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Mark Twain's
**THE ADVENTURES OF
TOM SAWYER**

Alexander J. Butrym

马克·吐温的

汤姆·索亚历险记



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A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF MARK TWAIN

INTRODUCTION. The story of Mark Twain's life is typical of the success stories written by Horatio Alger, the boys' novelist, for Twain had to struggle with an environment that seemed to be against him from the beginning. Born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in the one-horse village of Florida, Missouri, in 1835, he rose to become a world famous writer, lecturer and traveler before he died in 1910. Most of his success stemmed from a combination of indomitable drive, unceasing energy and maximum use of his own talents. He did have some good luck, too, and that helped.

EARLY LIFE. The facts of Twain's life are well known. Four years after he was born the family moved to Hannibal, Missouri, a village larger—but not a great deal different from—his birthplace. During his boyhood he had all the advantages and disadvantages of growing up in a country environment. He was close to the Mississippi River, and probably spent a lot of time exploring its wooded shores and islands. He grew up in tune with the life around him, swimming and playing hooky from school, falling in love, and reading adventure stories. His family was an intelligent though not a wealthy or successful one by any material standards. Upon his father's death in 1847 Sam Clemens was apprenticed to his brother Orion, who owned a local printing shop and a newspaper. (Neither Orion, nor Twain's other brother, Henry, was able to break out of the poverty to which their impulsive and "wishful-thinking" schemes to make big money fast had doomed them.) Sam, however, left Hannibal to follow his trade over a good part of the country, working in towns as different as

Keokuk and New York. But the pay wasn't too good for printers in those days, so he thought he'd go to South America and look for gold, or find some other way of making a quick fortune. Had he been successful in leaving the U.S., we would probably never have heard more of him.

LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI. Fortunately for American literature, however, Sam never took ship at New Orleans. He had become friendly with a river pilot named Horace Bixby, who promised to teach him about the Mississippi River. Bixby was a good pilot, one who loved his work and established a reputation for excellence. The story of Twain's apprenticeship is told in *Life on the Mississippi*, where he recounts his sudden awakening to the fact that pilots of river boats did more than just stand around looking "gaudy" after the boat had pulled into a landing. If, however, the romantic image of the pilot was gone from Twain's experience forever, it was replaced by an appreciation of the deep beauties of the river, its many shifts and changes, different at various times of the day, and sometimes unrecognizable from one season to the next. The account Twain leaves us is "stretched" somewhat, as Huck Finn would say, but in general the impression it creates is a true one.

LATER TRAVELS. After piloting the river steamers for about four years, Clemens retired to the Nevada gold country because the onset of the Civil War had put an end to river commerce. He prospected and clerked, doing many things to keep body and soul together. Eventually he ended up back in the printing trade, working his way from town to town before more or less settling down in California. He wrote short pieces for the newspapers he worked on, establishing a reputation as a humorist among the provincial readers of the Old West. So successful were these pieces, generally burlesques of social

customs and institutions, that his newspaper sent him on a tour of the Sandwich Islands, as Hawaii was called in those days. He wrote a series of travel-letters burlesquing the typical travelogues tourists and professional travellers were sending back to their home towns from abroad. The result of this writing and some lecturing was that he began to be known as an earthy humorist, and classed among such writers as Bret Harte, Artemus Ward, and Petroleum V. Nasby. These men were known for their extremely popular western tales woven from folk stories and written in dialect with rough-hewn humor and plenty of recognizable concrete detail.

THE INNOCENTS ABROAD. In 1869 he published *The Innocents Abroad*, an account of a trip to Europe made under the sponsorship of a newspaper. In this book, he satirizes the folly of going across the Atlantic to see dead men's graves when there were many more living things to see in America, a dynamic and growing nation in contrast to decaying and dying Europe. The book made him famous, and gave him a literary reputation in the East. This reputation opened to him the doors of the cultivated and genteel literary patrons who generally scorned the writings of the Western humorists.

MARRIAGE. As a successful writer he attained respectability enough to marry into a wealthy Buffalo, New York, family. His wife was Olivia Langdon, of the socially prominent Langdons. Many aspects of their courtship, preserved for us in Twain's letters to Olivia and to her friends, remind us of the courtship of Tom and Becky in *Tom Sawyer*. Twain depended on "Livy" to read and censor his manuscripts before they were sent to the printer to make certain they contained nothing that would be improper among the social class he was now a member of. Some critics hold that this censorship did Twain a great deal of harm; others, who examined the surviving

manuscripts, point out that "Livy" generally did not suggest more than minor changes, none of which significantly altered the books in question.

Five years after his marriage, Twain moved to Elmira, New York, and then to Hartford, Connecticut, where he had his famous and unusual house, an obvious status symbol, built. Most of his time was taken up with writing, although he did become involved in several get-rich-quick business enterprises that from then until the end of his life drained his energy and his finances, with the loss of not only most of his fortune but of "Livy's" as well.

FRIENDSHIP WITH DEAN HOWELLS. Twain had made friends with a number of interesting literary people, among them William Dean Howells, the famous author (*The Rise of Silas Lapham*) and editor (*The Atlantic Monthly*). Howells was quick to see and appreciate Twain's talent for humor, and encouraged him to develop the talent by acting as his literary adviser and practically guaranteeing Twain the critical backing of the prestigious *Atlantic* .

During this period he wrote *Roughing It* and *The Gilded Age* . The former is a memoir of the early days of the West; the latter, written in collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner, another friend, is a satire on the way the federal government was run in those days. By 1875 he was working sporadically on his first full length novel, *Tom Sawyer* .

HUCKLEBERRY FINN. The only other book that earned Twain more money than *Tom Sawyer* was its sequel, *Huckleberry Finn* . He began writing Huck Finn's story in 1876, and although this is the work on which the largest proportion of his literary fame rests, he

found writing it to be hard going. The book was laid aside several times, but each time it was picked up again and brought a little nearer to completion. It did not appear until 1884 in England and 1885 in America. It was an immediate success, despite adverse criticism by some of the more conservative literary judges of the day who felt it was vulgar and dealt with insignificant material.

OTHER WRITINGS. Between 1876 and 1885 Twain had written several books, among them *The Prince and the Pauper*, *A Tramp Abroad*, and *Life on the Mississippi*. The first of these is a children's book which has as its basic plot a fictitious story of mistaken identity in which Edward VI of England is replaced on the throne by Tom Canty, a commoner. A thoroughly delightful book, *The Prince and the Pauper* was never one of Twain's more financially successful works. *A Tramp Abroad* is another travel book, this time recounting Twain's walking tour through Europe. And *Life on the Mississippi* is an account of Twain's visit to the scene of his early piloting days some twenty-five to thirty years after he left the trade. The work contains a great deal of pleasant reminiscence, social criticism, and much autobiographical material.

After *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain's next major work was *Pudd'n-head Wilson* (1889), a novel which has been published under the title *Natural Son*, which should give you some idea of its contents. Then came *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1894), a story about a Yankee engineer who goes back in time and becomes an adviser to King Arthur, enemy to Merlin, and—for all practical purposes—ruler of England until his reforms and charities are overthrown by the ignorant masses led by superstitious knights and clergy.

FINAL YEARS. Mark Twain's final years were not full of the satisfactions a man hopes to enjoy at the end of a life well led. Instead, he suffered a series of financial disasters and personal losses which would have taken the heart out of a lesser man. His publishing company failed in 1894 in spite of early successes—it had paid General Grant's widow \$ 200 000, the largest payment in advance royalties ever paid, and it had reaped much from Twain's own works. Twain also invested a great deal of money in a typesetting machine invented and designed by a man named Paige who did not have to work too hard to convince ex-printer Twain of the need for such an invention. Unfortunately, Paige stretched out the development of the machine, making costly changes and modifications that not only ran up the expenses, but delayed the finishing of the invention until Mergenthaler had produced his Linotype. Twain lost his proverbial shirt.

In spite of his advanced years—he was in his sixties—Twain undertook a foreign lecture tour to pay back every cent he owed. Since he was paid about \$ 1 000 a night, it was not long before he was out of debt. But before he finished the tour, in 1898, there began for him a series of losses that were to color the rest of his life. These were deeper losses, more personally tragic than mere financial ruin. First, his daughter Suzy died, then his wife died, then his daughter Clara went with her husband to live in Europe. This left him with only his daughter Jean, whose epilepsy resulted in a fatal heart attack in 1910. Twain was now bereft of the company he enjoyed most, his girlish family. Four months after Jean's death, on April 21, 1910, Mark Twain suffered a heart attack and died. Disillusioned by business reversals and personal losses, he was a bitter writer toward the end of his days. The acidity of his earlier works was sweet when compared to his later bitterness, which became a violent cynicism and materialistic humanism. Some of his later writings, withheld

from the public by his estate because of the savage nature of their biting satire, are just being published.

EVALUATION. His writings, from the earliest to those now appearing, can best be described as "iconoclastic." Twain delighted in shattering the images of glamor and romance built up around what he regarded as false and villainous institutions and customs. As a satirist attacking fraudulent pursuits and the weak, insipid facades of hypocrisy, Twain was a terrible enemy to injustice and confusion.

Many of his attacks seem unreasonable to us with sixty or seventy years of hindsight from which to judge. But Twain's attitudes were colored not only by his times and his lack of formal training, but also by his personality, which has been described by one critic as that of "neurotic genius."

INTRODUCTION OF THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER

This novel about boyhood doings in a small southern village on the shores of the Mississippi during the first half of the nineteenth century is regarded as Mark Twain's second best book. The best is, of course, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (For the story of Huckleberry Finn, see Monarch Review Notes and Study Guides Number 649, *Huckleberry Finn and Other Novels by Twain*.) But *Tom Sawyer* is the first full length novel Mark Twain attempted to write on his own.

BEGINNINGS. The story of the writing of *Tom Sawyer* goes back to 1870 and answers many questions readers ask about Twain's intentions. It also explains some of the apparent flaws in the novel. Sometime during 1870 Twain began to put together a manuscript of a story about a boy living in a small town. This story was apparently modelled on a novel by Thomas Bailey Aldrich, *The Story of a Bad Boy*, which appeared in 1869. The hero of Twain's story was a boy named Billy Rogers, and his adventures were largely based on Mark Twain's recollections of his own youthful days. The story was developed with a great deal of burlesque of the children's literature of the time. For some reason, Twain never finished his story. He was probably somewhat dissatisfied with it. It is, moreover, common knowledge that Twain worked by fits and starts, writing whenever the spirit moved him. So, he probably lost inspiration and got involved in other projects: at this time he owned a one-third interest in a newspaper, and he was busy seeing two other books through press (*Roughing It* and *The Gilded Age*, a novel which he collaborated on

with his neighbor, Charles Dudley Warner). Sometime in late 1873 or early 1874, Twain took up his boy story again, intending to make it a novel spoofing the "Good-Boy" stories that were popular with Sunday school teachers at the time. Notice as you go through the novel how the early chapters seem to deal with Tom's badness more than anything else. Along the way, though, Twain was inspired to include more than the "Good-Boy" stories in his burlesque. He began to add passages burlesquing school sessions, and Sunday school and church services, among other things. As time went on, however, he began to include more and more material that described Tom as a real, normal boy. Tom was becoming not a good boy and not a bad boy, just a normal one who would grow up to be a decent man, not a criminal or a prig. This aim required Twain to include more and more background material culled not only from his wide reading, but mainly from his own boyhood. Eventually the novel became a children's book. Its major appeal is to boys who feel a sense of restriction in the ordinary course of life, and would like to camp in the woods on an uninhabited island for a while and track down stolen treasure. This appeal is made by the idyllic character of the many scenes of youthful joy and romping and planning and playing which Twain knew well how to develop.

But *Tom Sawyer* appeals to grown-ups, too. For though Twain censored parts of the book before he offered it to his publishers as a children's book, he left in much that he had included when he intended the book to be a burlesque. The censored parts are really not that bad; in one place he changed "hell" to "heck" in Huck's speech, in another place he left out all but two lines of a sermon he had burlesqued. So the greater part of the grown-up interest is still in the novel.

THE NOVEL'S APPEAL. In writing the story, Mark Twain used many episodes that appeal to both grown-ups and children. For instance, he included a good deal of horror material. Now, on the superficial children's level, this material provides adventuresome conflict in the story and maintains interest and suspense. On a more adult level, however, this same material is used to burlesque the dime novels that were becoming popular in the second half of the nineteenth century.

MAJOR EPISODES. The major episodes in this novel are Tom's love affair with Becky Thatcher, his involvement with Huck in the guilty knowledge that Muff Potter did not murder Doctor Robinson, and, again with Huck, Tom's search for treasure. Together with these major episodes there are many minor ones, such as Tom's pirate expedition with Joe Harper and Huck, the whitewashing incident, and the "Painkiller" incident, all of which are tied in one way or another to either Tom's personality or to one of the major episodes which, in turn, grow out of Tom's personality. It is clear then, that although the book might easily have degenerated into merely a collection of assorted adventures, it did not. This coherence results from Twain's control over his materials, and from his superb understanding of child psychology in the broad sense of that term.

THE CHARACTER OF TOM. Let us look at Tom more closely. As we said, Twain uses Tom Sawyer to give unity to what might be a series of separate adventures and burlesques. (The novel might be said to be like Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, in this regard.) Tom, is, therefore, the most important character in the story, and we would expect Twain to develop him fully and individualistically. When we meet Tom in the first few chapters he is a typical irresponsible boy, playing tricks on his aunt to escape punishment, "hooking" dough-

nuts and apples, beating up the sissified dandy from out of town, and generally finding ways and means to "get out from under" the fairly rigid conventions and training imposed upon him. But, as his Aunt Polly says, he is not really a "bad" boy, he's just "mischievous." He is fairly bright; after all, he does read a lot—maybe not his Bible, but after all, novels are educative in a way. And he carries over his reading into his play life. Tom is a "bookish" boy in his way. He has memorized whole passages of dialogue from his favorite stories, and when he plays he acts these stories out, insisting that his comrades follow the book—even when no one, not even himself, understands what the book means. Now, this quality in Tom makes him a little different from the ordinary boy. At the same time it gives Mark Twain an opportunity to burlesque some of the writing that was popular among young boys—notably the work of Dumas (*The Man in the Iron Mask*, etc.) and Sir Walter Scott. We see Tom living in his dream world according to a set of well-worn clichés: when he goes pirating he becomes the "Avenger of the Spanish Main," and he has a "sleek black-hulled racer." We also see that for some reason or other, all the children who play with Tom are willing to accept the authority of his books. The only exception is Huck Finn, who hasn't been trained in the village conventions, and who really doesn't believe anything until he either sees it or experiences it some other way. Tom, therefore, has the appearance of a "learned" man among his peers. This is not accidental. He does all he can to stay in the limelight. He childishly comes to everyone's attention by applying for the Bible that he hasn't rightfully earned, and later he gains more "fame" when he marches into his own funeral.

TOM GROWS UP. If Tom were to operate on this childish level throughout the novel, we might justly conclude that Mark Twain failed in his attempt at characterization. But Tom grows up in the

course of the story. Where he's earned notoriety with tricks in the early chapters, he earns it by saving Becky's pride in one other chapter and her life in a still later. In another chapter, he becomes notorious only after an intense moral struggle: he must decide whether he will break his blood oath and endanger his life by testifying that Muff Potter did not kill the doctor, or whether he will let Muff die for a crime he did not commit. This was no easy decision for Tom to make, witness the fact that he made it only at the last moment, after attempts at salving his conscience by visiting Muff in the jailhouse provided no relief from his torment. And in this incident, Tom rises not only above himself, but also above all the other villagers, for he is the only person with the moral courage to accuse Injun Joe. No one else had the integrity even to lead a mob in tarring and feathering Joe for body-snatching.

The final index of Tom's maturation is provided by the conversation in the final chapter where he convinces Huck to go back to the widow's and try to get civilized: There has been a change in Huck, of course. Earlier he would not have entertained Tom's appeal from authority that a robber must have a respectable "front." Indeed, all Huck's experience is evidence against this argument: he knows well that Injun Joe didn't have a respectable "front." But at the same time, there is really no need for Tom to try to convince Huck to burden himself with the shackles of respectability. The only possible reason for his wanting Huck to do so is that he himself has become convinced of the intrinsic value of civilized conventions. Both boys are rich now, and famous in the community. They can, theoretically at least, do as they please. Yet, they both, in the end, go back to the village. (Of course it is important to note that Tom and Huck—the irresponsible boy and the village outcast—prosper. Sid and Willie Mufferson—the good boy and The Model Boy of the Village—

haven't come an inch toward growing up.)

TWAIN'S VIEW OF TOM SAWYER. Mark Twain indicated to William Dean Howells that *Tom Sawyer* is a hymn to boyhood. We might well ask how he could describe this very funny book as a hymn. The answer is that *Tom Sawyer* is a beautifully written book. Boyhood is described idyllically. It is a time of long vacations, and buck-swimming, fishing, and playing in thousands of acres of woods. Twain describes the solitude of waking up on Jackson's Island, the fierce power of the storm there, and the gnawing anxiety and loneliness of feeling that a thunderstorm has been sent specifically to destroy you, in terms that reflect the point-of-view of a growing boy who loves life. In all the horror and the humor in which Tom personally figures, there is a sense of quiet understanding on the part of the author. This quiet tone is not obvious all through the novel. Indeed, there are times when Mark Twain's acid wit comes clearly through—as when he describes the cave on Jackson's Island after Injun Joe is buried nearby, and when he describes the “little old ladies” who have been petitioning the governor to pardon Joe, or when, earlier in the novel, he describes the congregation entering church for Sunday services. Twain enjoyed boyhood; he found it to be a time of clear-eyed innocence, unsmirched by brutal ambition and ignorant pride. On adults, on the other hand, he heaped bitter criticism.

WRITING TOM SAWYER. During the year and a half that Mark Twain was writing *Tom Sawyer*, he paused several times—as was his habit—to let the wells of his imagination fill up. This fact accounts for some of the shifts in emphasis and some of the discrepancies in the novel. Twain was not a careful reviser; he hated going over something he wrote once he had written it. You will notice from time to time little inconsistencies in detail, but these do not subtract

from the overall close-knit organization of the novel. For instance, you may notice that Twain is occasionally not sure whether Becky's home is in Constantinople or Coonville or St. Petersburg. Sometimes she seems to be visiting Jeff Thatcher's family, and sometimes she seems to be a permanent resident—along with her mother and father—of St. Petersburg. You may also notice that the summer vacation is interminably long: the number of weeks in the vacation after July 4 stretches the vacation well into October.

For all these little flaws, the book still is verisimilitudinous (real-seeming). This verisimilitude comes from Twain's use of concrete detail and properly thought out motivation. One break in the verisimilitude ought to be mentioned. Huck gets sick after the exciting night at the Widow Douglas' house. We are not properly prepared for this action, and as a result the incident seems contrived merely to build up the suspense in the treasure hunt, to give Injun Joe time to die, and to give Tom a chance to find out where the real "Number Two" is.