Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* Chapter 7 Excerpt

**A Daring Deed**

WHEN I returned to the pilot-house St. Louis was gone and I was lost.

Here was a piece of river which was all down in my book,

but I could make neither head nor tail of it: you understand,

it was turned around. I had seen it when coming up-stream, but I

had never faced about to see how it looked when it was behind me.

My heart broke again, for it was plain that I had got to learn this

troublesome river BOTH WAYS.

The pilot-house was full of pilots, going down to 'look at the river.'

What is called the 'upper river' (the two hundred miles between St. Louis

and Cairo, where the Ohio comes in) was low; and the Mississippi changes

its channel so constantly that the pilots used to always find it

necessary to run down to Cairo to take a fresh look, when their boats

were to lie in port a week; that is, when the water was at a low stage.

A deal of this 'looking at the river' was done by poor fellows who seldom

had a berth, and whose only hope of getting one lay in their being

always freshly posted and therefore ready to drop into the shoes

of some reputable pilot, for a single trip, on account of such pilot's

sudden illness, or some other necessity. And a good many of them

constantly ran up and down inspecting the river, not because they ever

really hoped to get a berth, but because (they being guests of the boat)

it was cheaper to 'look at the river' than stay ashore and pay board.

In time these fellows grew dainty in their tastes, and only infested

boats that had an established reputation for setting good tables.

All visiting pilots were useful, for they were always ready and willing,

winter or summer, night or day, to go out in the yawl and help buoy

the channel or assist the boat's pilots in any way they could.

They were likewise welcome because all pilots are tireless talkers,

when gathered together, and as they talk only about the river they

are always understood and are always interesting. Your true pilot

cares nothing about anything on earth but the river, and his pride

in his occupation surpasses the pride of kings.

We had a fine company of these river-inspectors along, this trip.

There were eight or ten; and there was abundance of room for them in our

great pilot-house. Two or three of them wore polished silk hats, elaborate

shirt-fronts, diamond breast-pins, kid gloves, and patent-leather boots.

They were choice in their English, and bore themselves with a dignity

proper to men of solid means and prodigious reputation as pilots.

The others were more or less loosely clad, and wore upon their heads tall

felt cones that were suggestive of the days of the Commonwealth.

I was a cipher in this august company, and felt subdued, not to say torpid.

I was not even of sufficient consequence to assist at the wheel when it

was necessary to put the tiller hard down in a hurry; the guest that stood

nearest did that when occasion required--and this was pretty much all

the time, because of the crookedness of the channel and the scant water.

I stood in a corner; and the talk I listened to took the hope all out of me.

One visitor said to another--

'Jim, how did you run Plum Point, coming up?'

'It was in the night, there, and I ran it the way one of the boys

on the "Diana" told me; started out about fifty yards above

the wood pile on the false point, and held on the cabin

under Plum Point till I raised the reef--quarter less twain--

then straightened up for the middle bar till I got well abreast

the old one-limbed cotton-wood in the bend, then got my stern

on the cotton-wood and head on the low place above the point,

and came through a-booming--nine and a half.'

'Pretty square crossing, an't it.?'

'Yes, but the upper bar 's working down fast.'

Another pilot spoke up and said--

'I had better water than that, and ran it lower down;

started out from the false point--mark twain--raised the second

reef abreast the big snag in the bend, and had quarter less twain.'

One of the gorgeous ones remarked--

'I don't want to find fault with your leadsmen, but that's a good deal

of water for Plum Point, it seems to me.'

There was an approving nod all around as this quiet snub dropped on

the boaster and 'settled' him. And so they went on talk-talk talking.

Meantime, the thing that was running in my mind was, 'Now if my ears

hear aright, I have not only to get the names of all the towns and islands

and bends, and so on, by heart, but I must even get up a warm personal

acquaintanceship with every old snag and one-limbed cotton-wood and obscure

wood pile that ornaments the banks of this river for twelve hundred miles;

and more than that, I must actually know where these things are in the dark,

unless these guests are gifted with eyes that can pierce through two miles

of solid blackness; I wish the piloting business was in Jericho and I had

never thought of it.'

At dusk Mr. Bixby tapped the big bell three times (the signal

to land), and the captain emerged from his drawing-room

in the forward end of the texas, and looked up inquiringly.

Mr. Bixby said--

'We will lay up here all night, captain.'

'Very well, sir.'

That was all. The boat came to shore and was tied up for the night.

It seemed to me a fine thing that the pilot could do as he pleased,

without asking so grand a captain's permission. I took my supper and went

immediately to bed, discouraged by my day's observations and experiences.

My late voyage's note-booking was but a confusion of meaningless names.

It had tangled me all up in a knot every time I had looked at it in

the daytime. I now hoped for respite in sleep; but no, it reveled all

through my head till sunrise again, a frantic and tireless nightmare.