



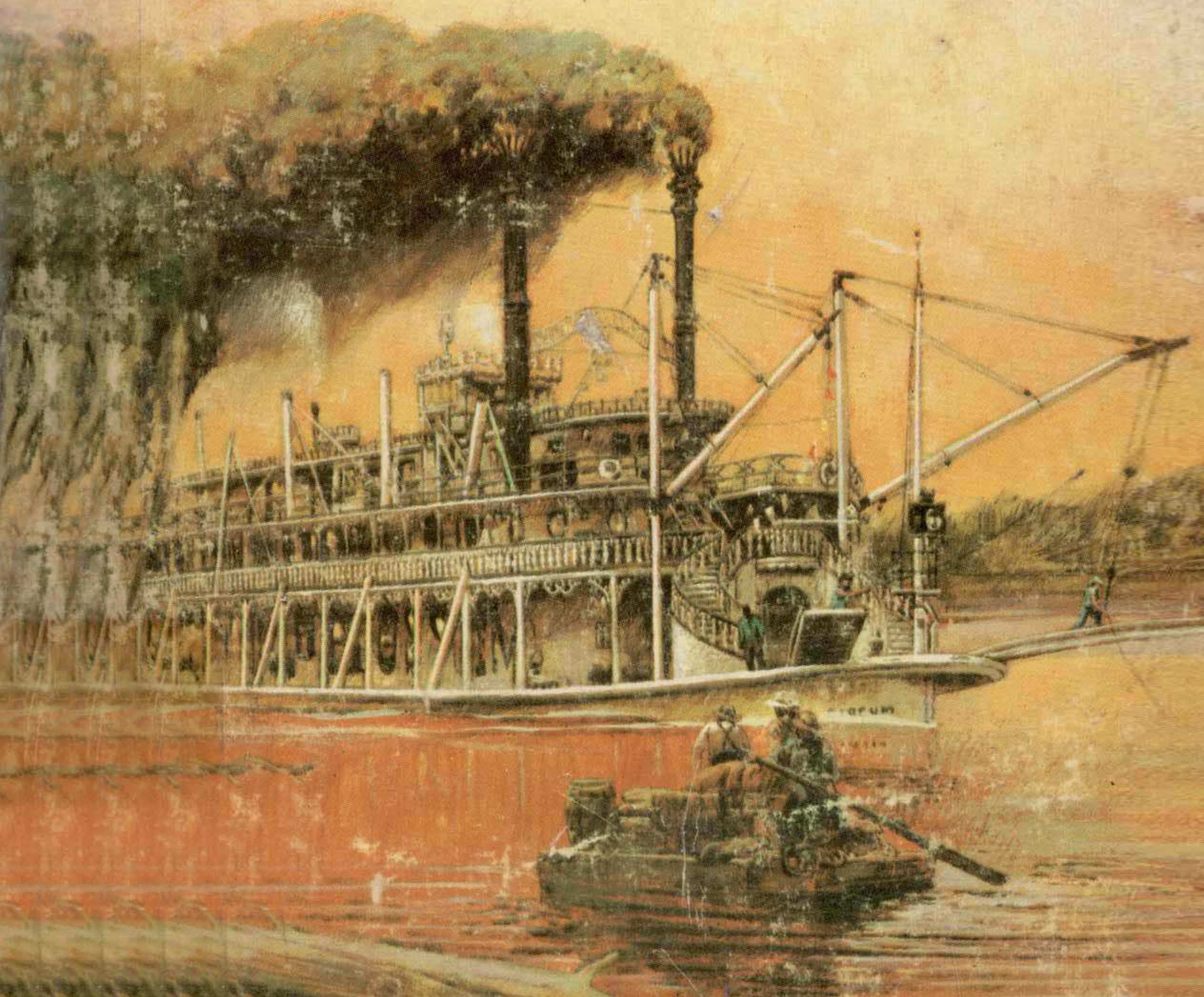
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CLASSICS SERIES

**MARK
TWAIN**

Life on the Mississippi

Introduction by John Willoughby



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

Life on the Mississippi



MARK TWAIN

Introduction

In olden times, it is said, giants walked the earth; and Mark Twain was a pilot during the olden times of steamboating just before the Civil War, when "to get on the river" was the dream of every boy along the Mississippi, and when "pilot was the grandest position of all." Steamboat pilots are likened to princes, kings, and emperors in Twain's celebration of their legendary deeds.

The reason is plain: a pilot, in those days, was the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived in the earth. . . . 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*. . . . So here was the novelty of a king without a keeper, an absolute monarch who was absolute in sober truth and not by a fiction of words.

During the great age of steamboating on the Mississippi, then, the pilot was regarded as a king and a hero; and the river itself as, in T. S. Eliot's words, a "strong brown god."

Some of the most memorable expressions of Twain's relationship with that god-river are those chapters in *Life on the Mississippi* which chronicle what he calls "My Education." In those chapters is described the often amusing and sometimes agonizing growth of a novice, who fears "that in order to be a

pilot a man had to learn more than any one man ought to be allowed to know," into a man whose disciplined mastery of the river enables him "to read the face of the water as one would cull the news from the morning paper," and which thereby gains him acceptance into the heroic company of Mississippi steamboat pilots.

When he has "learned the river," however, Twain feels that he has lost something. "All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river!" because he has lost the way of looking at the world that he had as a boy. Yet if *Life on the Mississippi* expresses regret for the innocent vision Twain had lost in "growing up" on the river, it betrays an even stronger regret for a whole way of life that had passed out of existence since the end of the Civil War. For the boyhood world that Twain remembered as a pastoral paradise was gone when he returned to the Mississippi in 1882. This mythic theme of a lost paradise in *Life on the Mississippi* links it to works like Wordsworth's *Prelude*, works about the shedding of illusions, about man's growing up into a world concerned with getting and spending, a world in which he feels somehow an alien. For Twain, too, a glory had passed from the earth as he and his country almost simultaneously left their childhoods behind. "Manifestly a glory that once was had dissolved and vanished away" since he had left the Mississippi "such ages and ages ago." Now, even the mighty river itself is dealt with sacrilegiously by the United States River Commission and the West Point engineers who, as Uncle Mumford joys in pointing out, have forgotten what Ecclesiastes 7:13 says. Now, indeed, it is likely that a boy's ambition is to be, not a steamboat pilot, but a railroad engineer! Things have so changed that when Twain gets off the boat at Hannibal, Missouri, his old home town, he steps ashore "with the feeling of one who returns out of a dead-and-gone generation."

His return to Hannibal is, to be sure, disillusioning but Twain never relinquished all of his boyish illusions, and he surrendered those which he did only very gradually and not at all gracefully. It would seem, for example, that at the time he was writing *Life on the Mississippi* his nostalgia for his boyhood home was so great that he cannot be said to have reached an awareness that

the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

For though both he and his home town had changed, there is a sense in which Twain did not truly recognize how little either had changed. Indeed, one of the most fascinating pursuits in reading Twain is the attempt accurately to determine the extent of the changes which had taken place within him and within his country during the years spanned by his writings.

Many of those changes are clearly manifested in *Life on the Mississippi* by the way in which the section comprised of Chapters Four to Twenty-one differs from the rest of the book. That the two parts of the book should be so readily distinguishable is in part explained by the differing circumstances of their composition. In October of 1874, Twain wrote to William Dean Howells, then editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, that a friend had suggested his memories "about old Mississippi days of steamboating glory and grandeur" would be a good subject for magazine articles. Howells agreed; and "Old Times on the Mississippi" appeared as a series of seven papers in the *Atlantic Monthly* between January and August of 1875. Seven years later, in 1882, Twain returned to the Mississippi for the purpose of refreshing his memories of it, and of gathering material about it for a book which he proposed to make from his earlier articles. The book, *Life on the Mississippi*, appeared in 1883.

The *Atlantic* installments which make up Chapters Four to Twenty-one of *Life on the Mississippi* are recollections of boyhood seen through a mist of memory and imagination: they begin with the magical words, "When I was a boy." The rest of the book is written from the perspective of twenty-one years' absence from the river, and is less a fantasy-like recollection, and an imaginative re-living, of things as they seemed so long ago to Sam Clemens than it is a series of reportorial observations of things in the present by the famous author, Mark Twain.

There is another sense in which the book manifests a doubleness: like most of Twain's writing, *Life on the Mississippi* betrays certain ambivalent attitudes. For example, Twain distrusted the technology and the machines which were transforming his old world and, at the same time, greatly admired them. He sympathizes with the notion that it is somehow sacrilegious to attempt to tame the Mississippi; yet he admires the technology that can tame a god. It is significant that Twain once describes a parrot's ugly laugh as "a *machine-made* laugh, a Frankenstein laugh, with the soul left out of it." A more explicit expression of his distrust of the new machine-civilization is to be seen in his description of a landscape which is

all as tranquil and reposeful, as dreamland, and has nothing this-worldly about it—nothing to hang a fret or a worry upon.

Until the unholy train comes tearing along—which it presently does, ripping the sacred solitude to rags and tatters with its devil's war whoop and the roar and thunder of its rushing wheels—and straightaway you are back in this world, and with one of its frets ready to hand. . . .

Here, Twain clearly sees the unholy train as a destructive force. Yet the forces which that train represents are responsible for "the presence of active, energetic, intelligent, practical nineteenth-century populations" in all those upper-river towns where "one breathes a go-ahead atmosphere which tastes good in the nostrils." And that pleasant dreamlike quality of the landscape which the train dispels is very like the sleepy remoteness, the unenergetic quality of Southern civilization which Twain disparages when he compares it to that of the North.

On the other hand, Twain often seems to regret the loss of that dreamlike pastoral paradise he remembers as the Mississippi before the Civil War. And, though he complains that what is attractive to the Southerner always has "a kind of swell medieval bulliness and tinsel about it that pleases his gaudy barbaric soul," he occasionally suggests that the values of the Gilded Age which emerged in the North after the Civil War can similarly make their appeal to gaudy barbaric souls.

Life on the Mississippi is characteristic of Twain's work in its betrayal of such ambivalent attitudes, as well as in its being an uneven book. Some of Twain's picturesque descriptions, for example, are flawed by that same "artificial-flower complaint" whose presence in Southern journalism he so lamented; but he frequently uses language that has the vernacular authenticity of the language in his masterpiece, *Huckleberry Finn*. There are some flagrant stylistic lapses, and a few overly strained attempts to be "funny" (New Orleans was "the best lighted city in the Union, electrically speaking"). But there are also memorably realized characters, and fine examples of Twain's peculiar kind of tall-tale humor. (As in this striking testimony to the amazing nutritiousness of St. Louis drinking water: "You look at the graveyards; that tells the tale. Trees won't grow worth shucks in a Cincinnati graveyard, but in a Sent Louis graveyard they grow upwards of eight hundred feet high. It's all on account of the water the people drunk before they laid up. A Cincinnati corpse don't richen a soil any.")

Perhaps the best end to this Introduction's exploring is to arrive where *Life on the Mississippi* starts; to know that, as the book's first sentence proclaims, "The Mississippi is well worth reading about." The great river is well worth reading about because it is Mark Twain who writes about it; and because, as Eliot suggests, "the river is within us"—so that its story of a lost paradise of childhood innocence is our story, too.

"Sounds like poetry, but it's the petrified truth."

JOHN WILLOUGHBY

MARK TWAIN

(1835-1910)

MARK TWAIN—Samuel Langhorne Clemens—was born on November 30, 1835, to John Marshall and Sarah Lampton Clemens, in Florida, Missouri. In 1839, however, his father, a storekeeper and part-time lawyer, moved his family to Hannibal, where Samuel Clemens grew up.

Upon the death of his father, in 1847, the boy was apprenticed to a printer; and when, in 1851, his older brother, Orion, became a publisher, Samuel Clemens started to work for him. In 1856, upon the failure of the *Journal*, young Clemens started down the Mississippi on the first leg of a proposed trip to South America, but became so fascinated by the river that he became a pilot. The Civil War put an end to this, and in 1861, he joined his brother on a trip to Nevada territory to make his fortune. He did not make a fortune, but he did start his writing career in Carson City, where he began to write for the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*. In 1864, he went to San Francisco as a reporter for the *Call* and as a correspondent for the *Enterprise*.

In 1867, his collection of sketches, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches*, was brought out in book form. That same year he visited Europe and the Holy Land, and in 1869, *Innocents Abroad* was published as a result of this trip. In 1870, Clemens married Olivia Langdon and the couple soon moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where they lived during Twain's most productive years. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* appeared in 1876, *The Prince and the Pauper* in 1880, *Life on the Mississippi* in 1883, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1884, and *A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur's Court* in 1889.

Life on the Mississippi



MARK TWAIN



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The "Body of the Nation"

But *the basin of the Mississippi is the BODY OF THE NATION*. All the other parts are but members, important in themselves, yet more important in their relations to this. Exclusive of the Lake basin and of 300,000 square miles in Texas and New Mexico, which in many aspects form a part of it, this basin contains about 1,250,000 square miles. In extent it is the second great valley of the world, being exceeded only by that of the Amazon. The valley of the frozen Obi approaches it in extent; that of the La Plata comes next in space, and probably in habitable capacity, having about $\frac{8}{9}$ of its area; then comes that of the Yenisei, with about $\frac{7}{9}$; the Lena, Amoor, Hoang-ho, Yang-tse-kiang, and Nile, $\frac{5}{9}$; the Ganges, less than $\frac{1}{2}$; the Indus, less than $\frac{1}{3}$; the Euphrates, $\frac{1}{5}$; the Rhine, $\frac{1}{15}$. It exceeds in extent the whole of Europe, exclusive of Russia, Norway, and Sweden. *It would contain Austria four times, Germany or Spain five times. France six times, the British Islands or Italy ten times.* Conceptions formed from the river basins of Western Europe are rudely shocked when we consider the extent of the valley of the Mississippi; nor are those formed from the sterile basins of the great rivers of Siberia, the lofty plateaus of Central Asia, or the mighty sweep of the swampy Amazon more adequate. Latitude, elevation, and rainfall all combine to render every part of the Mississippi Valley capable of supporting a dense population. *As a dwelling-place for civilized man it is by far the first upon our globe.*—EDITOR'S TABLE, *Harper's Magazine*, February, 1863.

1. The River and Its History

The Mississippi is well worth reading about. It is not a commonplace river, but on the contrary is in all ways remarkable. Considering the Missouri its main branch, it is the longest river in the world—four thousand three hundred miles. It seems safe to say that it is also the crookedest river in the world, since in one part of its journey it uses up one thousand three hundred miles to cover the same ground that the crow would fly over in six hundred and seventy-five. It discharges three times as much water as the St. Lawrence, twenty-five

times as much as the Rhine, and three hundred and thirty-eight times as much as the Thames. No other river has so vast a drainage basin: it draws its water supply from twenty-eight States and Territories; from Delaware, on the Atlantic seaboard, and from all the country between that and Idaho on the Pacific slope—a spread of forty-five degrees of longitude. The Mississippi receives and carries to the Gulf water from fifty-four subordinate rivers that are navigable by steamboats, and from some hundreds that are navigable by flats and keels. The area of its drainage basin is as great as the combined areas of England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Austria, Italy, and Turkey; and almost all this wide region is fertile; the Mississippi valley, proper, is exceptionally so.

It is a remarkable river in this: that instead of widening toward its mouth, it grows narrower; grows narrower and deeper. From the junction of the Ohio to a point halfway down to the sea, the width averages a mile in high water: thence to the sea the width steadily diminishes, until, at the "Passes," above the mouth, it is but little over half a mile. At the junction of the Ohio the Mississippi's depth is eighty-seven feet; the depth increases gradually, reaching one hundred and twenty-nine just above the mouth.

The difference in rise and fall is also remarkable—not in the upper, but in the lower river. The rise is tolerably uniform down to Natchez (three hundred and sixty miles above the mouth)—about fifty feet. But at Bayou La Fourche the river rises only twenty-four feet; at New Orleans only fifteen, and just above the mouth only two and one half.

An article in the New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, based upon reports of able engineers, states that the river annually empties four hundred and six million tons of mud into the Gulf of Mexico—which brings to mind Captain Marryat's rude name for the Mississippi—"the Great Sewer." This mud, solidified, would make a mass a mile square and two hundred and forty-one feet high.

The mud deposit gradually extends the land—but only gradually; it has extended it not quite a third of a mile in the two hundred years which have elapsed since the river took its place in history. The belief of the scientific people is that the mouth used to be at Baton Rouge, where the hills cease, and that the two hundred miles of land between there and the Gulf was built by the river. This gives us the age of that piece of country, without any trouble at all—one hundred and twenty thousand years. Yet it is much the youthfulest batch of country that lies around there anywhere.

The Mississippi is remarkable in still another way—its disposition to make prodigious jumps by cutting through narrow necks of land, and thus straightening and shortening itself.

More than once it has shortened itself thirty miles at a single jump! These cutoffs have had curious effects: they have thrown several river towns out into the rural districts, and built up sand bars and forests in front of them. The town of Delta used to be three miles below Vicksburg: a recent cutoff has radically changed the position, and Delta is now *two miles above* Vicksburg.

Both of these river towns have been retired to the country by that cutoff. A cutoff plays havoc with boundary lines and jurisdictions: for instance, a man is living in the State of Mississippi today, a cutoff occurs tonight, and tomorrow the man finds himself and his land over on the other side of the river, within the boundaries and subject to the laws of the State of Louisiana! Such a thing, happening in the upper river in the old times, could have transferred a slave from Missouri to Illinois and made a free man of him.

The Mississippi does not alter its locality by cutoffs alone: it is always changing its habitat *bodily*—is always moving *bodily sidewise*. At Hard Times, La., the river is two miles west of the region it used to occupy. As a result, the original *site* of that settlement is not now in Louisiana at all, but on the other side of the river, in the State of Mississippi. *Nearly the whole of that one thousand three hundred miles of old Mississippi River which La Salle floated down in his canoes, two hundred years ago, is good solid dry ground now.* The river lies to the right of it, in places, and to the left of it in other places.

Although the Mississippi's mud builds land but slowly, down at the mouth, where the Gulf's billows interfere with its work, it builds fast enough in better protected regions higher up: for instance, Prophet's Island contained one thousand five hundred acres of land thirty years ago; since then the river has added seven hundred acres to it.

But enough of these examples of the mighty stream's eccentricities for the present—I will give a few more of them further along in the book.

Let us drop the Mississippi's physical history, and say a word about its historical history—so to speak. We can glance briefly at its slumbrous first epoch in a couple of short chapters; at its second and wider-awake epoch in a couple more; at its flushest and widest-awake epoch in a good many succeeding chapters; and then talk about its comparatively tranquil present epoch in what shall be left of the book.

The world and the books are so accustomed to use, and overuse, the word "new" in connection with our country, that we early get and permanently retain the impression that there is nothing old about it. We do of course know that there are several comparatively old dates in American history, but the mere figures convey to our minds no just idea, no distinct realization, of the stretch of time which they represent. To say

that De Soto, the first white man who ever saw the Mississippi River, saw it in 1542, is a remark which states a fact without interpreting it: it is something like giving the dimensions of a sunset by astronomical measurements, and cataloging the colors by their scientific names—as a result, you get the bald fact of the sunset, but you don't see the sunset. It would have been better to paint a picture of it.

The date 1542, standing by itself, means little or nothing to us; but when one groups a few neighboring historical dates and facts around it, he adds perspective and color, and then realizes that this is one of the American dates which is quite respectable for age.

For instance, when the Mississippi was first seen by a white man, less than a quarter of a century had elapsed since Francis I.'s defeat at Pavia; the death of Raphael; the death of Bayard, *sans peur et sans reproche*; the driving out of the Knights-Hospitallers from Rhodes by the Turks; and the placarding of the Ninety-Five Propositions—the act which began the Reformation. When De Soto took his glimpse of the river, Ignatius Loyola was an obscure name; the order of the Jesuits was not yet a year old; Michelangelo's paint was not yet dry on the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel; Mary Queen of Scots was not yet born, but would be before the year closed. Catherine de Medici was a child; Elizabeth of England was not yet in her teens; Calvin, Benvenuto Cellini, and the Emperor Charles V were at the top of their fame, and each was manufacturing history after his own peculiar fashion; Margaret of Navarre was writing the *Heptameron* and some religious books—the first survives, the others are forgotten, wit and indelicacy being sometimes better literature-preservers than holiness; lax court morals and the absurd chivalry business were in full feather, and the joust and the tournament were the frequent pastime of titled fine gentlemen who could fight better than they could spell, while religion was the passion of their ladies, and the classifying their offspring into children of full rank and children by brevet their pastime. In fact, all around, religion was in a peculiarly blooming condition: the Council of Trent was being called; the Spanish Inquisition was roasting, and racking, and burning with a free hand; elsewhere on the continent the nations were being persuaded to holy living by the sword and fire; in England, Henry VIII had suppressed the monasteries, burned Fisher and another bishop or two, and was getting his English reformation and his harem effectively started. When De Soto stood on the banks of the Mississippi, it was still two years before Luther's death; eleven years before the burning of Servetus; thirty years before the St. Bartholomew slaughter; Rabelais was not yet published; *Don Quixote* was not yet written; Shakespeare was not yet

born; a hundred long years must still elapse before Englishmen would hear the name of Oliver Cromwell.

Unquestionably the discovery of the Mississippi is a datable fact which considerably mellows and modifies the shiny newness of our country, and gives her a most respectable outside-aspect of rustiness and antiquity.

De Soto merely glimpsed the river, then died and was buried in it by his priests and soldiers. One would expect the priests and the soldiers to multiply the river's dimensions by ten—the Spanish custom of the day—and thus move other adventurers to go at once and explore it. On the contrary, their narratives when they reached home did not excite that amount of curiosity. The Mississippi was left unvisited by whites during a term of years which seems incredible in our energetic days. One may “sense” the interval to his mind, after a fashion, by dividing it up in this way: After De Soto glimpsed the river, a fraction short of a quarter of a century elapsed, and then Shakespeare was born; lived a trifle more than half a century, then died; and when he had been in his grave considerably more than half a century, the *second* white man saw the Mississippi. In our day we don't allow a hundred and thirty years to elapse between glimpses of a marvel. If somebody should discover a creek in the county next to the one that the North Pole is in, Europe and America would start fifteen costly expeditions thither: one to explore the creek, and the other fourteen to hunt for each other.

For more than a hundred and fifty years there had been white settlements on our Atlantic coasts. These people were in intimate communication with the Indians: in the south the Spaniards were robbing, slaughtering, enslaving, and converting them; higher up, the English were trading beads and blankets to them for a consideration, and throwing in civilization and whisky, “for lagniappe”;¹ and in Canada the French were schooling them in a rudimentary way, missionarying among them, and drawing whole populations of them at a time to Quebec, and later to Montreal, to buy furs of them. Necessarily, then, these various clusters of whites must have heard of the great river of the far west; and indeed, they did hear of it vaguely—so vaguely and indefinitely that its course, proportions, and locality were hardly even guessable. The mere mysteriousness of the matter ought to have fired curiosity and compelled exploration; but this did not occur. Apparently nobody happened to want such a river, nobody needed it, nobody was curious about it; so, for a century and a half the Mississippi remained out of the market and undisturbed. When De Soto found it, he was not hunting for a river, and

¹ See page 256.

had no present occasion for one; consequently he did not value it or even take any particular notice of it.

But at last La Salle the Frenchman conceived the idea of seeking out that river and exploring it. It always happens that when a man seizes upon a neglected and important idea, people inflamed with the same notion crop up all around. It happened so in this instance.

Naturally the question suggests itself, Why did these people want the river now when nobody had wanted it in the five preceding generations? Apparently it was because at this late day they thought they had discovered a way to make it useful; for it had come to be believed that the Mississippi emptied into the Gulf of California, and therefore afforded a short cut from Canada to China. Previously the supposition had been that it emptied into the Atlantic, or Sea of Virginia.

2. The River and Its Explorers

La Salle himself sued for certain high privileges, and they were graciously accorded him by Louis XIV of inflated memory. Chief among them was the privilege to explore, far and wide, and build forts, and stake out continents, and hand the same over to the king, and pay the expenses himself; receiving, in return, some little advantages of one sort or another; among them the monopoly of buffalo hides. He spent several years and about all of his money in making perilous and painful trips between Montreal and a fort which he had built on the Illinois, before he at last succeeded in getting his expedition in such a shape that he could strike for the Mississippi.

And meantime other parties had had better fortune. In 1673 Joliet the merchant, and Marquette the priest, crossed the country and reached the banks of the Mississippi. They went by way of the Great Lakes; and from Green Bay, in canoes, by way of Fox River and the Wisconsin. Marquette had solemnly contracted, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, that if the Virgin would permit him to discover the great river, he would name it Conception, in her honor. He kept his word. In that day, all explorers traveled with an outfit of priests. De Soto had twenty-four with him. La Salle had several, also. The expeditions were often out of meat, and scant of clothes, but they always had the furniture and other requisites for the mass; they were always prepared, as one of the quaint chroniclers of the time phrased it, to "explain hell to the salvages."