Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* Chapter 6 Excerpt

**A Cub-pilot's Experience**

WHAT with lying on the rocks four days at Louisville, and some

other delays, the poor old 'Paul Jones' fooled away about two

weeks in making the voyage from Cincinnati to New Orleans.

This gave me a chance to get acquainted with one of the pilots,

and he taught me how to steer the boat, and thus made the fascination

of river life more potent than ever for me.

It also gave me a chance to get acquainted with a youth who had taken

deck passage--more's the pity; for he easily borrowed six dollars of me

on a promise to return to the boat and pay it back to me the day after

we should arrive. But he probably died or forgot, for he never came.

It was doubtless the former, since he had said his parents were wealthy,

and he only traveled deck passage because it was cooler.

'Deck' Passage, i.e. steerage passage.]

I soon discovered two things. One was that a vessel would not be

likely to sail for the mouth of the Amazon under ten or twelve years;

and the other was that the nine or ten dollars still left

in my pocket would not suffice for so imposing an exploration

as I had planned, even if I could afford to wait for a ship.

Therefore it followed that I must contrive a new career.

The 'Paul Jones' was now bound for St. Louis. I planned a siege

against my pilot, and at the end of three hard days he surrendered.

He agreed to teach me the Mississippi River from New Orleans

to St. Louis for five hundred dollars, payable out of the first

wages I should receive after graduating. I entered upon the small

enterprise of 'learning' twelve or thirteen hundred miles of the great

Mississippi River with the easy confidence of my time of life.

If I had really known what I was about to require of my faculties,

I should not have had the courage to begin. I supposed

that all a pilot had to do was to keep his boat in the river,

and I did not consider that that could be much of a trick,

since it was so wide.

The boat backed out from New Orleans at four in the afternoon,

and it was 'our watch' until eight. Mr. Bixby, my chief,

'straightened her up,' plowed her along past the sterns of the other

boats that lay at the Levee, and then said, 'Here, take her;

shave those steamships as close as you'd peel an apple.'

I took the wheel, and my heart-beat fluttered up into

the hundreds; for it seemed to me that we were about to scrape

the side off every ship in the line, we were so close.

I held my breath and began to claw the boat away from the danger;

and I had my own opinion of the pilot who had known no better

than to get us into such peril, but I was too wise to express it.

In half a minute I had a wide margin of safety intervening

between the 'Paul Jones' and the ships; and within ten seconds

more I was set aside in disgrace, and Mr. Bixby was going into

danger again and flaying me alive with abuse of my cowardice.

I was stung, but I was obliged to admire the easy confidence with

which my chief loafed from side to side of his wheel, and trimmed

the ships so closely that disaster seemed ceaselessly imminent.

When he had cooled a little he told me that the easy water

was close ashore and the current outside, and therefore we must

hug the bank, up-stream, to get the benefit of the former,

and stay well out, down-stream, to take advantage of the latter.

In my own mind I resolved to be a down-stream pilot and leave

the up-streaming to people dead to prudence.

Now and then Mr. Bixby called my attention to certain things.

Said he, 'This is Six-Mile Point.' I assented. It was pleasant

enough information, but I could not see the bearing of it.

I was not conscious that it was a matter of any interest to me.

Another time he said, 'This is Nine-Mile Point.'

Later he said, 'This is Twelve-Mile Point.' They were

all about level with the water's edge; they all looked

about alike to me; they were monotonously unpicturesque.

I hoped Mr. Bixby would change the subject. But no; he would

crowd up around a point, hugging the shore with affection,

and then say: 'The slack water ends here, abreast this bunch

of China-trees; now we cross over.' So he crossed over.

He gave me the wheel once or twice, but I had no luck.

I either came near chipping off the edge of a sugar plantation,

or I yawed too far from shore, and so dropped back into disgrace again

and got abused.

The watch was ended at last, and we took supper and went to bed.

At midnight the glare of a lantern shone in my eyes, and the

night watchman said--

'Come! turn out!'

And then he left. I could not understand this extraordinary procedure;

so I presently gave up trying to, and dozed off to sleep.

Pretty soon the watchman was back again, and this time he was gruff.

I was annoyed. I said:--

'What do you want to come bothering around here in the middle of

the night for. Now as like as not I'll not get to sleep again to-night.'

The watchman said--

'Well, if this an't good, I'm blest.'

The 'off-watch' was just turning in, and I heard some brutal

laughter from them, and such remarks as 'Hello, watchman!

an't the new cub turned out yet? He's delicate, likely.

Give him some sugar in a rag and send for the chambermaid to sing

rock-a-by-baby to him.'

About this time Mr. Bixby appeared on the scene.

Something like a minute later I was climbing the pilot-house

steps with some of my clothes on and the rest in my arms.

Mr. Bixby was close behind, commenting. Here was something fresh--

this thing of getting up in the middle of the night to go to work.

It was a detail in piloting that had never occurred to me at all.

I knew that boats ran all night, but somehow I had never happened

to reflect that somebody had to get up out of a warm bed to run them.

I began to fear that piloting was not quite so romantic as I

had imagined it was; there was something very real and work-like

about this new phase of it.

It was a rather dingy night, although a fair number of stars were out.

The big mate was at the wheel, and he had the old tub pointed at

a star and was holding her straight up the middle of the river.

The shores on either hand were not much more than half a mile apart,

but they seemed wonderfully far away and ever so vague and indistinct.

The mate said:--

'We've got to land at Jones's plantation, sir.'

The vengeful spirit in me exulted. I said to myself,

I wish you joy of your job, Mr. Bixby; you'll have a good

time finding Mr. Jones's plantation such a night as this;

and I hope you never WILL find it as long as you live.