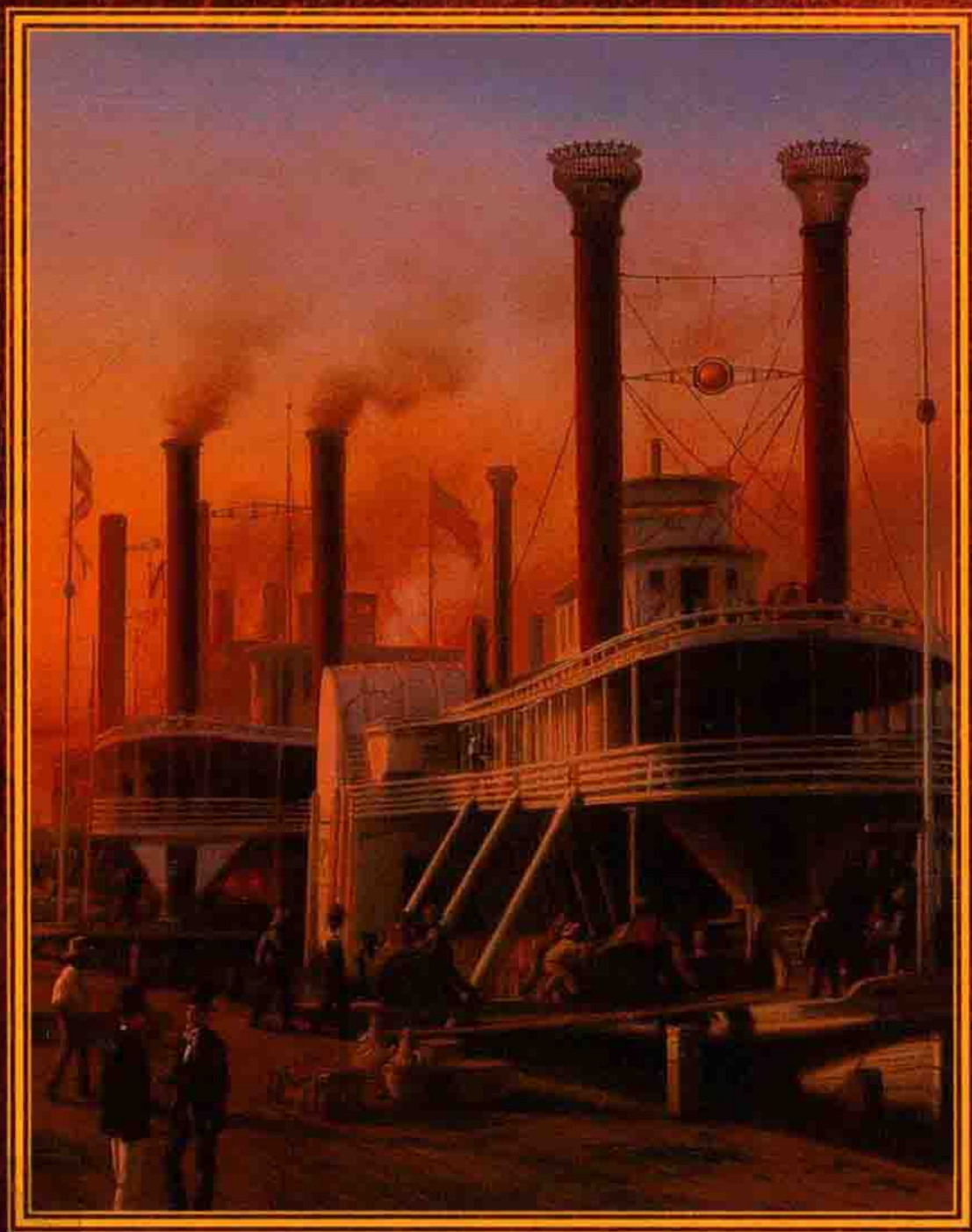


Signet Classic

MARK TWAIN



LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY JUSTIN KAPLAN

MARK TWAIN



Life on the Mississippi

*With a New Introduction
by Justin Kaplan*



A SIGNET CLASSIC

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MARK TWAIN was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in Florida, Missouri, in 1835 and died in Redding, Connecticut, in 1910. In his person and in his pursuits, he was a man of extraordinary contrasts. Although he left school at twelve when his father died, he was eventually awarded honorary degrees from Yale University, the University of Missouri, and Oxford University. His career encompassed such varied occupations as printer, Mississippi riverboat pilot, journalist, travel writer, and publisher. He made fortunes from his writing but toward the end of his life he had to resort to lecture tours to pay his debts. He was hot-tempered, profane, and sentimental—and also pessimistic, cynical, and tortured by self-doubt. His nostalgia for the past helped produce some of his best books. He lives in American letters as a great artist, the writer whom William Dean Howells called “the Lincoln of our literature.”

JUSTIN KAPLAN of Cambridge, Massachusetts, is the author of *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award; *Mark Twain and His World*; *Lincoln Steffens*; and *Walt Whitman: A Life*. In 1985, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

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 $\frac{2}{3}$ of its area; then comes that of the Yenisei, with about $\frac{1}{3}$; the Lena, Amoor, Hoang-ho, Yang-tse-kiang, and Nile, $\frac{1}{5}$; 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.

Introduction

For four of his seventy-five years, Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens) worked at the wheel of a Mississippi River steamboat, first as a “cub” (or apprentice) training for his pilot’s license. He had fulfilled an early dream that never lost its hold. Boys growing up along the river had “transient ambitions of other sorts,” he recalled, to be a circus clown or a pirate, “but they were only transient. . . . The ambition to be a steamboatman always remained.” Looking back on his apprenticeship, the mature writer Mark Twain—by then famous in Europe as well as at home—still felt the joy and solitary splendor of having reached the pinnacle of his first profession. The steamboat pilot, he said, was “the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived in the earth.”

But such freedom and authority—by law, once at the wheel, the pilot answered to no one, not even the ship’s captain—came with a chastening responsibility: steamboating on the Mississippi was hazardous. “My nightmares to this day,” Mark Twain was to write, “take the form of running into an overshadowing bluff with a steamboat—showing that my earliest dread made the strongest impression on me.” His brother, Henry, a clerk on the *Pennsylvania*, had been among the hundred or so passengers and crew who died in June 1858 when the ship’s boilers blew up sixty miles downriver from Memphis. “My darling, my pride, my glory, my *all*,” the twenty-two-year-old Sam Clemens mourned, praying to be struck dead if this would bring the boy back to life: he had arranged Henry’s job on the *Pennsylvania* and held himself responsible for the boy’s death. Gaudy, smoke-plumed floating palaces that were among the glories of nineteenth-century invention and elaboration, Mississippi steamboats could also be “black clouds” of destruction with “red-hot teeth,” as Huck Finn says: they devoured themselves, passengers, cargo, rafts and scows, and anything else in the way. Traveling on these boats, espe-

cially when they raced one another, could be like riding a volcano.

In April 1882, after twenty-one years' absence from the pilothouse, Mark Twain came back to the river to gather material for *Life on the Mississippi*. "I felt a very strong desire to see the river again, and the steamboats, and such of the boys as might be left; so I resolved to go out there." He brought with him on the westward journey from Hartford, Connecticut, his Boston publisher, James R. Osgood, for companionship; a Hartford stenographer, Roswell Phelps, for practical reasons; and supplies of tobacco and whiskey for his hourly needs. By the time of his return, most of the steamboats that had plied the Mississippi before the Civil War were gone—wrecked, burned, abandoned to rot and rust, killed off by the railroad. During Mark Twain's lifetime (1835–1910), steamboating on the Mississippi passed into history and legend along with the overland stage, the Pony Express, and the Western frontier. He outlasted all of them to become their chronicler and living symbol.

The mighty river itself—the young Sam Clemens claimed to have known stretches of it as well as he knew the hallway of his own house in the dark—was familiar no longer. He recognized this soon after he began his trip downriver from St. Louis: the Mississippi was "as brand-new as if it had been built yesterday." All that remained of his meticulously acquired knowledge of the river was a landsman's skill in remembering names and addresses. He saw new islands, new landings, new towns taking the place of once-thriving settlements now landlocked. At the St. Louis levee, in his piloting days packed solid with steamboats, he found only half a dozen, their fires banked or dead. Tied up inside the wooded mouth of a tributary, the Obion River, he saw a lone steamboat. "The spyglass revealed the fact that she was named for me—or *he* was named for me, whichever you prefer." Even this tribute to his fame did not relieve the feeling of strangeness and desolation—he saw no other steamboat that day.

Along with the departed glories of steamboating, there was a larger gamut of change that Mark Twain memorialized in *Life on the Mississippi*. The Civil War had closed the river to commercial traffic and destroyed the pilot's occupation. To Mark Twain's understanding, the war also destroyed something precious, redeeming, and innocent in American life. Moralistic and

social critic, he noted in its stead the hardness, cynicism, lust for money, and epidemic political corruption that shaped what he called the Gilded Age, "an era of incredible rottenness."

His friend and literary confidant William Dean Howells called him "the most desouthernized Southerner I ever knew. . . . No man more perfectly sensed and more entirely abhorred slavery." He married into an abolitionist family, and his next-door neighbor in liberal-minded Hartford was the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the novel that awakened the nation's conscience to the sin of slavery. And so in middle age, he returned to his native region with conflicting emotions: nostalgia and hostility, affection and outrage. Even before leaving on his trip South in 1882, he had begun to tell himself what he expected to find: a region barren of progress, he wrote in his notebook, expert only in the arts of war, murder, and massacre, given to "flowery and gushy" speech and pretentious architecture. For all its vaunted graciousness and refinement, the culture of the antebellum South, he said, had been an anachronism borrowed from the novels of Sir Walter Scott. It was "a pathetic sham," like "The House Beautiful" (Chapter XXXVIII): the town or village's finest dwelling, a two-story frame building fronted with fluted columns and Corinthian capitals made of pine painted white to look like marble and evoke the bygone glory of Greece, a civilization and economy, like that of the prewar Cotton Kingdom, founded on human bondage. "In the South, the war is what A.D. is elsewhere. They date from it," he writes. "All day long you hear things 'placed' as having happened since the waw; or du'in' the waw . . . 'Bless yo' heart, honey, you ought to seen dat moon befo' de waw!'" The Old South still hadn't grown up.

Mark Twain's acerb, profoundly felt, and hilarious chronicle of old times and present times on the Mississippi is social history and personal history, an alloy of anecdote, statistics, and river lore, true story, tall story, and dubious story, including the unverifiable claim that he borrowed his pseudonym from Captain Isaiah Sellers, the supposed Methuselah of the piloting profession. Like *The Innocents Abroad* and *Roughing It*, earlier books that had established Mark Twain's reputation, *Life on the Mississippi* is the work of a brilliant travel writer and incomparable humorist. It is also a fable about the education of a literary artist as well as a pilot and the roles of imagination, memory, training, and intuition.

* * *

Mark Twain had been planning the book that became *Life on the Mississippi* for nearly two decades before he published it in 1883. In January 1866, a few months after he announced to his family that he had had “a ‘call’ to literature”—“to excite the *laughter* of God’s creatures”—he planned to write a book about the Mississippi. “I expect it to make about three hundred pages, and the last hundred will have to be written in St. Louis, because the materials for them can only be got there. . . . I may be an old man before I finish it,” he said then. Five years later, he told his wife, Olivia, he intended to go back to the river and spend two months taking notes: “I bet you I will make a standard work.” Nothing came of this plan either. Late in 1874, struggling to come up with an idea for an *Atlantic Monthly* article and complaining that “my head won’t ‘go’,” he suddenly (by his own account) discovered—or rediscovered—a perfect, untapped subject: “Old Mississippi days of steamboating glory and grandeur as I saw them (during 5 years) *from the pilot-house*.” “I am the only man alive that can scribble about the piloting of that day,” he told Howells. The subject was not only his alone but seemingly inexhaustible. “If I were to write fifty articles they would all be about pilots and piloting.” He settled down to work with the enthusiasm and optimism he tended to show at the beginning and middle of any new project.

Always a storyteller favoring atmospheric over literal truth, in order to enhance the drama and credibility of his narrative he changed some of its main circumstances. He was not, as he claims, an untraveled boy of seventeen, when Horace Bixby signed him on as his “cub.” Instead, he had been twenty-two years old and had already worked far from home as a printer in St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati. Until he realized that he needed both money and a ship to take him from New Orleans to Brazil, he had even contrived a visionary scheme to go up the Amazon and perhaps corner the market in coca, the shrub source of cocaine, an elixir reputed to have invigorating properties. And so far from being a shore-bound innocent—“I supposed all a pilot had to do was to keep his boat in the river”—he had rafted on the Mississippi and studied steamboats since childhood.

“‘Cub’ Wants to Be a Pilot”—the first of seven installments, written in rapid succession, of a series titled “Old Times on the

Mississippi”—came out in the *Atlantic Monthly* in January 1875. It opens with the words “When I was a boy”—Mark Twain’s mantra for unlocking imagination and memory—and leads to one of the classic passages in American literature: “After all those years I can picture that old time to myself, the white town drowsing in the sunshine of a summer’s morning. . . .” The cry of “S-t-e-a-m-boat a-comin!” also announces the arrival of Mark Twain, future author of *Huckleberry Finn*, and declares that his surge of power and spectacle, along with a prose manner that is both distinctively American and distinctively his own, derives not from polite or traditional literary sources but from “the great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun.”

“The piece about the Mississippi is capital,” Howells wrote. “It almost made the water in our ice-pitcher muddy as I read it.” From the poet and journalist, and former private secretary to Abraham Lincoln, John Hay, born and raised in Warsaw, Illinois, fifty miles up the river from Hannibal, came another validation and tribute. “I don’t see how you do it. I knew all that, every word of it—passed as much time on the levee as you ever did, knew the same crowd and saw the same scenes—but I could not have remembered one word of it. You have the two greatest gifts of the writer, memory and imagination.”

Exhilarated by his rediscovered subject matter, Mark Twain believed at first he had enough material in hand to make a book to be published at the end of 1875. He was off by eight years and the several hundred additional pages that he needed to fill out his book and meet the length and bulk requirements of the subscription publishing trade. To pad it out he borrowed extensively, perhaps 11,000 words in all, from other writers, including the historian Francis Parkman. Chapter XXXVI (“The Professor’s Yarn”) is freestanding material heaved in from the author’s stock of unpublished or discarded manuscripts. Almost the whole of Chapter III is the raftsmen’s chapter, 7,000 words or so, borrowed from *Huckleberry Finn*, “a book which I have been working at, by fits and starts, during the past five or six years, and may possibly finish in the course of five or six more.” Other material adapted from the novel includes the Darnell-Watson feud (Chapter XXVI) and the period-piece description of “The House Beautiful” (Chapter XXXVIII). Even-

tually he accumulated more filler material than he needed and moved chunks of it to appendices.

His six-week trip to the river gave him material and impetus for two books he was writing more or less simultaneously: *Huckleberry Finn* and *Life on the Mississippi*, both of them narratives that flow downriver into the deep South. The two books had become symbiotic, and he used one to jog the other; his working notes for them overlapped. In 1885, with both books finished, he made preliminary notes for a third, this one never written: with Huck Finn cast as a cabin boy on a steamboat, it was to “put the great river and its bygone ways into history in the form of a story.”

“I never had such a fight over a book in my life before,” he told Howells as *Life on the Mississippi* was about to go to press: “I will not interest myself in anything connected with this wretched God-damned book.” His publisher insisted on some last-minute cuts (about 15,000 words in all) of material thought likely to offend loyal Southerners and sentimental Northerners. Olivia Clemens, always Mark Twain’s editor, was not only late in getting to the proofs but with 50,000 copies of *Life on the Mississippi* already printed, ordered two illustrations deleted—one showing a chopfallen corpse with staring eyes; another, the author being cremated, with an urn initialed “M.T.” standing in the foreground to receive the ashes. It was to be more than sixty years from publication in 1883 that *Life on the Mississippi* came near the 100,000 sale its author hoped for it.

In 1880, a twelve-year-old Dallas schoolboy named Wattie Bowser sent Mark Twain a fan letter asking him for his autograph and to say whether he would be willing to change places with Wattie and be a boy again. The answer was yes, but with one main condition: “That I should emerge from boyhood as a ‘cub pilot’ on a Mississippi boat, and that I should by and by become a pilot, and remain one. . . . And when strangers were introduced I should have them repeat ‘Mr. Clemens?’ doubtfully, and with the rising inflection—and when they were informed that I was the celebrated ‘Master Pilot of the Mississippi,’ and immediately took me by the hand and wrung it with effusion, and exclaimed, ‘O, I know *that* name very well!’ I should feel a pleasurable emotion trickling down my spine and know I had not lived in vain.” He was remembering

the grandeur that surrounded the lightning pilot, the gold-leaf, kid-glove, diamond-breastpin sort of pilot who answered to no man and spoke in commands, not requests.

"Master Pilot of the Mississippi" is a figure of speech for the literary achievement of Mark Twain, a name born on the river and meaning two fathoms, or twelve feet of depth: for the moment safe water, but not by much, for a shallow draft steamboat. It was a name so linked with the river that Mark Twain's young daughter, Clara, hearing the leadsman on a steamboat sing out his soundings, once said, "Papa, I have hunted all over the boat for you. Don't you know they are calling for you?"

"Your true pilot," he writes, "cares nothing about anything on earth but the river, and his pride in his occupation surpasses the pride of kings." The evolution under Horace Bixby of "cub" into licensed pilot is also the story of Sam Clemens's evolution from novice writer to the literary master Mark Twain. The lessons he learned on the river have the resonance of lessons learned about writing and put into practice year after year. "There is one faculty which a pilot must incessantly cultivate until he has brought it to absolute perfection. Nothing short of perfection will do. That faculty is memory. He cannot stop with thinking a thing is so and so; he must *know* it. . . . With what scorn a pilot was looked upon, in the old times, if he ever ventured to deal in that feeble phrase 'I think,' instead of the vigorous one 'I know!'" Along with memory, intuition, and trust in instinct, "he must have good and quick judgment and decision, and a cool, calm courage that no peril can shake." The great river itself had been an alphabet, a language, a primer, and a book with "a new story to tell every day. Throughout the long twelve hundred miles there was never a page that was void of interest, never one you could leave unread without loss." The next such story, after *Life on the Mississippi*, was to be *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

—Justin Kaplan

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION xv

CHAPTER I

The Mississippi Is Well Worth Reading About.—It Is Remarkable.—Instead of Widening Toward Its Mouth, It Grows Narrower.—It Empties Four Hundred and Six Million Tons of Mud.—It Was First Seen in 1542.—It Is Older Than Some Pages in European History.—De Soto Has the Pull.—Older Than the Atlantic Coast.—Some Half-Breeds Chip In.—La Salle Thinks He Will Take a Hand. 1

CHAPTER II

La Salle Again Appears, and So Does a Catfish.—Buffaloes Also.—Some Indian Paintings Are Seen on the Rocks.—“The Father of Waters” Does Not Flow into the Pacific.—More History and Indians.—Some Curious Performances.—Not Early English.—Natchez, or the Site of It, Is Approached. 6

CHAPTER III

A Little History.—Early Commerce.—Coal Fleets and Timber Rafts.—We Start on a Voyage.—I Seek Information.—Some Music.—The Trouble Begins.—Tall Talk.—The Child of Calamity.—Ground and Lofty Tumbling.—The Washup.—Business and Statistics.—Mysterious Band.—Thunder and Lightning.—The Captain Speaks.—Allbright Weeps.—The Mystery Settled.—Chaff.—I Am Discovered.—Some Artwork Proposed.—I Give an Account of Myself.—Released. 11

CHAPTER IV

The Boys' Ambition.—Village Scenes.—Steamboat Pictures.—A Heavy Swell.—A Runaway. 25

CHAPTER V

A Traveler.—A Lively Talker.—A Wildcat Victim. 29

CHAPTER VI

Besieging the Pilot.—Taken Along.—Spoiling a Nap.—Fishing for a Plantation.—“Points” on the River.—A Gorgeous Pilothouse. 33

CHAPTER VII

River Inspectors.—Cottonwoods and Plum Point.—Hat-Island Crossing.—Touch and Go.—It Is a Go.—A Lightning Pilot. . . . 39

CHAPTER VIII

A Heavy-Loaded Big Gun.—Sharp Sights in Darkness.—Abandoned to His Fate.—Scraping the Banks.—Learn Him or Kill Him. 45

CHAPTER IX

Shake the Reef.—Reason Dethroned.—The Face of the Water.—A Bewitching Scene.—Romance and Beauty. 50

CHAPTER X

Putting on Airs.—Taken Down a Bit.—Learn It as It Is.—The River Rising. 56

CHAPTER XI

In the Tract Business.—Effects of the Rise.—Plantations Gone.—A Measureless Sea.—A Somnambulist Pilot.—Supernatural Piloting.—Nobody There.—All Saved. 61

CHAPTER XII

Low Water.—Yawl Sounding.—Buoys and Lanterns.—Cubs and Soundings.—The Boat Sunk.—Seeking the Wrecked. 67

CHAPTER XIII

A Pilot's Memory.—Wages Soaring.—A Universal Grasp.—Skill and Nerve.—Testing a “Cub.”—“Back Her for Life.”—A Good Lesson. 72

CHAPTER XIV

Pilots and Captains.—High-Priced Pilots.—Pilots in Demand.—A Whistler.—A Cheap Trade.—Two-Hundred-and-Fifty-Dollar Speed. 79

CHAPTER XV

New Pilots Undermining the Pilots' Association.—Crutches and Wages.—Putting on Airs.—The Captains Weaken.—The Association Laughs.—The Secret Sign.—An Admirable System.—Rough

on Outsiders.—A Tight Monopoly.—No Loophole.—The Railroads and the War. 85

CHAPTER XVI

All Aboard.—A Glorious Start.—Loaded to Win.—Bands and Bugles.—Boats and Boats.—Racers and Racing. 95

CHAPTER XVII

Cutoffs.—Ditching and Shooting.—Mississippi Changes.—A Wild Night.—Swearing and Guessing.—Stephen in Debt.—He Confuses His Creditors.—He Makes a New Deal.—Will Pay Them Alphabetically. 104

CHAPTER XVIII

Sharp Schooling.—Shadows.—I Am Inspected.—Where Did You Get Them Shoes?—Pull Her Down.—I Want to Kill Brown.—I Try to Run Her.—I Am Complimented. 110

CHAPTER XIX

A Question of Veracity.—A Little Unpleasantness.—I Have an Audience with the Captain.—Mr. Brown Retires. 115

CHAPTER XX

I Become a Passenger.—We Hear the News.—A Thunderous Crash.—They Stand to Their Posts.—In the Blazing Sun.—A Gruesome Spectacle.—His Hour Has Struck. 119

CHAPTER XXI

I Get My License.—The War Begins.—I Become a Jack-of-All-Trades. 124

CHAPTER XXII

I Try the Alias Business.—Region of Goatees.—Boots Begin to Appear.—The River Man Is Missing.—The Young Man Is Discouraged.—Specimen Water.—A Fine Quality of Smoke.—A Supreme Mistake.—We Inspect the Town.—Desolation Way Traffic.—A Woodyard. 124

CHAPTER XXIII

Old French Settlements.—We Start for Memphis.—Young Ladies and Russia-Leather Bags. 131

CHAPTER XXIV

I Receive Some Information.—Alligator Boats.—Alligator Talk.—She Was a Rattler to Go.—I Am Found Out. 134

CHAPTER XXV

The Devil's Oven and Table.—A Bombshell Falls.—No White-wash.—Thirty Years on the River.—Mississippi Uniforms.—Accidents and Casualties.—Two Hundred Wrecks.—A Loss to Literature.—Sunday Schools and Brick Masons. 139

CHAPTER XXVI

War Talk.—I Tilt Over Backwards.—Fifteen Shot Holes.—A Plain Story.—Wars and Feuds.—Darnell *versus* Watson.—A Gang and a Woodpile.—Western Grammar.—River Changes.—New Madrid.—Floods and Falls. 144

CHAPTER XXVII

Tourists and Their Notebooks.—Captain Hall.—Mrs. Trollope's Emotions.—Hon. Charles Augustus Murray's Sentiment.—Captain Marryat's Sensations.—Alexander Mackay's Feelings.—Mr. Parkman Reports. 150

CHAPTER XXVIII

Swinging Down the River.—Named for Me.—Plum Point Again.—Lights and Snag Boats.—Infinite Changes.—A Lawless River.—Changes and Jetties.—Uncle Mumford Testifies.—Pegging the River.—What the Government Does.—The Commission Men and Theories.—“Had Them Bad.”—Jews and Prices. 155

CHAPTER XXIX

Murel's Gang.—A Consummate Villain.—Getting Rid of Witnesses.—Stewart Turns Traitor.—I Start a Rebellion.—I Get a New Suit of Clothes.—We Cover Our Tracks.—Pluck and Capacity.—A Good Samaritan City.—The Old and the New. 162

CHAPTER XXX

A Melancholy Picture.—On the Move.—River Gossip.—She Went By A-sparklin'.—Amenities of Life.—A World of Misinformation.—Eloquence of Silence.—Striking a Snag.—Photographically Exact.—Plank Sidewalks. 170

CHAPTER XXXI

Mutinous Language.—The Dead House.—Cast-Iron German and Flexible English.—A Dying Man's Confession.—I Am Bound and

Gagged.—I Get Myself Free.—I Begin My Search.—The Man with One Thumb.—Red Paint and White Paper.—He Dropped on His Knees.—Fright and Gratitude.—I Fled Through the Woods.—A Grisly Spectacle.—Shout, Man, Shout.—A Look of Surprise and Triumph.—The Muffled Gurgle of a Mocking Laugh.—How Strangely Things Happen.—The Hidden Money. 176

CHAPTER XXXII

Ritter's Narrative.—A Question of Money.—Napoleon.—Somebody Is Serious.—Where the Prettiest Girl Used to Live. 189

CHAPTER XXXIII

A Question of Division.—A Place Where There Was No License.—The Calhoun Land Company.—A Cotton Planter's Estimate.—Halifax and Watermelons.—Jeweled-Up Barkeepers. . . . 193

CHAPTER XXXIV

An Austere Man.—A Mosquito Policy.—Facts Dressed in Tights.—A Swelled Left Ear. 197

CHAPTER XXXV

Signs and Scars.—Cannon Thunder Rages.—Cave Dwellers.—A Continual Sunday.—A Ton of Iron and No Glass.—The Ardent Is Saved.—Mule Meat.—A National Cemetery.—A Dog and a Shell.—Railroads and Wealth.—Wharfage Economy.—Vicksburg *versus* the *Gold Dust*.—A Narrative in Anticipation. 198

CHAPTER XXXVI

The Professor Spins a Yarn.—An Enthusiast in Cattle.—He Makes a Proposition.—Loading Beeves at Acapulco.—He Wasn't Raised to It.—He Is Roped In.—His Dull Eyes Lit Up.—Four Aces, You Ass!—He Doesn't Care for the Gores. 205

CHAPTER XXXVII

A Terrible Disaster.—The *Gold Dust* Explodes Her Boilers.—The End of a Good Man. 210

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Mr. Dickens Has a Word.—Best Dwellings and Their Furniture.—Albums and Music.—Pantalettes and Conch Shells.—Sugar-Candy Rabbits and Photographs.—Horsehair Sofas and Snuffers.—Rag Carpets and Bridal Chambers. 211