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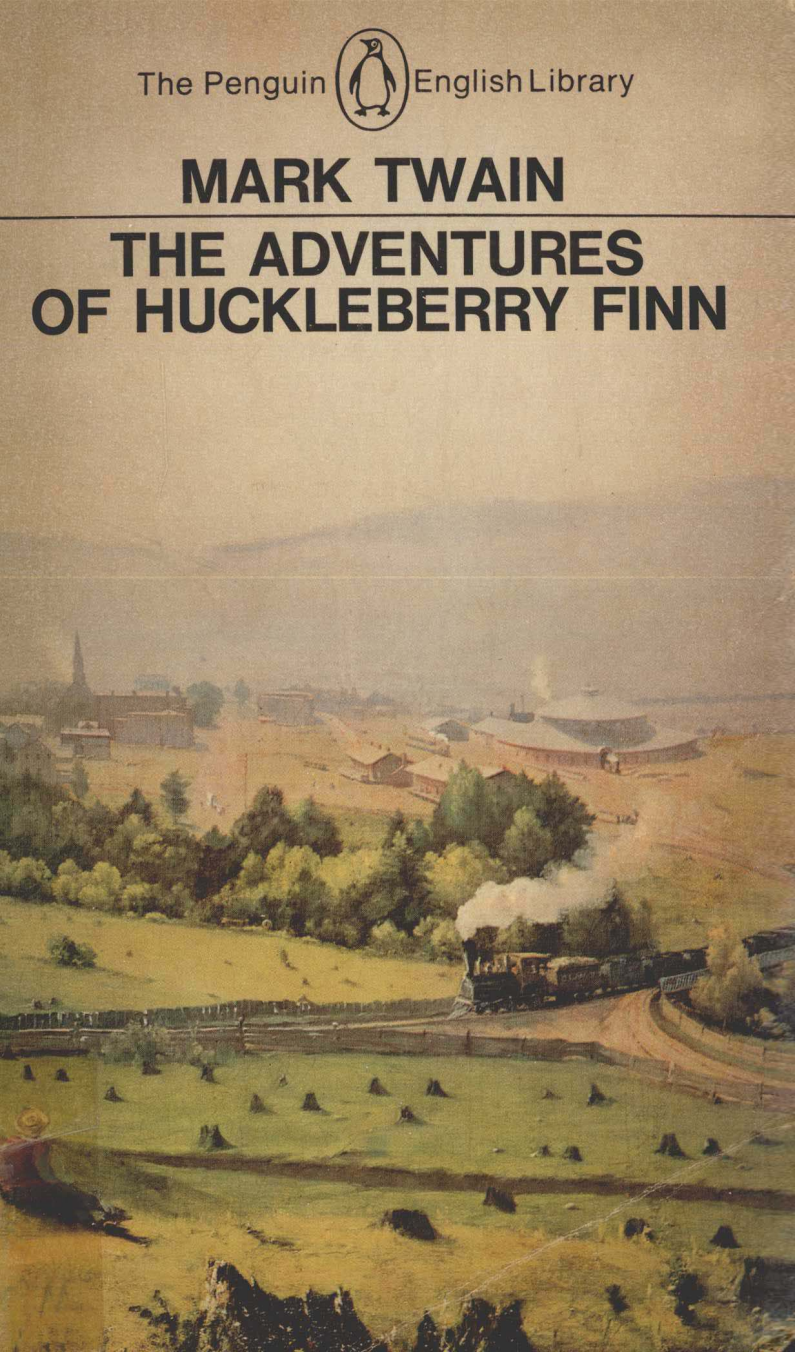
MARK TWAIN

THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN



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HUCKLEBERRY FINN

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Edited with an Introduction by
Peter Coveney

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SAMUEL LANGHORNE CLEMENS was born in Florida, Missouri, on 30 November 1835; his father, John Marshall Clemens, a lawyer, originating from Virginia; his mother, Jane Lampton, from Kentucky. When he was four, his family moved to Hannibal, Missouri, a small township on the Mississippi, where he continued to live until the age of eighteen. His formal education ended soon after his father's death in 1847, when he became a printer's apprentice, working for a time on the Missouri *Courier*, under the editorship of his elder brother, Orion. From 1853, he travelled widely, as a journeyman printer, in the Eastern States and in the West. As a result of a steamboat journey down the Mississippi, he met Horace Bixby, the captain of the boat, and turned to a career on the river. After an apprenticeship of one and a half years, he became a licensed pilot in 1859. He left the Mississippi at the outbreak of the Civil War, and became, in swift succession, an army volunteer, a gold prospector in Nevada, a timber speculator and a journalist. He met Artemus Ward and Bret Harte during this time and turned increasingly towards a professional literary career. While working for the Virginia City *Enterprise*, he adopted the pseudonym 'Mark Twain', the cry of a boatman taking soundings, and meaning two fathoms, i.e. twelve feet. The choice of name may have been characteristically ironic, since two fathoms was presumably an uncomfortable depth for a large steamboat. His first book, *Jumping Frog*, appeared in 1865. Assignments as a travelling reporter to the Sandwich Islands and then to the Mediterranean and Middle East brought him success as a public lecturer and also material for his first major literary success, *Innocents Abroad* (1869). He married Olivia Langdon the following year, and in 1871 established himself, as a

successful writer, in a large mansion in Hartford, Connecticut. He continued to live there for the next seventeen years. It was during this period that his most famous works were written, *Roughing It* (1872), *The Gilded Age* (1873), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884/5). He combined his writing with public lecturing and foreign travelling, becoming American ambassador at large, and acquiring an international reputation as humorist-cum-frontier-philosopher. He indulged in frequent financial speculation, particularly in type-setting machinery and the Charles L. Webster publishing house. Although his literary reputation became increasingly secure (he received an M.A. of Yale in 1888), his intellectual pessimism and despair of human nature increased with his success. *The Gilded Age*, written in collaboration with C. Dudley Warner, had already pointed towards his uneasy acceptance of the values of nineteenth-century American society. In the year of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), he was bankrupted by the failure of both the type-setting and publishing companies, and was compelled to restart his travels to raise the money to discharge his debts. It was during his absence on this voyage that his daughter Susy died. In 1898, the year that he cleared his debts, he wrote three works expressing his acute pessimism, *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg* (published 1900), the philosophizing treatise *What is Man?* (published 1906) and *The Mysterious Stranger* (published posthumously in 1916). From this time until his death, he maintained a bitter scepticism, relieved at times by outraged commentary on world affairs, notably on Belgian atrocities in the Congo and American behaviour in the Philippines. His last years were saddened by personal bereavement; his wife dying in 1904 and his daughter Jean in 1909. In 1906 he started preparing material for his *Autobiography*, and in 1907 received an honorary doctorate of Oxford University. He died at Redding, Connecticut, on 21 April 1910, at the age of seventy-five.

INTRODUCTION

I

IN the late summer of 1883, at Quarry Farm, high above Elmira in southern New York State, Samuel Langhorne Clemens completed a work which, as he put it in a letter to his brother Orion, he had 'been fooling over for 7 years'. That summer, however, he said, it had been no more trouble to him to write than it had been to lie. Going 'damp from the breakfast table each morning' to the study he had had built at the farm nine years before, he gave his inspirational talent full-rein, 'piling up manuscript in a really astonishing way' – and, incidentally, as his custom was, letting it fall on the floor about him as he wrote. In this way, at the age of forty-eight, 'in the quietest of all quiet places', Mark Twain completed what many would accept as the greatest American novel, and certainly the most important novel of the American nineteenth century, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.*

It was indeed seven years earlier, in July 1876, immediately after the publication of *Tom Sawyer*, that he began 'another boy's book'. It was, he wrote, 'more to be at work than anything else'. In a month four hundred pages were written of Huck Finn's Autobiography, as he called it. But then, when he thought it very nearly half done, he decided that he liked what he had written only 'tolerably well', and considered pigeon-holing or burning the manuscript. This rushing at a work and becoming played out was nothing new to his talent. 'As long as a book would write itself,' he once wrote, 'I was a faithful and interested amanuensis . . . but the minute that the book tried to shift to *my* head the labour of contriving its situations . . . I put it away . . . my tank had run dry.' It so happened that this time his 'tank had run dry' at a particularly difficult stage. He stopped composing, probably

for three years, towards the end of what is now Chapter 16. Seven years altogether of working 'by fits and starts' were needed before he could complete the themes established in those first sixteen chapters.

In the summer of 1883, he had little conscious idea of the importance of the work he had created. In a letter to a friend, he called it no more than a 'kind of companion to *Tom Sawyer*'. For all the exhilaration of that summer he remained innocent of the scale of the work his imagination had strangely put together. Very few felt the power behind the picaresque rather untidy story. For respectable America – and the Library Committee of Concord, Massachusetts, was representative – *Huckleberry Finn* was 'rough, coarse and inelegant ... more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people'. In a phrase, it was the 'veriest trash'. To the less censorious, it seemed no more than a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, a second boyhood romance, set in the Mississippi valley 'some forty to fifty years ago', written in the tradition of south-western humour, to which from the outset Mark Twain's talents had been recruited. Certainly the essential story is simple enough. A boy of about thirteen or fourteen decides to run away from the cruelties of a drunken father and the 'sivilizing' pressures of respectable St Petersburg society. At the moment of escape, he falls in with Jim, Miss Watson's runaway slave. Together they make their way down the Mississippi on a raft brought down on the 'June rise', travelling over a thousand miles to the Phelps's plantation in Arkansas, where the novel has its ending.

Only in this century has the importance of the novel created about this skeleton become generally accepted; that from this tale of the escape of the outcast son of the town drunkard of St Petersburg, Missouri, Mark Twain created a novel which came in time to be recognized as *the* American 'classic'. H. L. Mencken set the tone and scale of much later assessment when he declared it, in 1913, 'one of the greatest


Hannibal
ILLINOIS
INDIANA
OHIO
Missouri
St.Louis
MISSOURI
Ohio
Miles
0
100
200
KENTUCKY
Cairo
TENNESSEE
ARKANSAS
Memphis
U S A
NEW YORK
THE MISSISSIPPI of HUCKLEBERRY FINN
NEW ORLEANS
MISSISSIPPI
Mississippi
LOUISIANA
ALABAMA
FLORIDA
New Orleans
THE MISSISSIPPI
Gulf of Mexico

masterpieces of the world', and asserted Twain's essential 'Americanness', seeing him as the 'true father of our national heritage, the first genuinely American artist of the blood royal'. This comes near to Hemingway's famous – and characteristic – testimony that 'all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . . It's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.' Although this kind of rhetoric doesn't get us very far, it serves to establish the scale of reference within which *Huckleberry Finn* has come to be discussed. Even though it has long been the subject of serious critical and sometimes adverse debate, the central position remains, that any discussion of it, whether of its strength or weakness, begins from an assumption about its greatness. Bernard De Voto's claim that it has 'a vigor, a depth, and a multiplicity which no other American novel surpasses, if in fact any equals them'; and T. S. Eliot's proposal that the character of Huckleberry Finn is 'one of the permanent symbolic figures of fiction not unworthy to take a place with Ulysses, Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Hamlet and other discoveries which man has made about himself', set the radius of the circle which any account of the novel is called upon to inscribe.

2

Mark Twain's vague intention in starting the book was indeed to write a 'kind of companion to *Tom Sawyer*'. From the outset Huckleberry Finn was the 'Tom Sawyer's Comrade' of the work's ultimate sub-title. And although the novel became in the course of seven years' writing something entirely other than a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, Twain never moved away from the theme he first established. The novel was to be about a boy's adventures in the Mississippi valley some 'forty or fifty years ago'. Boyhood and the world of the old Mississippi before the Civil War (1861–5) were the

twin points of concentration for Twain's imagination during the period 1874–83. The recollected image of his own boyhood and adolescence, in the small riverside town of Hannibal, Missouri, had enormous power over his mind. He retained in his memory a 'picture' of it, he said, 'as clear and vivid as a photograph'. It became the source for the St Petersburg of both *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. His recollection of the Mississippi was immeasurably entrenched by his experience as a steamboat pilot during four years of his early manhood (1857–61). Hannibal and the Mississippi, with all the complexity and nostalgia of his response to them, became the continuous focus of his work from the time when he was involved in earnest with the writing of *Tom Sawyer*. In that year (1874) he wrote the first instalment of the reminiscing *Old Times on the Mississippi*, and in the year *Tom Sawyer* was completed (1876) he started with *Huckleberry Finn*. Six years later, before that last rush of creativity which saw the end of the novel, he revisited the river valley. It was his first prolonged visit since he left the Mississippi at the outbreak of the Civil War. Out of this spring visit of 1882 came *Life on the Mississippi* and some at least of the great middle section of *Huckleberry Finn*. We now know that it was wrong to suppose that the visit caused him to take up the manuscript of the novel again, since he had already returned to it in the winter of 1879–80. Nevertheless, the visit clarified his attitudes towards the river and made him acutely aware of what had been happening on the Mississippi since he left it in 1861. In itself, the visit is important evidence of his concern with the river during the years he was at work on *Huckleberry Finn*.

Twain knew his own obsessions. He was entirely conscious of the power of boyhood and the Mississippi over his mind. In a letter of 1890, he wrote:

> I confine myself to the life with which I am familiar . . . I confine myself to boy-life out on the Mississippi, because that had peculiar charm for me. . . . *Now* then: as the most valuable capital . . . in the

building of novels is personal experience, I ought to be well-equipped.

But then, in a crossed-through postscript, he added:

> And yet I can't get away from the boyhood period and write novels, because capital is not sufficient by itself and I lack the other essential: interest in handling the men and experience of later times.

Although he could write in an unmailed letter of 1876 to his close friend Will Bowen, that nostalgia was 'simply mental and moral masturbation', nevertheless, his own nostalgic imagination flowed incessantly back to his own 'boy-life out of the Mississippi' and the lost piloting days of his early maturity. 'After all these years,' he wrote in *Old Times on the Mississippi* 'I can picture that old time . . . just as it was then: the white town (of Hannibal) drowsing in the sunshine of a summer's morning . . . the great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along.' Thinking of that 'old day' of his childhood in Hannibal made him feel, he wrote in a letter of 1887, like 'some banished Adam, revisiting his half-forgotten Paradise and wondering how the arid world could ever have seemed green and fair to him'. Four days after his marriage he wrote this to Bowen:

> Your letter has stirred me to the bottom. The fountains of my great deep are broken up and I have rained reminiscences. . . . The old life has swept before me . . . the old faces have looked out of the mists of the past . . . and the songs I loved ages and ages ago have come wailing down the centuries.

Even twenty years after he left the river, he could write, in *Life on the Mississippi*, that he longed to be left to 'dream that the years had not slipped away; that there had been no war, no mining days, no literary adventures' that he was 'still a pilot, happy and carefree' as he had been 'twenty years before':

> A pilot in those days was the only unfettered and entirely independent being that lived on earth . . . writers of all kinds are manacled servants of the public. We write frankly and fearlessly, but then we

'modify' before we print. 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.

This raises at once the problem of Twain's complicated and much-discussed personality and the influence that this had upon his work. The idea of the past was clearly associated for him with the idea of a lost freedom and a compromised integrity. Being a pilot was somehow freedom and integrity; all else was being 'manacled', being mastered. And being mastered meant the modification of frank and fearless statement by cowardice masquerading as discretion. *Huckleberry Finn* was written out of Twain's concern with the problem of creative independence. It is a novel about freedom and integrity.

It has been suggested that this concern bordered upon obsession; that an over-statement takes over in such passages as the above, indicating a personality labouring under restraint and inhibition: that under various psychic pressures, his desire for the past and its freedom became merely longing for escape; that his wisdom and commentary as a novelist were almost everywhere blurred and vitiated by an insuperable regression. It was Van Wyck Brooks who first attempted an analysis of Mark Twain's complex and, for him, acutely disturbed personality, in his *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (1920). He saw Twain's uncomfortable humour, his ironic self-recrimination, his growing misanthropy (which is already there as a pressure, albeit a controlled pressure, in *Huckleberry Finn*) as the morbid products of curbs imposed upon his personality. For Brooks, the 'sivilizing' pressures of his wife and New England literary friends curbed and blighted the vitalities of his 'frontier' humour. The devitalizing 'genteel tradition' of New England was at odds with the living warmth of that so essentially *American* phenomenon, the 'frontier'. More important still, Brooks contended that Twain himself was discontented with his success, that he felt

his talents as in some way squandered and compromised; that he regretted becoming the comic spokesman of a civilization whose values, in part of him, he deeply despised. Somewhere at the heart of Twain's talent, Brooks saw a hurt and a frustration, in face of which Twain maintained the escape-route of his 'boy-life out on the Mississippi' re-created in the fantasy world of Tom Sawyer and his 'comrade' Huckleberry Finn. He did not, of course, question the greatness of *Huckleberry Finn*. There, at least, Twain's genius transmuted what was generally pervasive weakness into what was undeniably major art. Elsewhere, however, he saw Twain's talents continuously negated, with *Huckleberry Finn* itself hovering at times uncomfortably on the narrow frontier between triumph and failure.

There is, of course, over-pleading in Brooks's case; he may well have been too much caught up in the psychologizing enthusiasms of his time. But for all the *caveats* and protests of his detractors, the acceptability of much of his position surely stands. Almost everywhere in Twain's work, even in *Huckleberry Finn*, there is the sense of a casual, inspirational talent at work, happening almost accidentally upon its potentialities. For anyone not needing to adopt a 'position' in the controversy, it is inconceivable not to admit that Brooks, with very considerable originality, cast valuable insights into the formation of Twain's personality and the sources of his imaginative life, and within them, the creation of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Twain's relations with his wife, Olivia Langdon, whom he married in 1870, have always been central to the controversy. But even if we discount the degree of inhibition which she exercised over his talent, it is difficult entirely to ignore the constant irony with which he referred to her. Even before their marriage he could write: 'but you will break up all my irregularities when we are married and *civilize* me, and make of me a model husband and an adornment to society – won't