his absentminded brother, Sam said that he had "a grave mien and big earnest eyes" with "a precocious intellect, and a voracious appetite for books and study."[38] His switch from Whig to Republican had won plaudits from his St. Louis mentor, Judge Edward Bates. Bates had been a losing presidential contender against Lincoln, who then rewarded him with a cabinet appointment as attorney general. A former slaveholder who freed his slaves, Bates was an almost

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biblical-looking figure, with a full white beard, who helped to solidify Lincoln's support among moderate Republicans.

In January 1861, Orion traveled to St. Louis to solicit a government post from Bates and dragooned Sam into this lobbying campaign, asking him to send Bates a letter "recommending me for a clerkship . . . It will be a great advantage to me to get some such office, as I can then support myself and family, which will be a huge gratification, and probably be able to pay some debts, which will also be gratifying."[39] Once in office in March, Bates duly urged Secretary of State William Seward to name Orion as secretary of a territory. While Bates didn't submit a breathless endorsement of Orion and conceded he possessed only middling talents, he praised him as "honest & manly" and noted that he had braved "opposition amounting almost to persecution" for espousing Republican views in slaveholding territory.[40] The good news for Orion came through on March 27 when he was appointed secretary of the newly formed Nevada Territory—second in power only to the governor—with a yearly salary of $1,800. Sam, who envied his brother's newfound "distinction" and "financial splendor," was to accompany him.[41] Sam would thus be sprung, ironically, from the Civil War by Orion's solid Republican credentials and high-level contact in the Lincoln administration.

Stuck in political limbo after defecting from the Marion Rangers, Sam must have viewed Orion's appointment as a godsend and happily seized the chance to escape the moral quandary presented by the national conflict. Attorney General Bates had taken a tough, pitiless stand against secessionist partisans in Missouri, arguing that arrest alone was too lenient for them. "They should be *summarily shot by thousands,*" he decided.[42] Sam Clemens would sneak out of Missouri under the auspices of an attorney general who might well have had him executed. Orion, bogged down in debt, needed to borrow money to make the Nevada trip, and Sam, still flush with cash from the river, struck a deal with him: if Orion excused his recent Confederate escapade, he would pay their joint passage overland. There also existed an expectation that Sam would serve as the private secretary to the new territorial secretary. He

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imagined that the war would last only three months and he would then resume his lovely idyll on the Mississippi. The detour, however, would prove more than temporary and would free Sam Clemens to redefine his personality far from the stifling constraints of Missouri and its slavery, starting his slow, halting, and never-quite-complete transformation into a northerner.

On July 18, Sam and his brother left St. Louis and set off on a marathon trip westward to the Nevada Territory. The conscientious Orion, noted Sam, toted along "six pounds of Unabridged Dictionary."[43] Although he didn't know it, Sam Clemens had made an irrevocable break from his past life in Missouri. Three days later, Union troops suffered a catastrophic rout at Bull Run, underscoring that the war would be no short-lived affair. As his steamboat, the *Sioux City,* traversed the Missouri River to St. Joseph, on the western edge of the state, Sam was giddily excited at the prospect of "the long strange journey" ahead and of the "curious new world" he would inhabit.[44] When the brothers arrived in St. Joseph, they booked passage on the overland stagecoach to Carson City, Nevada Territory, meaning they would ride behind large teams of horses and mules for eighteen days and nights. In his unforgettable, fictionalized chronicle of the trip, *Roughing It,* Mark Twain resurrected "the wild sense of freedom" as he headed west, wedged into a stagecoach alongside stacks of mail packed in with the passengers, a jolting, hell-for-leather ride "through sagebrush, over sand and alkali plains, wolves and Indians, starvation and smallpox—everything to make the journey interesting."[45]

As he describes his departure for Carson City, one feels all the footloose, carefree excitement of young Sam Clemens lighting out for the territory, shedding the burdens of his past and experiencing pristine feelings of joy. "It was a superb summer morning, and all the landscape was brilliant with sunshine. There was a freshness and breeziness, too, and an exhilarating sense of emancipation from all sorts of cares and responsibilities, that almost made us feel that the years we had spent in the close, hot city, toiling and slaving, had been wasted and thrown away."[46]

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He smoked his pipe with exquisite pleasure aboard a "great swinging and swaying" stagecoach, "drawn by six handsome horses."[47] Travel would always be a sovereign remedy for his troubles. Not surprisingly, he immortalized the Pony Express rider, who "was usually a little bit of a man, brim full of spirit and endurance . . . he must be always ready to leap into the saddle and be off like the wind!"[48]

Racing across country that was brand-new to him, Sam didn't distinguish himself by his tolerance for the new sights and sounds and he reserved special bile for Native Americans. In the wild country west of Salt Lake City, he wrote, "We came across the wretchedest type of mankind I have ever seen, . . . I refer to the Goshoot [*sic*] Indians. From what we could see and all we could learn, they are very considerably inferior to even the despised Digger Indians of California; inferior to all races of savages on our continent."[49] He described their poverty-stricken existence in virulently racist terms, an encounter, he asserted, that cured him of the "mellow moonshine of romance" about Indians.[50] Resorting to the most scurrilous language, he called the Goshoots "treacherous, filthy and repulsive."[51] Mark Twain showed no early enlightenment in his view of Native Americans nor any awareness of how white settlement had shaped their often lowly situation. With Blacks, he would be capable of considerable growth, but it would take much more time and experience for him to graduate to a higher level of awareness with Native communities.

As reported in *Roughing It,* Sam's first encounter with the Mormons in Salt Lake City brought forth equally unsparing reactions. He picked up a copy of the Mormon Bible and subjected it to a scathing critique—funny if unfair—that derided the tome as so sleepy and pretentious it constituted "chloroform in print. If Joseph Smith composed this book, the act was a miracle—keeping awake while he did it was, at any rate."[52] He drew laughs from a burlesque monologue in which he had the polygamist Brigham Young bemoan the bother of having to sleep with seventy-two wives. "It appeared to me that the whole seventy-two women snored at once. The roar was deafening . . . Take my word for it, ten or eleven

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wives is all you need—never go over it."[53] Mark Twain allowed that the Mormon code of morals was "unobjectionable," even as he grumbled that it was swiped from the New Testament without proper credit.[54]

On August 14, 1861, the overland stagecoach pulled into Carson City, the capital of the Nevada Territory, having survived endless stretches of desert splashed with sagebrush. A little the worse for wear, Sam stepped from the stagecoach "tired, discouraged, white with alkali dust" and not knowing a soul except Orion.[55] The sight that first greeted his eyes must have made him wonder whether the lengthy trip was worth the grueling effort. It was a strange town with a desert floor below and snowcapped peaks above. Boasting a population of a few thousand people, it featured a main street composed of small white frame stores and sidewalks that were loose wooden planks that wobbled underfoot. Instead of wallpaper, many houses were lined inside with flour sacks sewn together.

Appearances could be deceptive. Two years earlier, the discovery of the Comstock Lode had sparked a silver rush to the area on a scale unseen since the California gold rush a decade earlier, a frenzy that spawned many fortunes, including that of George Hearst, the father of William Randolph Hearst. No less fortuitous for a future novelist, this area rich in minerals was even richer in colorful figures who would populate his imagination. Two months later Sam wrote ecstatically to his mother: "Nevada Territory is fabulously rich in gold, silver, copper, lead, coal, iron, quicksilver, marble, granite, chalk, slate, plaster of Paris (gypsum), thieves, murderers, desperadoes, ladies, children, lawyers, Christians, gamblers, Indians, Chinamen, Spaniards, sharpers, cuyotes . . . preachers, poets and jackass rabbits." Fate had a way of depositing Sam Clemens amid the boisterous scenes he would most relish. "It is the dustiest country on the face of the earth," he concluded, "—but I rather like dust."[56] A proud mother, Jane Clemens saw to it that Sam's letter was published in the Keokuk *Gate City.*

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CHAPTER SIX

"The Most Lovable Scamp"

Sam Clemens had gloried in his bad boy image, the rebel angel proud of his apostasy, the scourge of middlebrow morality, and in Nevada he found himself right in his element. He had a head full of curly auburn hair and penetrating eyes and soon added a mustache to his image. According to his first biographer, "He wore a rusty slouch hat, flannel shirt, [and] coarse trousers slopping half in and half out of the heavy cow-skin boots."[1] He had typically preferred the outsider role, operating beyond the pale of respectability, and now, a frontier denizen, he was surrounded by like-minded rogues. He would recall, with undisguised nostalgia, the notorious characters of those early days, an honor roll of "desperadoes, who made life a joy and the 'Slaughter-house' a precious possession: Sam Brown, Farmer Pete, Bill Mayfield, Six-fingered Jake, Jack Williams and the rest of the crimson discipleship . . . Those were the days!"[2] Years later, when he saw the Wild West show of Buffalo Bill Cody, he wrote him in an onrush of happy memories that "it brought vividly back the breezy, wild life of the great plains & the Rocky Mountains & stirred me like a war song. Down to its smallest details the show is genuine—cowboys, vaqueros, Indians, stage-coach, costumes & all."[3]

In *Roughing It,* Mark Twain portrayed a rough-and-tumble world where violence often ruled, decent citizens hobnobbed freely with criminals, and murder was commonplace. "After a murder, all that Rocky Mountain etiquette required of a spectator was, that he should help the gentleman bury his game—otherwise his churlishness would surely be

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remembered against him the first time he killed a man himself and needed a neighborly turn in interring him."[4] It was a place where a saloonkeeper or a blacksmith might be a notorious fugitive from justice, escaping his past with impunity. Sam never pretended that this world of outlaws represented a higher form of civilization, but he enjoyed socializing with disreputable characters. Gregarious and easygoing, he latched on to every conceivable type of personality—why he would corral so much of American life into his fiction. Unlike most writers, Sam Clemens had nothing solitary or contemplative in his nature. With transplants from many states and countries, Nevada had created a polyglot slang that would enrich his writing. As if by osmosis, he picked up scraps of dialect from everywhere, fusing them into a new idiom and making himself a master of vernacular speech. The new territory's lack of social barriers offered a welcoming environment for any newcomer.

With his omnivorous curiosity about people, Sam sought out depraved characters for closer inspection. In *Roughing It,* he would tell how he was intrigued by colorful legends about Jack Slade, a stagecoach agent in the Rocky Mountains, reputed to be a homicidal maniac. He wrote that Slade liked to postpone murderous vengeance against enemies "just as a school-boy saves up a cake, and made the pleasure go as far as it would by gloating over the anticipation."[5] Since rumor had it that Slade had killed twenty-six people, Twain allegedly sought him out on the ninth day of his journey west, but found a quiet, affable man, not a monster. When the coffee was running out, Slade offered to refill Sam's cup instead of his own, but Sam "politely declined. I was afraid he had not killed anybody that morning, and might be needing diversion."[6] It was all humorous invention: when Sam breakfasted with Slade during his stagecoach journey, he didn't yet know of his ghoulish reputation. Three years later, after another satisfying round of shooting sprees, Slade was hung by vigilantes in Montana.[7]

The brothers' first quarters in Carson City could not have been humbler. A landlady named Bridget O'Flannigan provided Orion with an office and bedroom on the ground floor, while Sam slept in a second-story bed—one of "fourteen white pine cot-bedsteads that stood in two

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long ranks in the one sole room of which the second story consisted."[8] Sam told of uproarious times there, including the night when a strong wind knocked over a shelf with glass bottles full of tarantulas, triggering a panic in the room. Sam clerked for Orion for a couple of months but was condemned to inaction. "I had nothing to do and no salary. I was private secretary to his majesty the Secretary and there was not yet writing enough for the two of us."[9]

Perhaps inevitably this young man who'd had fantasies of cornering the global coca trade was soon infected with a bad case of silver mania. Americans equated money with success, and Sam Clemens was never immune from this belief, his Nevada time reinforcing a get-rich-quick mentality instilled early by the Tennessee land saga. As he told Orion, "I shall never look upon Ma's face again, or Pamela's, or get married . . . until I am a rich man," and he was convinced he would land a fortune "as surely as Fate itself."[10] In Carson City, people babbled about their silver strikes, "prospecting parties" flocked to the hills daily, and novice miners emerged as instant millionaires. As Twain later reflected, "I would have been more or less than human if I had not gone mad like the rest . . . I succumbed and grew as frenzied as the craziest."[11]

As with steamboating, Sam dove headlong into this new world, expecting to "find masses of silver lying all about the ground."[12] For his first prospecting foray that September 1861, he traveled to Aurora, in mining-rich Esmeralda County, one hundred miles southeast of Carson City, and bought "feet"—mining shares—in a number of rocky ledges. After a brief stay, he returned to Carson City to clerk for Orion during the first legislative session. Then, in December, he and three companions loaded up a wagon with eighteen hundred pounds of supplies—picks, shovels, drills, and powder, along with fourteen packs of playing cards, two dogs, a cribbage board, and a copy of Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*—and rode 175 miles northeast, sometimes in pelting rain or snow, to the Humboldt Range. They often had to push the wagon because Sam's finicky horse Bunker balked at further movement. The horse was so "infernally lazy," Sam assured his mother, that he could have been "a blood relation of our family." The road was thickly littered with the

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detritus of aborted mining ventures: "skeletons and carcasses of dead beasts of burden . . . and charred remains of wagons" as well as "chains, and bolts and screws."[14] In the evening, the four men gathered around a campfire in the desert stillness and found cheer in pipe smoking, song singing, and yarn spinning. Always a bard of nomadic life, Mark Twain would celebrate this open-air existence as "the very summit and culmination of earthly luxury."[15]

Arriving at Unionville, a settlement of stone and adobe houses, Sam and his companions threw up a log cabin that teetered beside a crevice. An amateur miner, Sam scoured the grounds for loose stones and returned excitedly with what turned out to be fool's gold. He discovered that serious mining—sinking shafts, drilling tunnels with iron drills and heavy sledgehammers—was backbreaking labor. "One week of this satisfied me," he said. "I resigned."[16] As he groused to his family, "Why, I have had my whiskers and moustaches so full of alkali dust that you'd have thought I worked in a starch factory and boarded in a flour barrel."[17] Nonetheless, he grew convinced that his mining investments would yield major results, even though his overactive mind sometimes cooled down. "Don't you know that I have never held in my hands a gold or silver bar that belonged to me?" he lamented to his mother and sister. "Don't you know that it's all talk and no cider so far? . . . By George, if I *just* had a thousand dollars *I'd* be all right!"[18]

Like many newcomers, Sam speculated in mining shares in Humboldt and Esmeralda Counties. Lacking sufficient capital, he tapped Orion for money, and they became partners in the Clemens Gold and Silver Mining Company. In a significant inversion of their former power relationship, Orion would provide the capital while Sam handled the business affairs, convinced—no doubt now through experience—that his older brother lacked "business talent enough to carry on a peanut stand." The result, he told his family, was that "if mines are to be bought or sold, or tunnels run or shafts sunk, parties have to come to me—and me only. I'm the 'firm,' you know."[19] Not only did Sam reserve to himself all business decisions, but he left Orion in the dark about any setbacks. He advised their partner Billy Clagett that Orion lacked the stomach to ride

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out failures and that he should always discuss things with his brother "in such a way that Orion cannot understand them." "I don't care a d—n for failures and disappointments, but they nearly kill him, you know."[20] Orion, of course, resented any money Sam squandered, reviving their old fraternal sparring.

The main locus of Sam's speculations centered in Aurora. When Sam and his associates went to test various claims in which they had invested, they had to brave wintry gusts in a cabin whose chinks let in icy air from the mountain slopes. Sam was so deflated by the mining results that he ordered Orion not to buy any more "ground, anywhere. The pick and the shovel are the only claims I have any confidence in now. My back is sore and my hands blistered with handling them to-day." Then, sounding more like *David Copperfield*'s Mr. Micawber, he added, "something must come, you know."[21] Like many Nevada prospectors, Sam Clemens was rich on paper, if broke in the real world. As he phrased it, he and his partners owned "not less than thirty thousand 'feet' apiece in the 'richest mines on earth,'" but "were in debt to the butcher" and "our credit was not good at the grocer's."[22]

Blinded by greed, Sam convinced himself that it was only a matter of time before he and Orion grew wealthy. Riches "*will* come," he assured his brother, "there is no *shadow* of a doubt."[23] As always, he was headstrong. "I have got the thing sifted down to a dead moral certainty," he said, stating flatly that the Monitor Ledge they owned would "contain our fortune. The ledge is 6 feet wide, and one needs no glass to see gold & silver in it."[24] This cocksure certainty about prospective riches would be his undoing. When their mining ventures faltered, Sam adopted a testy tone toward his older brother, one he would maintain for decades. "You have *promised* me that you would leave all mining matters, and everything involved in an outlay of money, in my hands," he scolded Orion. "Now it may be a matter of no consequence at all to *you,* to keep your word with me, but I assure you *I* look upon it in a very different light . . . Now Orion, I have given you a piece of my mind—you have it in full, and you deserved it."[25] Sam left no doubt who was boss—he was now the decisive, hard-charging brother—and he would henceforth lord it over

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Orion, perhaps exacting revenge for his older brother's harsh treatment of him in their printing office days. Sam warned him that "when you stand between me and my fortune . . . you stand between me and *home,* friends, and all that I care for."[26]

At the nadir of his Nevada sojourn, Sam was reduced to working for a short period as a common laborer in a quartz mill, where he had to shovel silver tailings. It was gruesome, exhausting work in which the quartz was crushed, filtered, and rinsed in an effort to extract embedded shards of silver. Although Sam claimed that he had taken the job to learn the refining business for future use as a mining mogul, he lasted only a week in this filthy trade and regarded it as the most detestable work he had ever performed.

Despite his business frustrations, Sam loved the brash freedom of the West, its hedonistic permission to carouse and socialize, and one companion remembered how "he used to smoke pipes, and quaff lager and dress rather slouchily."[27] Surrounded by ruffians galore, he had an ideal setting to exercise his comic gifts. He had many boon companions, even if some back home worried about the wicked prankster from Hannibal. Pamela piously entreated him to "let the Spirit of God, which has been knocking at the door of your heart for years, now come in, and make you a new man in Christ Jesus."[28] Everyone in the family but Sam had embraced religion, and he seemed in no particular rush to remedy the omission.

Quite the bon vivant, effervescent and exuberant, Sam amused people at balls by dancing alone and crooning to himself, shutting his eyes in comic ecstasy, the court jester. "By the second set," friend Cal Higbie recalled, "all the ladies were falling over themselves to get him for a partner, and most of the crowd, too full of mirth to dance, were standing or sitting around dying with laughter."[29] Sam admitted to his sister-in-law, Mollie, that he might be sleeping with chambermaids. "I don't mind sleeping with female servants as long as I am a bachelor—by *no* means—but *after* I marry, that sort of thing will be 'played out.'" He also indicated that he intended to marry well or not at all and would postpone marriage "until I can afford to have servants enough to leave my wife in

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the position for which I designed her, viz.—as a *companion*. I don't want to sleep with a three-fold Being who is cook, chambermaid and washerwoman all in one."[30] The letter foreshadows the woman he would eventually marry: rich, genteel, and refined, and he may already have had a sixth sense that only marriage could cure his roaming nature and satisfy his social ambitions.

One underappreciated aspect of Mark Twain's career would be his sensitivity to nature and the magnificent word pictures he painted of it. Not long after arriving in Carson City, he and a friend, John Kinney, hiked to Lake Bigler—later known by its Indian name, Lake Tahoe—where they had staked out a timber claim, and they were smitten by their first glimpse of the water. "We plodded on, two or three hours longer, and at last the lake burst upon us—a noble sheet of blue water lifted six thousand three hundred feet above the level of the sea, and walled in by a rim of snow-clad mountain peaks that towered aloft full three thousand feet higher still!"[31] Clemens and Kinney fell under the spell of this untamed wilderness beauty, a version of the prelapsarian river paradise Tom and Huck would inhabit. Sealed off from the world, Sam and his companion spent days on a boat, drifting freely with the breeze, buoyed by lake water so crystalline "that the boat seemed floating in the air!" Mark Twain later gave the lake this hilarious endorsement: "Three months of camp life on Lake Tahoe would restore an Egyptian mummy to his pristine vigor, and give him an appetite like an alligator. I do not mean the oldest and driest mummies, of course, but the fresher ones."[32] Unfortunately, before leaving the lake, Sam accidentally set fire to the forest while attempting to cook dinner over a campfire, and he and Kinney went away looking "like *lava* men, covered as we were with ashes, and begrimed with smoke."[33] Much of their timber claim went up in flames.

The comic vitality that surged through Sam's letters home signals that he was flexing his powers as a writer—you can see him reveling in comic riffs—and Jane Clemens rushed them into print in the Keokuk *Gate City*. Though convinced he would be a rich capitalist by summer, he no longer expected to resume his piloting life because his pride was too injured by mining failures to return home. Hence, he searched for a new job of

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sturdy independence. "I have been a slave several times in my life," he told Pamela, "but I'll never be one again. I always intend to be so situated (*unless* I marry) that I can 'pull up stakes' and clear out whenever I feel like it."[34] He had begun sending satirical sketches to the *Territorial Enterprise* in Virginia City under the well-chosen name "Josh." He wrote for personal amusement and a desperate need for cash. With no clear literary calling, he "stumbled" into the writing profession, he said, "as a man falls over a precipice that he is not looking for."[35] To his everlasting amazement, he received a letter that summer from the affable Joseph T. Goodman, owner of the *Territorial Enterprise,* and William H. Barstow, its managing editor, offering him a job as a local editor for a weekly salary of $25. Not only did the sum seem princely—"a sinful and lavish waste of money"—but he needed work posthaste. "I do not doubt that if, at the time, I had been offered a salary to translate the Talmud from the original Hebrew, I would have accepted."[36] Aside from the Josh letters, the editors had two other pressing reasons for hiring Sam Clemens: the local editor, William Wright, who wrote under the pen name "Dan De Quille," was taking temporary leave for an eastern trip, and the editors may also have thought Sam would help win public printing contracts from Orion.

Before starting work on the *Territorial Enterprise,* Sam ventured one last attempt at mining in a leaky Aurora cabin. As he wrote with black humor, "Yesterday it rained—the first shower for five months . . . We went outside to keep from getting wet."[37] He and his partner Daniel Twing subsisted on hardtack and beans, and rooted around in garbage dumps to supplement their diet. During this bleak interval, they let empty food tins and champagne bottles pile up outside their cabin to foster the illusion of prosperity within.

When he began working for the paper in September, Sam Clemens operated on a much larger stage, for the *Enterprise* was the territory's foremost daily paper. The combined population of Virginia City and nearby Gold Hill had mushroomed from nothing before the mining craze to become Nevada's most populous city. Mark Twain left graphic descriptions of this town that sat astride the Comstock Lode. Sitting on

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the steep slope of Mount Davidson, the Virginia City hillside was honeycombed with shafts and tunnels. "Taken as a whole, the underground city had some thirty miles of streets and a population of five or six thousand."[38] Whenever miners touched off explosives, stores and houses shook from the impact. Working in an office where all the editors and printers seemed to pack revolvers, Sam knew when they were blasting quartz below. "Often we felt our chairs jar, and heard the faint boom of a blast down in the bowels of the earth under the office."[39]

The future author of *The Gilded Age* found himself at the white-hot center of silver euphoria. People traded worthless shares at blue-sky prices, and everybody believed his fortune was nigh. This was money madness in its purest form. Twain said "there was a glad, almost fierce, intensity in every eye, that told of the money-getting schemes that were seething in every brain and the high hope that held sway in every heart."[40] It was exactly the sort of free-wheeling, rip-roaring atmosphere that appealed to Sam Clemens's swaggering personality and subversive instincts. "There were military companies, fire companies, brass bands, banks, hotels, theatres, 'hurdy-gurdy houses,' wide-open gambling palaces, political pow-wows, civic processions, street fights, murders, inquests, riots, a whisky mill every fifteen steps."[41] In short, the perfect place for an aspiring writer to study human nature in its rawest form.

For the first time, Sam joined a community of writers with a rough western bravado, and he couldn't have found a more convivial crew, especially in thirty-three-year-old Dan De Quille and the twenty-four-year-old compositor Steve Gillis. There was as much drinking, swearing, and juvenile horseplay as he could possibly have desired. De Quille, who roomed with Sam at times, left interesting impressions of him, noting his "bushy brows," "curly pate," and half-shut eyes that sized up the world with a shrewd, appraising gaze.[42] He remembered Sam's chronic insomnia and nighttime prowling. Most of all, he recalled how Sam became a captive of his anger, the way things simmered inside him and refused to settle down. He "was nervously overstrung and always in danger of a neurotic upset or explosion . . . Things that wouldn't disquiet

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the average man would grate on him and set him wild, while just an ordinary annoyance hit with the force of an overpowering shock."[43]

Sam's first article appeared on October 1, 1862. Never having written on deadline and educating himself on the job, he panicked about filling his first two columns until he was blessed by a lucky occurrence: "a desperado killed a man in a saloon and joy returned once more. I never was so glad over any mere trifle before in my life."[44] Then a wagon train pulled into town, having survived hostile Native American territory, and Sam served up the story with lavishly macabre exaggeration: "I put this wagon through an Indian fight that to this day has no parallel in history. My two columns were filled. When I read them over in the morning I felt that I had found my occupation at last."[45] Mark Twain made light of the episode, but it helped to launch a career marked by embellishment and hyperbole that would frequently get him into scrapes, even as it delighted readers. Published in a spirit of entertainment as well as straight reportage, the *Territorial Enterprise* was an ideal home for someone with Sam's outsize powers of invention and casual relationship with facts.

From his teenage years, Sam was skilled in taunts and teasing, and this side of his personality meshed perfectly with the new job, which included trading barbs and engaging in mock feuds with rival journalists. Reporters in Virginia City were literary gladiators who amused readers by making blood sport of these vendettas. It was vaudeville in print, with reporters as clowns of the show. As he began to cover the Nevada legislature, he clashed, at least on paper, with Clement T. Rice of the *Virginia City Daily Union.* He coined a name for Rice, "The Unreliable," which he made stick by constant repetition, and Rice retaliated by branding Sam "The Reliable." It was mostly good-natured ribbing, with Sam advising the Unreliable in print on how to behave in church and other such matters, but the two men remained good friends. In time, this combative style of play would take a darker turn, albeit not with Rice.

Sam's fertile imagination was on full display that October when he published a report about the discovery of "The Petrified Man" in a desert cave near the Humboldt River. Dressed up in scientific jargon, the

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story described how a prehistoric man, dead three hundred years, was found petrified in rock, his body welded to limestone sediment. The tale was a hoax—"an unmitigated lie, made from whole cloth," Sam admitted—but it gained widespread credence and was reprinted by gullible California and Nevada papers, making it the author's first interstate story.[46] The outrageous farce was designed to ridicule Judge G. T. Sewall, who supposedly held an inquest of the Petrified Man. "The practical joke was a legal tender in Virginia [City]," noted a Twain biographer. Twain had turned his old Hannibal talent for mischief into a marketable skill.[47] The following year, Sam followed up with two equally preposterous hoaxes: "A Bloody Massacre Near Carson" and "The Great Landslide Case." Of these titillating, ghoulish stories, Twain explained that "the public needed matters of thrilling interest for breakfast. The seemingly tranquil *Enterprise* office was a ghastly factory of slaughter, mutilation and general destruction in those days."[48] It was the start of Mark Twain's persona as a man who spun wild yarns and minted tall tales.

Not everything the *Territorial Enterprise* did was risible, and the editorials composed by Joseph T. Goodman were widely read and influential. That November, he sent Sam back to Carson City to cover the Territorial Legislature. Sam resided with Orion, who had now been joined by his wife, Mollie, and their daughter, Jennie. In his new incarnation, Sam cut a foppish figure and was vain about his influence. As a journalist, he had a passport to people in power. "I was there every day in the legislature to distribute compliment and censure with evenly balanced justice and spread the same over half a page of the *Enterprise* every morning; consequently I was an influence."[49] After his Sunday letters from Carson City appeared, they tended to draw howls of derision from delegates the next day. Aided by information from Orion, Sam received an invaluable education in legislative back-scratching and maneuvers, their inner workings greased by bribery. It was telling that Sam's coverage also called attention to himself, making him a local celebrity. If he won plaudits, he also made many enemies. "I suppose he was the most lovable scamp and nuisance who ever blighted Nevada," said William M.

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Stewart, later known as the "silver senator" from Nevada, who alleged that Sam went around "stirring up trouble" and "did not care whether the things he wrote were true or not, just so he could write something."[50] Undoubtedly Sam qualified as a troublemaker, albeit one endowed with a rapier wit.

It was likely in early February 1863 that he published his first article under the byline "Mark Twain." Pen names were then in vogue among fellow journalists and particularly commonplace among the chief humorists of the day. Dan De Quille had left Nevada on December 27 for a prolonged leave, and Sam, in taking a pseudonym, may have been seeking continuity as his replacement. Sam liked that "Mark Twain" was short and melodious—a perfect spondee. On the surface, the origin of the moniker seems fairly simple: On the Mississippi River, the leadsman would sound the water's depth by lowering a weighted rope, and if he cried "mark twain," it meant two fathoms or twelve feet, considered a safe depth; hence, a pleasing sound. Twain maintained that he swiped the name from an old steamboat captain, Isaiah Sellers, who employed it in reporting on Mississippi River doings for the New Orleans *Picayune*. Although Sam had mocked his encyclopedic, pedantic comments, incurring Sellers's wrath, he claimed to have taken Sellers's pen name upon the captain's death. He regretted having made sport of an esteemed pilot, who "did me the honor to profoundly detest me from that day forth."[51]

Over the years, Twain grew testy whenever the pen name's derivation was questioned. "I have published this vital fact 3,600 times now. But no matter, it is good practice; it is about the only fact that I can tell the same way every time."[52] Twain scholars have pointed out glaring inconsistencies in Twain's story, including that Sellers didn't die until 1864 and that his newspaper columns never bore the Mark Twain byline. One Twain authority has suggested that he appropriated the name from a comic sketch titled "The North Star" in a January 1861 issue of *Vanity Fair*.[53] Still others have suggested that the true source of the pen name was a barroom practice of chalking up two marks—"mark twain"—for two drinks whenever Sam Clemens ran up a tab at a local saloon.[54]

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Whatever the truth, the nom de plume would come to wrap Sam Clemens like a tight cloak. Often he signed letters to intimate friends "Mark" and they addressed him as such. He always instructed dinner hosts to introduce him as Mark Twain and "not Clemens, for my private name embarrasses me when used in public."[55] He would even become the first author to claim his pen name as a trademark, suing pirated editions on that basis. Given the invective that he dished out to Nevada rivals, it was probably not a bad idea to shield himself with a made-up name. For twenty-seven-year-old Sam Clemens it was the ultimate act of reinvention, the start of an attempt to mythologize his life. Many commentators have noted the name's ingenuity, for it not only attached the author to the Mississippi River but reflected the striking dualities in his nature. As he later told Helen Keller, the name fit because he was "sometimes light and on the surface, and sometimes—" She completed the sentence: "Deep."[56]

After adopting his pen name, Mark Twain started to cultivate larger literary connections. In May 1863, he clambered aboard a stagecoach with none other than Clement T. Rice, the Unreliable himself, and crossed the Sierra Nevada en route to San Francisco. They stayed at the two best hotels in town, dining sumptuously and drowning themselves in champagne and claret. With the blessing of his Nevada employers, Twain met with the editor of the San Francisco *Morning Call* and walked away with a contract to send him letters from Virginia City, giving Twain a chance to write for a more literate audience than Nevada miners. He admitted that in covering mining stories, he planned to shake down companies for shares in exchange for touting their businesses, telling his mother and sister, "if I don't know how to levy black-mail on the mining companies,—who *does,* I should like to know."[57] Such extortion was, alas, all too common among reporters covering the Comstock Lode. Twain's time in San Francisco showed that his early literary successes had by no means quieted his lust for money. "I take an absorbing delight in the stock market," he informed his family. "I love to watch the prices go up. My time will come after a while."[58] When he departed San Francisco, he lamented that "it seems like going back to prison to go back to the snows & the deserts of Washoe, after living in this Paradise."[59]

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A controversial young man on the make, Twain attracted growing attention, albeit not always wanted or desirable. In October he scripted another hoax for the *Territorial Enterprise* titled "A Bloody Massacre Near Carson." It purported to tell how an investor cheated in a stock swindle had slaughtered his wife and children. This grisly tale was meant as a satire on financial shenanigans, but many Nevada and California papers that reprinted the story missed the point entirely. In the ensuing hubbub, said Dan De Quille, "Some papers demanded the immediate discharge of the author" by the *Enterprise* editors. Although Joseph T. Goodman stood by him, Twain was "so distressed that he could not sleep," De Quille recalled. "He tossed, tumbled and groaned aloud."[60] The young Twain gloried in the shock value of his writing, even if he was not always braced for the outrage it would generate.

With fortuitous timing, the young Artemus Ward, America's most-beloved humorist and a favorite of President Lincoln, visited Virginia City that December. Born Charles Farrar Browne, Ward gave Mark Twain a sense of the shape a humorist's career could take, uniting the roles of clown, entertainer, sage, and moralist. When Ward lectured at Maguire's Opera House, Twain reviewed him in the *Territorial Enterprise* and gave him his highest encomium by stating that any spectator who listened to Ward "without laughing either inwardly or outwardly must have done murder, or at least meditated it, at some time during his life."[61] His later descriptions of Ward's speaking style preview the poker-face style he himself would adopt. He lauded Ward's "inimitable way of pausing and hesitating, of gliding in a moment from seriousness to humor without appearing to be conscious of so doing . . . There was more in his pauses than his words."[62] Ward was only a year older than Twain, yet his profits that season totaled $30,000 to $40,000—a staggering sum that must surely have captivated Twain's imagination.

Around midnight on Christmas Eve, Ward, with flaming red hair, an aquiline nose, and a handlebar mustache, showed up at the *Territorial Enterprise* office and proposed to treat the editorial staff to an oyster

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supper. According to Joseph T. Goodman, during this uproariously funny dinner, Twain upstaged Ward, winning undisputed claim to the "King of Comedy" title. "It was on that occasion that Mark Twain fully demonstrated his right to rank above the world's acknowledged foremost humorist."[63] As dawn streaked the sky, Ward announced, "I feel like walking on the skies, but as I can't I'll walk on the roofs."[64] Ward, Twain, and De Quille then scrambled to the top of a building and raced across rooftops until the local police drew weapons, suspecting they were burglars. This famous literary odyssey ended with Twain sitting on a barrel in a local saloon and downing drinks with Ward.

A kindly, generous soul, Ward encouraged Twain to write for the New York *Sunday Mercury* and eased his path by sending a flattering letter about him to its editors. When the publication accepted two Twain sketches in mid-January 1864, it signaled a critical foothold for him on the Eastern Seaboard. Twain told his mother that while he couldn't "write regularly for the Mercury," he was mindful that it had "a more extended circulation than is afforded by a local daily paper."[65] Clearly Ward's visit served as a tonic to Twain's spirits and a spur to his ambition to think in national terms. In 1867 Ward would die of tuberculosis, just shy of his thirty-third birthday, leaving open a prime spot for Twain as America's premier humorist.

When he first arrived in Nevada, Twain had been decidedly junior to his older brother, but now as a rising personage in the territory, he was eclipsing Orion. "Everybody knows me," Twain boasted to his mother in August 1863, "& I fare like a prince wherever I go . . . And I am proud to say I am the most conceited ass in the territory."[66] He bragged of his power as a "wire-puller" in the legislature. "I passed every bill I worked for, & on a bet, I killed a bill by a three-fourths vote in the House after it had passed the Council unanimously. Oh, I tell you a reporter in the Legislature can swing more votes than any member of the body."[67] Since voters approved Nevada statehood in a plebiscite that September, with the first state elections scheduled for January 1864, Sam meant to get his older brother "some fat office" in the new government.[68]

This was hardly a foregone conclusion, the sojourn in Nevada having

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had differing effects on the brothers. Sam had soaked up experience and shown a worldly pizzazz, while Orion grew more dreamy and impractical. Mark Twain always viewed his brother as a well-meaning but hopeless bungler who dithered his way through life. The problem wasn't that Orion was stupid, for he was highly intelligent. Rather, he lacked common sense and could be headstrong with authority figures, while at other times he was so eager to please folks that he refused to stand his ground. Additionally, Orion suffered from some psychological ailment that clouded his mental faculties and often rendered him inert and depressed. As Twain wrote of a character based on his brother, he "read everything and digested nothing; he was a mine of misinformation and mental confusions."[69] Sam still chafed when Orion tried to usurp their father's place and keenly resented a letter from his brother chastising him for dissipated living. Sam seethed to his family that Orion would "learn after a while, perhaps, that I am not an infant, that I know the value of a good name as well as he does, and stop writing such childish nonsense to me."[70]

A photo of Orion shows a tall, handsome man with dark hair, a full beard, and shaggy eyebrows, but the telling feature is the eyes—large, staring eyes that betray fear or alarm and a hint of sadness. One can see nervous instability in the expression, a lifetime of disappointments, the variable moods. "You could break his heart with a word of disapproval; you could make him as happy as an angel with a word of approval," Twain noted.[71] Where the younger brother had an irrepressible force that lifted him from troubles, Orion seemed mired in dejection. "He moved through a cloud of gloom and depression all his days," Twain said.[72] For all of Orion's infuriating flaws, Mark Twain thought him "a sterling man," who was "beloved, all his life, in whatsoever community he lived."[73]

As territorial secretary, Orion worked directly under Governor James W. Nye, a former president of the Metropolitan Board of Police of New York City, who was, said one of Sam's friends, a "fat, vulgar, profane fellow whose colloquialisms were tainted with obscenity."[74] Orion had a demanding job, having to handle the finances and serve as acting governor during Nye's frequent absences. Without a capitol, Orion

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rented the second floor of a local hotel and divided it into chambers for the new legislature. He also had to arbitrate complex boundary disputes with California. Orion even had to design the territory's official seal: a miner hoisting a pick and waving an American flag. Although he didn't know it at the time, the job of territorial secretary would mark the pinnacle of Orion's career, even as he and Mollie grandly assumed the good times would persist. When they built and furnished an expensive house in Carson City, Twain blamed Mollie's social pretensions—"there was no other house in that sagebrush capital that could approach this property for style and cost."[75]

When President Lincoln declared Nevada a state on October 31, 1864, Orion aspired to be secretary of state. For this to happen, he needed to attend the Republican Party convention where nominations would be decided. In a typically quixotic move, Orion decided that "his presence there would be an unfair and improper influence," Twain recalled with exasperation, "and that if he was to be nominated the compliment must come to him as a free and unspotted gift."[76] A recent convert to teetotalism, Orion refused to frequent a saloon where critical politicking took place. "The paper next morning contained the list of chosen nominees," Twain remembered. "He had not received a vote. His rich income ceased when the State government came into power. He was without an occupation . . . He put up his sign as attorney at law, but he got no clients."[77] Compounding Orion's problems was that he and Mollie had lost their eight-year-old daughter, Jennie, to cerebrospinal meningitis in February 1864. Twain challenged the undertaker's excessive charges, launching a lifetime habit of disputing bills loudly and at length. By 1866 Orion and Mollie had left Nevada and returned impoverished to Iowa. They would never see their daughter's grave again, although they would, as a memorial, keep her empty chair in houses they subsequently occupied. To worsen matters for Orion's delicate self-esteem, just as his life commenced a long, depressing slide, his kid brother was about to stage a comet-like ascent in the American literary firmament.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

"Heaven on the Half Shell"

Mark Twain would leave Nevada amid a blaze of controversy, and the cause can be traced to the very issues of race and the Civil War that he had sought to leave far behind. Although the Nevada Territory was dominated by the Union Party, there was still pervasive anti-Black sentiment and Orion was again denounced for his "Black Republican" politics.[1] With plenty of southern transplants in Virginia City, abolitionism was less popular locally than unionism. In March 1864, when Joseph T. Goodman decamped on a trip to the Sandwich Islands (as the Hawaiian Islands were then known), he asked Twain and Dan De Quille to take over the *Territorial Enterprise* in his absence. Still ducking the Civil War, Twain had already stipulated when he was hired "that I should never be expected to write editorials about politics or eastern news. I take no sort of interest in those matters."[2]

In his early days in Nevada, Sam Clemens still betrayed clear sympathy for the southern cause. When a mule named Paint-Brush, which he had ridden with the Marion Rangers, fell into Union hands, he exclaimed to his sister-in-law, "'Paint-Brush' in the hands of the enemy! God forgive me! this is the first time I have felt melancholy since I left the United States."[3] In February 1862, when northern general Samuel Curtis scored a major victory in Missouri by vigorously routing General Sterling Price and his mostly Missouri militia from the state into Arkansas, Sam, hopping mad, wrote to his friend Billy Clagett about Curtis's victory: "He has thrashed our Missourians like everything. But by the Lord, they

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didn't do it on the Sacred Soil, my boy. They had to chase 'em clear down into Arkansas before they could whip them. There's a consolation in *that*."[4] Shortly afterward, when he feuded with Judge G. T. Sewall, Sam commented sarcastically to Clagett, "I don't see why he should dislike *me*. He is a yankee,—and I naturaly [*sic*] love a yankee."[5] To Orion, Sam complained, "There *are* good men in the North, but they are *d—d* scarce."[6] Nevada governor James W. Nye had already disparaged Sam as "a damned Secessionist."[7]

Yet despite the racial slurs that still infested his notebook, Sam Clemens's time in the Nevada Territory had given him a chance for a slow disengagement from a southern identity. There may have been opportunism involved—he was writing in Unionist territory for a pro-Union paper—but a deeper evolution was at work. The Far West allowed him a convenient break from his Missouri upbringing, a chance to reimagine himself as a born-again Yankee. The most-dramatic rupture came in early July 1863 amid pivotal Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg. As a violent electrical storm pounded Mount Davidson, black clouds blocked out everything but the American flag atop the mountain, which was illuminated by the setting sun. As Mark Twain wrote in the *Territorial Enterprise, "It was the flag!* . . . a mysterious messenger of good tidings . . . It was the nation's emblem transfigured by the departing rays of the sun . . . The superstition grew apace that this was a mystic courier come with great news from the war . . . Vicksburg fallen, and the Union armies victorious at Gettysburg." He concluded that "every man that had any respect for himself would have got drunk."[8] Twain showed no twinge of discomfort in expressing outright joy over the Union triumphs.

Twain's carefree Nevada life began to fall apart after he wrote an article about money raised for the United States Sanitary Commission, launched in 1861 to raise funds for medical care for sick and wounded Union soldiers. Pamela acted as a leader of the St. Louis branch, and the cause was also dear to Orion Clemens, who served as president of the Sanitary Commission of Ormsby County, while Mollie labored as its secretary. Western supporters had devised a fundraising gimmick of

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auctioning off a fifty-pound sack of flour—it would be greeted in towns with bands and festive crowds—and cities competed proudly to top the highest bid. On May 17, 1864, Twain published an article suggesting that Carson City hadn't outbid nearby Dayton because of rumors that "the money raised at the Sanitary Fancy Dress Ball recently held in Carson . . . had been diverted from its legitimate course, and was to be sent to aid a Miscegenation Society somewhere in the East; and it was feared the proceeds of the sack might be similarly disposed of."[9] It was as tasteless and incendiary a jape as Mark Twain ever penned. A catalyst for controversy, he was still, at heart, an immature, smart-alecky young journalist, willing to wring cheap laughs from a harmful wisecrack, and he now paid dearly for this crisis of his own devising.

The term "miscegenation" had entered the political lexicon the previous year when Democratic Copperheads attempted to discredit Lincoln and the Republican Party by claiming they favored miscegenation—that is, racial mixing. Twain's introduction of this nasty innuendo offended the genteel ladies of Carson City, including Mollie Clemens, who oversaw the Sanitary Fancy Dress Ball, but it also typed him as a closet secessionist. The response to his article was ferocious, with the ladies dashing off a letter to *Enterprise* editors denouncing the "*tissue of falsehoods,* made for *malicious* purposes," and insisting that all money raised thus far would go for the care of distressed Union soldiers.[10] Twain even faced duel challenges from outraged husbands of the ladies in question.

The author stood abashed. He tried to stammer out an explanation to Mollie, stating that when he wrote the piece he wasn't sober and that Dan De Quille had warned him "it would wound the feelings of the ladies of Carson."[11] He claimed, unconvincingly, that he had decided to shelve the piece, that he and Dan had then sauntered off to the theater, and that the next thing he knew the foreman had gone and printed the article in the *Enterprise*. Even as he confided that "the Sanitary expedition has been very disastrous to me," he resisted a printed retraction because he feared "the humiliation of publishing myself as a liar."[12]

With the crowd's angry roar still throbbing in his ears, Twain did issue a belated, if half-hearted, apology, saying, "We resemble the majority of

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our species in the respect that we are very apt to get entirely in the wrong, even when there is no seeming necessity for it; but to offset this vice, we claim one of the virtues of our species, which is that we are ready to repair such wrongs when we discover them."[13] Twain had already been hurt by his reputation as a literary brawler, with an opposing paper noting that "Sammy Clemens, or as he styles himself, Mark Twain," was fond of directing satirical fire at others but found it very tough to handle it when they reciprocated. "Merciless himself in perpetrating jokes on others, he winces like a cur with a flea in his ear when others retort."[14]

Twain inflamed the controversy further when he accused the *Virginia City Daily Union* of reneging on its donations for the flour sack, leading its publisher, James L. Laird, to denounce the *Enterprise* in turn. The exchanges between Twain and Laird became increasingly heated and brutal. Before it was over, Twain had blasted the rival publisher as a "putrid . . . groveling, vulgar liar," an "ass," and a "craven carcass."[15] For his part, Laird tore into Twain as "an unmitigated liar, *a poltroon, and a puppy,*" charging him with "disregard for truth, decency and courtesy."[16] In high dudgeon, Twain issued duel challenges to Laird, who declined. "The more he did not want to fight," Twain later joked, "the bloodthirstier I became." In the end, Laird and his second offered an apology on the dueling ground and settled the conflict peacefully. Nevertheless, an 1861 Nevada law called for prison sentences for anyone involved in a duel, and rumor hinted that the governor might set an example and arrest the participants. When this news reached Twain, it forced him to flee to California, or so he said. Perhaps he mostly wished to escape ridicule and his sudden notoriety, his swashbuckling, outlaw style having finally caught up with him. Joseph T. Goodman urged him to resign his newspaper post and leave Nevada at once, which he did.

On May 29, 1864, Twain departed from Virginia City and headed by stagecoach to San Francisco, where, he told Orion, he expected to stay a month. A few days earlier, he had written to his brother in a defiant mood, still growling about the Sanitary Commission spouses who threatened duels. "However, if there is any chance of the husbands of those women challenging *me*, I don't want a straw put in the way of it. I'll wait

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for them a month, if necessary, & fight them with *any* weapon they choose."[17] The day before he left, when another irate husband pursued him, Twain remained unrepentant. Later he alleged that he left Nevada because he had grown restless, needed a change of scenery, and yearned to travel. As so often with Twain, his memories obfuscate events as much as clarify them. Whatever the true cause of his departure, he left a territory that, for all his atrocious judgment toward the end, had transformed him from callow youth into a seasoned newspaperman and afforded him "the most vigorous enjoyment of life I had ever experienced."[18] One Nevada paper thumbed its nose at his departure, saying, "Mark Twain's beard is full of dirt, and his face is black before the people of Washoe."[19]

When he had visited San Francisco the previous year with Clement T. Rice, he had returned to Nevada with reluctance. It was perhaps foreordained that he would now stay longer than a month, and this interlude would indeed stretch into a two-year period. Notwithstanding their limited cash, Twain and Steve Gillis checked into the swank Occidental Hotel, a hostelry that Twain crowned as "heaven on the half shell."[20] Of his time with Twain, Gillis observed: "Mark was the laziest man I ever knew in my life, physically. Mentally, he was the hardest worker I ever knew."[21] Indeed, Mark Twain had a brain that always buzzed with words, a whirring beehive of thoughts, jokes, and ideas.

Urgently needing money, Twain took a job as a local reporter for the San Francisco *Morning Call,* which boasted the largest circulation in the city. (He would also file weekly articles with the San Francisco *Golden Era,* a local literary journal.) The *Morning Call* editor George Barnes recalled how a "slim, awkward, hawk-eyed, tousle-haired Twain" slouched into his office one day. Beneath Twain's bravado, Barnes sensed a sad and lonely soul who had difficulty making friends. "The refugee from Nevada justice told a hard-luck story about being out of money and out of work in a strange city."[22] As a Nevada reporter, Twain had written in an ebullient style about whatever struck his fancy, whereas working for the *Morning Call* meant tamping down his creative flair and becoming a humdrum scribe. As he recalled in 1906, the daily schedule

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was "fearful drudgery, soulless drudgery, and almost destitute of interest" that started early in the police court and ended late in the theaters.[23]

The indolent Twain nursed multiple grudges against the paper, where he always felt rushed and hated the late hours. In the morning he attended police court, then spent afternoons making political rounds. At night he wrote theater reviews, visiting six houses. "We remained in each of those places for five minutes, got the merest passing glimpse of play and opera, and with that for a text we 'wrote up' those plays and operas, as the phrase goes, torturing our souls every night."[24] However arduous the routine, it sparked an interest in theater and supplied handy tips for public speaking. Of actor Fred Franks he wrote how he possessed "the first virtue of a comedian, which is to do humorous things with grave decorum and without seeming to know that they are funny."[25] Already busy as a master of ceremonies, Twain exhibited a certain thespian flair when he delivered a tribute to Major Edward C. Perry at Maguire's Opera House. Perry had raised a Union gunboat from the harbor bottom, and Twain praised him by reading aloud from a seven-foot-long parchment as the "entire audience was dissolved in tears of laughter," said a reporter.[26]

With a dawning sense of social justice at the *Morning Call,* Twain exposed the mistreatment of Chinese immigrants, especially by police abuse. One day he filed a strongly worded piece about "some hoodlums chasing and stoning a Chinaman who was heavily laden with the weekly wash of his Christian customers" as a policeman stood by, watching amusedly.[27] Twain was shocked when the article failed to appear the next day in what he considered an odious concession to Irish readers. He later mocked the paper's mission: "To lick the boots of the Irish & throw bold brave mud at the Chinamen."[28] Mark Twain was beginning to shed some of the bigoted provincialism of his youth. In *Roughing It,* he recorded blistering passages about how "the worst class of white men" made the Chinese suffer "fines for their petty thefts, imprisonment for their robberies, and death for their murders."[29] Not only did the white working class persecute Chinese immigrants, but "the policemen and politicians, likewise, for these are the dust-licking pimps and slaves of the scum,

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there as well as elsewhere in America."[30] Twain saw the Chinese immigrants as a peaceable, hardworking people, "a harmless race when white men either let them alone or treat them no worse than dogs."[31]

Always alert to official misdeeds, he wrote venomous articles for the *Territorial Enterprise* about Martin Burke, San Francisco's crooked police chief. Twain's discomfort with authority figures, first evinced as a Hannibal boy, now started to generalize into a larger critique of public figures. He was especially outraged by police laxity and corruption. One day he found a policeman snoozing on the job and turned it into a memorable incident. Grabbing an oversize cabbage leaf from a nearby vendor, he began to wave it lazily over the sleeping cop until a sizable crowd had gathered to laugh and watch the incident. News of Twain's stunt—street theater with a punchy political message—soon raced around the city.

While he felt trapped and demeaned by his *Morning Call* job, he knew he "couldn't get another berth if I resigned . . . Therefore I swallowed my humiliation and stayed where I was."[32] Instead of taking his usual pride in his writing, "I took the pen and spread this muck out in words and phrases, and made it cover as much acreage as I could."[33] After his flush times in Nevada, the paper felt like a terribly poor fit for the easygoing Twain and he knew it, and by October he was fired. George Barnes broke the news in gentle, fatherly fashion, and while Twain understood the decision—"I neglected my duties and became about worthless as a reporter for a brisk newspaper"—the firing still stung him to the quick.[34] It was, he later claimed, the only time in his life that he was discharged, and the rejection bothered him for years.

Losing his job meant that Twain felt the insecurity of a freelance writer's life, devoid of any permanent paycheck, a brush with poverty that had a harrowing effect on him. "I became very adept at 'slinking.' I slunk from back street to back street, I slunk away from approaching faces that looked familiar, I slunk to meals . . . I felt meaner, and lowlier and more despicable than the worms."[35] Whatever the hyperbole here, Twain was haunted by this early period of poverty, which reinforced his preoccupation with money, a leitmotif of his life. A *Morning Call* reporter pub-

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lished an item about "a melancholy-looking Arab, known as Marque Twain," who moved like a Bedouin from tent to tent. "His hat is an old one, and comes too far down over his eyes, and his clothes don't fit as if they were made for him."[36]

However low his spirits, Mark Twain managed to experience some rollicking times in San Francisco, writing to Jane and Pamela that after the Nevada snowbanks, "this superb climate agrees with me."[37] With prodding from his mother he joined the San Francisco Olympic Club, which featured a large gymnasium and classes in gymnastics, boxing, and fencing. One member testified that Twain's main exercise was "confined to studying up jokes to play on his fellow members."[38]

Twain and Steve Gillis were rowdy tenants who were usually laggards in paying rent and had to switch lodgings five times in four months. One disgruntled landlady said the two men smuggled beer into their room, and she also didn't care for the revolvers and bowie knives they kept lying around, or the women who waltzed in and out of their lair.[39] To make things worse, they had a vile habit of tossing empty beer bottles onto the tin roofs of Chinese residences below. Though he generated lots of noise himself, Twain was a light sleeper and driven mad by any sounds in the vicinity. According to his authorized biographer, he was awakened one morning by a howling dog and decided to get even with the creature. Steve Gillis awoke to find "his room-mate standing in the door that opened out into a back garden, holding a big revolver, his hand shaking with cold and excitement."[40]

Twain still had the option of resuming life as a Mississippi pilot, but he knew he would have to master anew the intricacies of a river that constantly reshaped itself. He had also become so accustomed to a bohemian life of odd hours—he could never fit into a conventional mold—that he didn't imagine he could return to the stern discipline of a river pilot. As he told Will Bowen, "I generally get up at eleven o'clock, because I am naturally lazy, as you well know . . . I am too lazy for 14-day trips—too fond of running all night & sleeping all day—too fond of sloshing around, talking with people." Nor did he think marriage would reform his wayward behavior. "Marry be d—d. I am too old to marry. I am

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nearly 31. I have got gray hairs in my head. Women appear to like me, but d—n them, they don't *love* me."[41] Women were fascinated by him—he was, after all, a charming rogue, a lovable scamp—but they may also have been wary of his mercurial personality and footloose existence.

As a writer, Twain craved respectability and gained a modicum of literary cachet writing for the *Golden Era,* a literary journal housed in the same building as the *Morning Call*. Now he started writing for an even classier publication, the *Californian,* which began publication in May 1864. Owned by Charles Henry Webb and employing a sophisticated format, it attracted the most-talented writers from the city's thriving literary community. Its chief ornament, main contributor, and sometime editor was Bret Harte, and Ambrose Bierce also appeared there. In late September, Twain reported home that he had dropped the *Golden Era*—"It wasn't high-toned enough"—and contracted to write weekly articles for the *Californian,* which "circulates among the highest class of the community, & is the best weekly literary paper in the United States."[42] Of special importance to Twain was that the publication "has an exalted reputation in the east."[43] One can see how Twain's social striving commingled with his literary ambitions as he sought to cultivate readers among people of better standing. His two-year association with the periodical would help elevate him to national prominence.

If a year younger than Twain, Bret Harte was already a literary star in San Francisco and held a cushy sinecure as secretary to the superintendent of the U.S. Mint, occupying an office one floor below the *Morning Call*. Harte's story was not unlike Twain's: In his teens he traveled west to California with his mother and stepfather and taught school in mining camps, where he learned to capture local manners and dialect. He then went to San Francisco, rising from typesetter to author at the *Golden Era*. Three weeks before sealing his deal with the *Californian,* Twain heaped printed compliments on Harte, who had just been named editor. "Some of the most exquisite productions which have appeared in its pages emanated from his pen and are worthy to take rank among even Dickens' best sketches."[44] The praise is noteworthy since Twain, in time, would emerge as a vitriolic critic of Bret Harte's work. In these early

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