

from *Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain

Discussion Questions

As a youth Mark Twain was so fascinated by riverboats that he persuaded Horace Bixby, the locally famous pilot of the *Paul Jones*, to teach him how to navigate the river between New Orleans and St. Louis for \$500. Twain was not alone in his dream; nearly every boy along the Mississippi, black or white, yearned to work on a steamboat.

Read Twain's brief biography on pages 450-451, then read the excerpt from *Life on the Mississippi*. These chapters describe a time when Twain was an apprentice pilot being trained by Bixby. After reading the selection, answer the questions below ON A SEPARATE SHEET OF PAPER.

1. What information is Twain told he must learn as well as he knows a hall in his own home?
2. What happens the night Twain believes he is left at the wheel alone?
3. Explain the factors that make "learning the river" a great challenge.
4. What does Twain say he has lost when he finally learns the language of the river?
5. Identify an example of personification in the excerpt. Discuss how it helps the story.
6. At the end of this excerpt, Twain ruefully reports "the romance and the beauty were all gone from the river." How does he relate this trade to that of a doctor? Can you identify another example of this kind of experience, perhaps in your own life? Think of something you wished for – a skill, ability, honor, award, etc. – and then successfully gained. Were you in any way disappointed after reaching your goal?
7. In the chapter titled "Continued Perplexities," an extended metaphor compares the river with a book "that had a new story to tell every day." Find three specific comparisons Twain makes between reading a book and "reading" the river.
8. Mark Twain is celebrated in part because of his use of humor. Some comic devices used in literature include: **hyperbole** (a figure of speech that uses incredible exaggeration, or overstatement, for effect), **comic metaphors** (comparisons between two unlike things that create colorful, hilarious images), and **understatement** (saying less than what is meant, usually for ironic purposes). Identify two examples of each of these three comic devices.

*Save these definitions in your notebook.

from Life on the Mississippi

Mark Twain

Perplexing Lessons

At the end of what seemed a tedious while, I had managed to pack my head full of islands, towns, bars, "points," and bends;¹ and a curiously inanimate mass of lumber it was, too. However, inasmuch as I could shut my eyes and reel off a

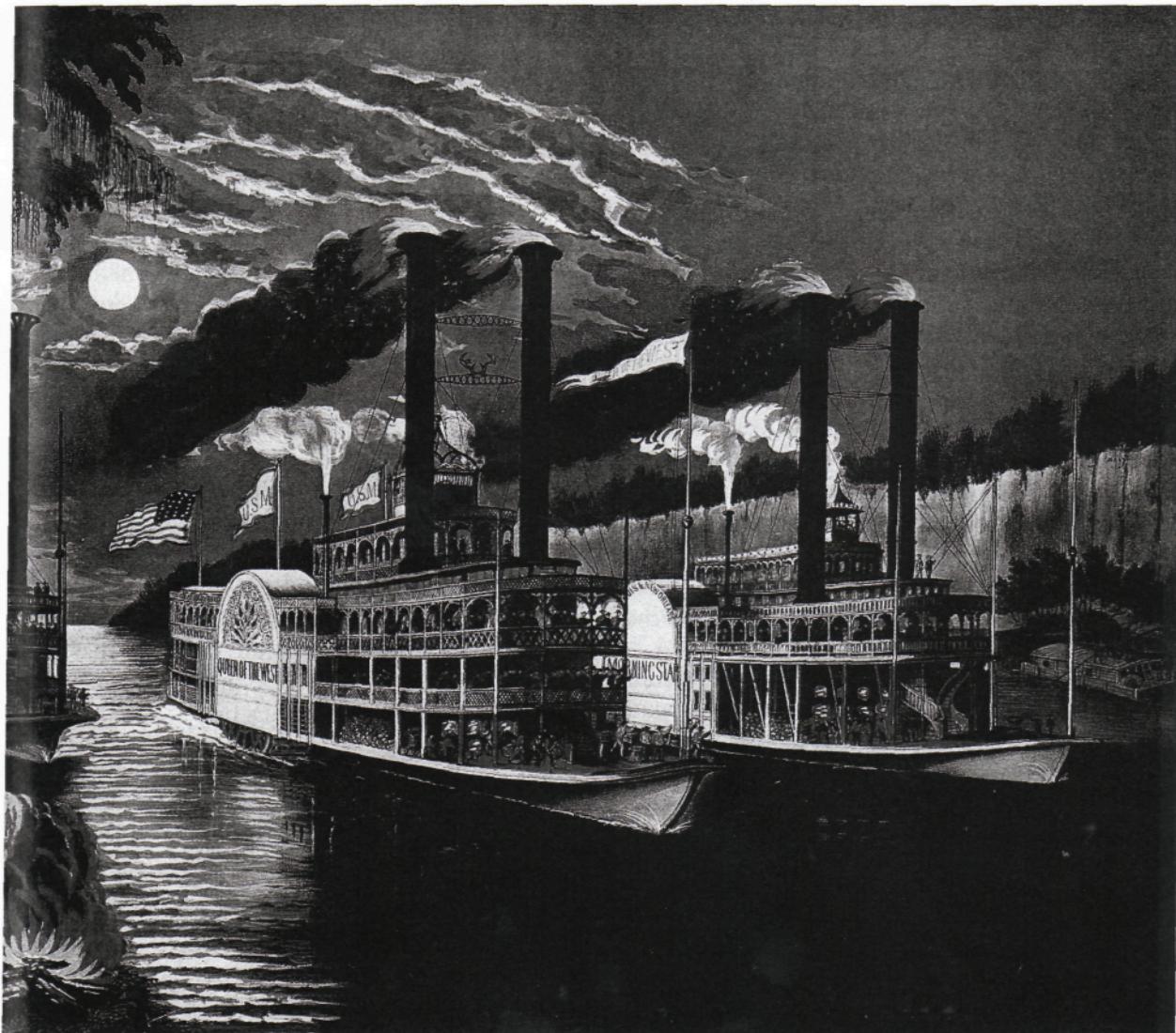
1. **islands . . . bends:** geographic features used in river navigation. Each numbered point was a landmark on a curve or bend in the river.

good long string of these names without leaving out more than ten miles of river in every fifty, I began to feel that I could take a boat down to New Orleans if I could make her skip those little gaps. But of course my complacency could hardly get start enough to lift my nose a trifle into the air,

WORDS TO OWN

inanimate (in·an'ə·mit) *adj.*: lifeless.

complacency (kəm·plā'sən·sē) *n.*: self-satisfaction.



before Mr. Bixby would think of something to fetch it down again. One day he turned on me suddenly with this settler²—

"What is the shape of Walnut Bend?"

He might as well have asked me my grandmother's opinion of protoplasm.³ I reflected respectfully, and then said I didn't know it had any particular shape. My gunpowdery chief went off with a bang, of course, and then went on loading and firing until he was out of adjectives.

I had learned long ago that he only carried just so many rounds of ammunition, and was sure to subside into a very placable and even remorseful old smoothbore⁴ as soon as they were all gone. That word "old" is merely affectionate; he was not more than thirty-four. I waited. By and by he said—

"My boy, you've got to know the *shape* of the river perfectly. It is all there is left to steer by on a very dark night. Everything else is blotted out and gone. But mind you, it hasn't the same shape in the night that it has in the daytime."

"How on earth am I ever going to learn it, then?"

"How do you follow a hall at home in the dark? Because you know the shape of it. You can't see it."

"Do you mean to say that I've got to know all the million trifling variations of shape in the banks of this interminable river as well as I know the shape of the front hall at home?"

"On my honor, you've got to know them *better* than any man ever did know the shapes of the halls in his own house."

"I wish I was dead!"

"Now I don't want to discourage you, but"—

"Well, pile it on me; I might as well have it now as another time."

"You see, this has got to be learned; there isn't any getting around it. A clear starlight night throws such heavy shadows that if you didn't know the

2. **settler:** colloquial for "something [such as Bixby's question] that does a person in."

3. **protoplasm:** living matter basic to all plant and animal cells.

4. **smoothbore:** gun with no grooves inside its barrel.

*"Have I got to learn
the shape of the river
according to all these
five hundred thousand
different ways? If I
tried to carry all that
cargo in my head it
would make me
stoop-shouldered."*

shape of a shore perfectly you would claw away from every bunch of timber, because you would take the black shadow of it for a solid cape;⁵ and you see you would be getting scared to death every fifteen minutes by the watch.⁶ You would be fifty yards from shore all the time when you ought to be within fifty feet of it. You can't see a snag⁷ in one of those shadows, but you know exactly where it is, and the shape of the river tells you when you are coming to it. Then there's your pitch-dark night; the river is a very different shape on a pitch-dark night from what it is on a starlight night. All shores seem to be straight lines, then, and mighty dim ones, too; and you'd run them for straight lines only you know better. You boldly drive your boat right into what seems to be a solid, straight wall (you knowing very well that in reality there is a curve there), and that wall falls back and makes way for you. Then there's

your gray mist. You take a night when there's one of these grisly, drizzly, gray mists, and then there isn't *any* particular shape to a shore. A gray mist would tangle the head of the oldest man that ever lived. Well, then, different kinds of *moonlight* change the shape of the river in different ways. You see"—

"Oh, don't say anymore, please! Have I got to learn the shape of the river according to all these five hundred thousand different ways? If I tried to carry all that cargo in my head it would make me stoop-shouldered."

"No! you only learn *the shape of the river*; and you learn it with such absolute certainty that you can always steer by the shape that's *in your head*, and never mind the one that's before your eyes."

5. **cape:** land projecting into water.

6. **by the watch:** The workday on a steamboat was divided into three four-hour periods, or watches, every twelve hours: two watches for work and one off-watch for rest.

7. **snag:** tree trunk dangerous to navigation because it is partly or completely underwater.

WORDS TO OWN

subside (səb·sīd') v.: to settle down.

interminable (in·tur'mi·nə·bel) adj.: endless.

"Very well, I'll try it; but after I have learned it can I depend on it? Will it keep the same form and not go fooling around?"

Before Mr. Bixby could answer, Mr. W— came in to take the watch, and he said—

"Bixby, you'll have to look out for President's Island and all that country clear away up above the Old Hen and Chickens. The banks are caving and the shape of the shores changing like everything. Why, you wouldn't know the point above 40.⁸ You can go up inside the old sycamore snag,⁹ now."

So that question was answered. Here were leagues¹⁰ of shore changing shape. My spirits were down in the mud again. Two things seemed pretty apparent to me. One was, that in order to be a pilot a man had got to learn more than any one man ought to be allowed to know; and the other was, that he must learn it all over again in a different way every twenty-four hours.

That night we had the watch until twelve. Now it was an ancient river custom for the two pilots to chat a bit when the watch changed. While the relieving pilot put on his gloves and lit his cigar, his partner, the retiring pilot, would say something like this—

"I judge the upper bar is making down a little at Hale's Point; had quarter twain with the lower lead and mark twain¹¹ with the other."

"Yes, I thought it was making down a little, last trip. Meet any boats?"

"Met one abreast the head of 21,¹² but she was away over hugging the bar, and I couldn't make her out entirely. I took her for the 'Sunny South'—hadn't any skylights forward of the chimneys."

And so on. And as the relieving pilot took the wheel his partner¹³ would mention that we were

8. **point above 40:** numbered navigational point on the river beyond the landmark numbered 40.

9. **inside . . . snag:** It may not be necessary but still can do no harm to explain that "inside" means between the snag and the shore. [Twain's note]

10. **leagues:** One league equals about 3 miles.

11. **quarter . . . mark twain:** Two fathoms. Quarter twain is $2\frac{1}{4}$ fathoms, [or] $13\frac{1}{2}$ feet. Mark three is three fathoms. [Twain's note] These measures of water depth are calculated by using a lead weight attached to a rope. One fathom, or "mark one," equals 6 feet. Two fathoms, or "mark twain," equals 12 feet.

12. **abreast . . . 21:** beside landmark, or point, 21.

13. **partner:** "Partner" is technical for "the other pilot." [Twain's note]

in such and such a bend, and say we were abreast of such and such a man's woodyard or plantation. This was courtesy; I supposed it was *necessity*. But Mr. W— came on watch full twelve minutes late on this particular night—a tremendous breach of etiquette; in fact, it is the unpardonable sin among pilots. So Mr. Bixby gave him no greeting whatever, but simply surrendered the wheel and marched out of the pilothouse without a word. I was appalled; it was a villainous night for blackness, we were in a particularly wide and blind part of the river, where there was no shape or substance to anything, and it seemed incredible that Mr. Bixby should have left that poor fellow to kill the boat trying to find out where he was. But I resolved that I would stand by him anyway. He should find that he was not wholly friendless. So I stood around, and waited to be asked where we were. But Mr. W— plunged on serenely through the solid firmament of black cats that stood for an atmosphere, and never opened his mouth. Here is a proud devil, thought I; here is a limb of Satan that would rather send us all to destruction than put himself under obligations to me, because I am not yet one of the salt of the earth and privileged to snub captains and lord it over everything dead and alive in a steamboat. I presently climbed up on the bench; I did not think it was safe to go to sleep while this lunatic was on watch.

However, I must have gone to sleep in the course of time, because the next thing I was aware of was the fact that day was breaking, Mr. W— gone, and Mr. Bixby at the wheel again. So it was four o'clock and all well—but me; I felt like a skinful of dry bones and all of them trying to ache at once.

Mr. Bixby asked me what I had stayed up there for. I confessed that it was to do Mr. W— a benevolence—tell him where he was. It took five minutes for the entire preposterousness of the thing to filter into Mr. Bixby's system, and then I judge it filled him nearly up to the chin; because he paid me a compliment—and not much of a one either. He said—

WORDS TO OWN

serenely (sə·rēn'lē) *adv.*: calmly.

benevolence (bə·nev'ə·ləns) *n.*: kindness.

"Well, taking you by and large, you do seem to be more different kinds of an ass than any creature I ever saw before. What did you suppose he wanted to know for?"

I said I thought it might be a convenience to him.

"Convenience! D-nation! Didn't I tell you that a man's got to know the river in the night the same as he'd know his own front hall?"

"Well, I can follow the front hall in the dark if I know it *is* the front hall; but suppose you set me down in the middle of it in the dark and not tell me which hall it is; how am *I* to know?"

"Well, you've got to, on the river!"

"All right. Then I'm glad I never said anything to Mr. W—"

"I should say so. Why, he'd have slammed you through the window and utterly ruined a hundred dollars' worth of window sash¹⁴ and stuff."

I was glad this damage had been saved, for it would have made me unpopular with the owners. They always hated anybody who had the name of being careless, and injuring things.

I went to work now to learn the shape of the river; and of all the eluding and ungraspable objects that ever I tried to get mind or hands on, that was the chief. I would fasten my eyes upon a sharp, wooded point that projected far into the river some miles ahead of me, and go to laboriously photographing its shape upon my brain; and just as I was beginning to succeed to my satisfaction, we would draw up toward it and the exasperating thing would begin to melt away and fold back into the bank! If there had been a conspicuous dead tree standing upon the very point of the cape, I would find that tree inconspicuously merged into the general forest, and occupying the middle of a straight shore, when I got abreast of it! No prominent hill would stick to its shape long enough for me to make up my mind what its form really was, but it was as dissolving and changeful as if it had been a mountain of butter in the hottest corner of the tropics. Nothing ever had the same shape when I was coming downstream that it had borne when I went up. I mentioned these little difficulties to Mr. Bixby. He said—

"That's the very main virtue of the thing. If the shapes didn't change every three seconds they

14. **window sash:** frame that holds window glass.

wouldn't be of any use. Take this place where we are now, for instance. As long as that hill over yonder is only one hill, I can boom right along the way I'm going; but the moment it splits at the top and forms a V, I know I've got to scratch to starboard¹⁵ in a hurry, or I'll bang this boat's brains out against a rock; and then the moment one of the prongs of the V swings behind the other, I've got to waltz to larboard¹⁶ again, or I'll have a misunderstanding with a snag that would snatch the keelson¹⁷ out of this steamboat as neatly as if it were a sliver in your hand. If that hill didn't change its shape on bad nights there would be an awful steamboat graveyard around here inside of a year."

It was plain that I had got to learn the shape of the river in all the different ways that could be thought of—upside down, wrong end first, inside out, fore-and-aft, and "thort-ships"¹⁸—and then know what to do on gray nights when it hadn't any shape at all. So I set about it. In the course of time I began to get the best of this knotty lesson, and my self-complacency moved to the front once more. Mr. Bixby was all fixed, and ready to start it to the rear again. He opened on me after this fashion—

"How much water did we have in the middle crossing at Hole-in-the-Wall, trip before last?"

I considered this an outrage. I said—

"Every trip, down and up, the leadsmen¹⁹ are singing through that tangled place for three quarters of an hour on a stretch. How do you reckon I can remember such a mess as that?"

"My boy, you've got to remember it. You've got to remember the exact spot and the exact marks the boat lay in when we had the shoalest²⁰ water, in every one of the five hundred shoal places between St. Louis and New Orleans; and you mustn't get the shoal soundings and marks²¹ of

15. **scratch to starboard:** move quickly to the right side of the boat.

16. **larboard:** the left side of the boat.

17. **keelson:** wood or metal beams fastened along a boat's keel to strengthen it. The keel is the timber along the boat's bottom that supports the frame.

18. **fore-and-aft, and "thort-ships":** end to end and shore to shore.

19. **leadsman:** workers who use a lead line to measure the water's depth.

20. **shoalest:** most shallow.

21. **soundings and marks:** measurements of water depth.

one trip mixed up with the shoal soundings and marks of another, either, for they're not often twice alike. You must keep them separate."

When I came to myself again, I said—

"When I get so that I can do that, I'll be able to raise the dead, and then I won't have to pilot a steamboat to make a living. I want to retire from this business. I want a slush-bucket and a brush; I'm only fit for a roustabout.²² I haven't got brains enough to be a pilot; and if I had I wouldn't have strength enough to carry them around, unless I went on crutches."

"Now drop that! When I say I'll learn²³ a man the river, I mean it. And you can depend on it, I'll learn him or kill him."

Continued Perplexities

There was no use in arguing with a person like this. I promptly put such a strain on my memory

22. **roustabout:** deckhand; laborer on a boat.

23. **learn:** "Teach" is not in the river vocabulary. [Twain's note]

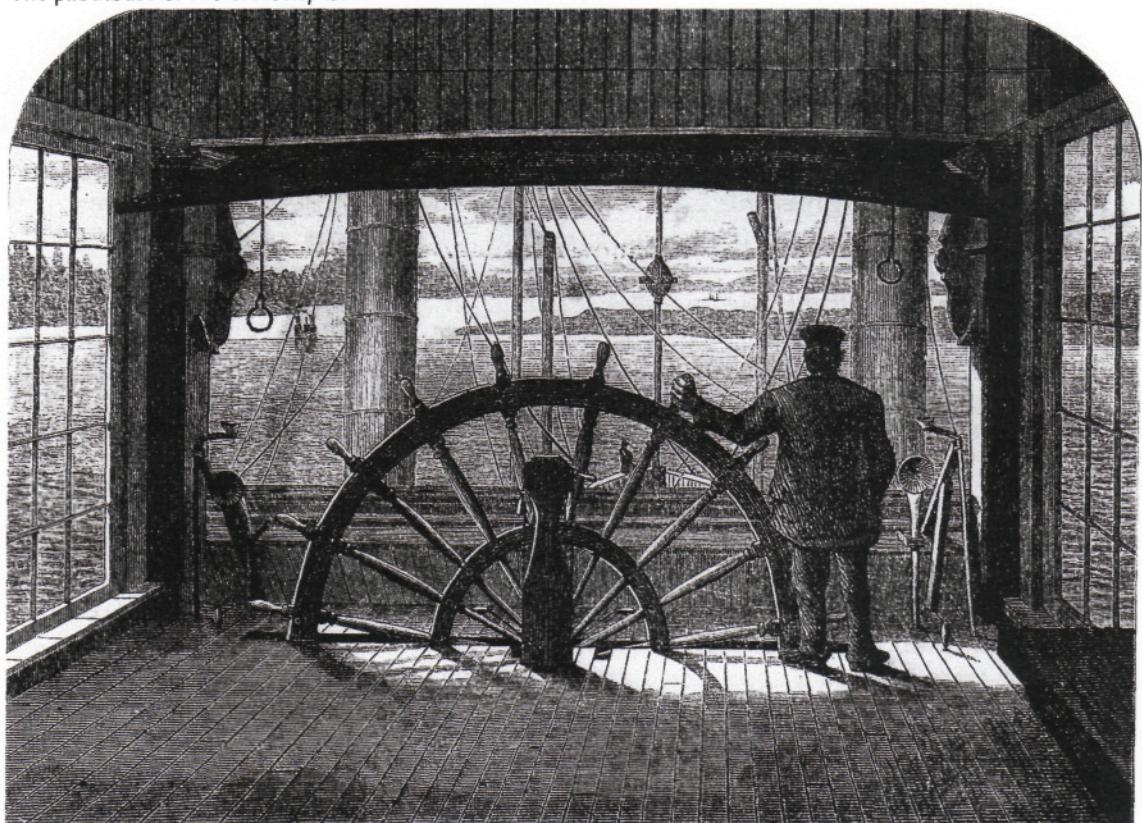
that by and by even the shoal water and the countless crossing marks²⁴ began to stay with me. But the result was just the same. I never could more than get one knotty thing learned before another presented itself. Now I had often seen pilots gazing at the water and pretending to read it as if it were a book; but it was a book that told me nothing. A time came at last, however, when Mr. Bixby seemed to think me far enough advanced to bear a lesson on water-reading. So he began—

"Do you see that long slanting line on the face of the water? Now, that's a reef. Moreover, it's a bluff reef.²⁵ There is a solid sandbar under it that is nearly as straight up and down as the side of a house. There is plenty of water close up to it, but mighty little on top of it. If you were to hit it you would knock the boat's brains out. Do you see where the line fringes out at the upper end and begins to fade away?"

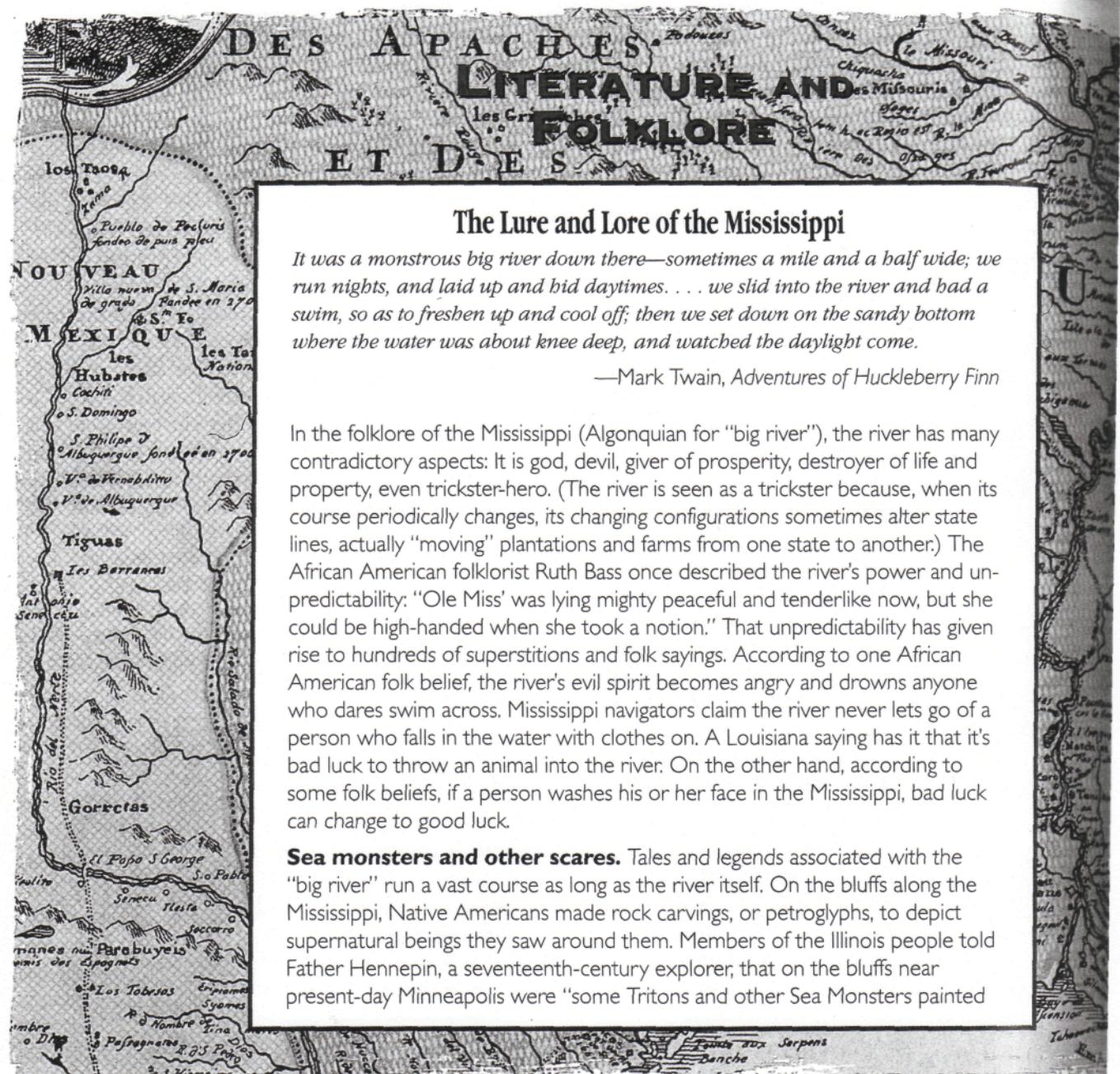
24. **crossing marks:** points on the river where a boat could cross safely.

25. **bluff reef:** hidden sandbar with a high, steep front. Its position is indicated by lines or ripples on the water.

The pilothouse of *The Great Republic*.



The Bettmann Archive.



The Lure and Lore of the Mississippi

It was a monstrous big river down there—sometimes a mile and a half wide; we run nights, and laid up and hid daytimes. . . . we slid into the river and had a swim, so as to freshen up and cool off; then we set down on the sandy bottom where the water was about knee deep, and watched the daylight come.

—Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

In the folklore of the Mississippi (Algonquian for "big river"), the river has many contradictory aspects: It is god, devil, giver of prosperity, destroyer of life and property, even trickster-hero. (The river is seen as a trickster because, when its course periodically changes, its changing configurations sometimes alter state lines, actually "moving" plantations and farms from one state to another.) The African American folklorist Ruth Bass once described the river's power and unpredictability: "Ole Miss' was lying mighty peaceful and tenderlike now, but she could be high-handed when she took a notion." That unpredictability has given rise to hundreds of superstitions and folk sayings. According to one African American folk belief, the river's evil spirit becomes angry and drowns anyone who dares swim across. Mississippi navigators claim the river never lets go of a person who falls in the water with clothes on. A Louisiana saying has it that it's bad luck to throw an animal into the river. On the other hand, according to some folk beliefs, if a person washes his or her face in the Mississippi, bad luck can change to good luck.

Sea monsters and other scares. Tales and legends associated with the "big river" run a vast course as long as the river itself. On the bluffs along the Mississippi, Native Americans made rock carvings, or petroglyphs, to depict supernatural beings they saw around them. Members of the Illinois people told Father Hennepin, a seventeenth-century explorer, that on the bluffs near present-day Minneapolis were "some Tritons and other Sea Monsters painted

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that is a low place; that is the head of the reef. You can climb over there, and not hurt anything. Cross over, now, and follow along close under the reef—easy water there—not much current."

I followed the reef along till I approached the fringed end. Then Mr. Bixby said—

"Now get ready. Wait till I give the word. She won't want to mount the reef: a boat hates shoal water. Stand by—wait—wait—keep her well in

hand. Now cramp her down!²⁶ Snatch her!²⁷
Snatch her!"

He seized the other side of the wheel and helped to spin it around until it was hard down, and then we held it so. The boat resisted, and refused to answer for a while, and next she came surging to starboard, mounted the reef, and sent a

26. **cramp her down:** turn the wheel sharply.

27. Snatch her: Act quickly.

which the boldest Men durst not look upon, there being some Enchantment in their face." Farther south, near Alton, Illinois, inmates of the state prison who were quarrying rock in the 1850s came upon the traces of two huge bird petroglyphs. Their origin, according to a tradition of the Illinois people, involves a gigantic bird that preyed on humans long before the white settlers came. After whole villages were destroyed, a chief offered himself to the bird as armed warriors lay in ambush. The Great Spirit, in admiration of the chief's cunning and bravery, allowed the chief to live, and the murderous bird died with a "wild, fearful scream." In memory of the event, the bird's image was engraved on the bluff.

The haunted river. The Mississippi also has its share of ghost stories. One Chippewa legend from Minnesota tells of a white panther that spoke the people's language and served as their prophet. A young warrior killed the panther and brought upon himself the curse of roaming forever; "a starving and undying skeleton." When the moon has a red cast or the sky is purple, legends say, the ghost of the warrior can be seen wandering the banks of the river. Another story, this one from Creole folklore, warns that zombies haunt a number of Louisiana bayous. On a shoal called Devil Flats, a zombie who carries his own dismembered head under his arm takes care on his evening walks to turn the head so that its eyes can take in the tranquil twilight scene.

On somewhat more scientific footing are the mysterious reports from Devil's Punch Bowl, near Natchez, Mississippi. The Bowl is a several-acre pit in a river bluff; it may have been caused by a prehistoric meteorite. Ship captains report that when their ship approaches the spot, their compass needles go wild and sometimes spin around completely. Some people theorize that this happens because of the iron sunk into the earth by the meteorite. But Devil's Punch Bowl is also said to have been a meeting place for pirates who preyed upon river traffic, and a hiding place for their stolen loot. Thus, the more romantic explanation for the erratic behavior of compasses is that it is caused by the huge pots of gold and silver coins buried by the pirates.

The Mississippi may or may not guard lost treasure, but it most certainly has riches in legend and lore.



The Granger Collection, New York.

long, angry ridge of water foaming away from her bows.²⁸

"Now watch her; watch her like a cat, or she'll get away from you. When she fights strong and the tiller slips a little, in a jerky, greasy sort of way, let up on her a trifle; it is the way she tells you at night that the water is too shoal; but keep edging her up, little by little, toward the point. You are

28. bows: front part of a boat.

well up on the bar, now; there is a bar under every point, because the water that comes down around it forms an eddy and allows the sediment to sink. Do you see those fine lines on the face of the water that branch out like the ribs of a fan? Well, those are little reefs; you want to just miss the ends of them, but run them pretty close. Now look out—look out! Don't you crowd that slick, greasy-looking place; there ain't nine feet there; she won't stand it. She begins to smell it; look

sharp, I tell you! Oh blazes, there you go! Stop the starboard wheel! Quick! Ship up to back! Set her back!"²⁹

The engine bells jingled and the engines answered promptly, shooting white columns of steam far aloft out of the 'scape pipes, but it was too late. The boat had "smelt"³⁰ the bar in good earnest; the foamy ridges that radiated from her bows suddenly disappeared, a great dead swell³¹ came rolling forward and swept ahead of her, she careened far over to larboard, and went tearing away toward the other shore as if she were about scared to death. We were a good mile from where we ought to have been, when we finally got the upper hand of her again.

During the afternoon watch the next day, Mr. Bixby asked me if I knew how to run the next few miles. I said—

"Go inside the first snag above the point, outside the next one, start out from the lower end of Higgins's woodyard, make a square crossing³² and"—

"That's all right. I'll be back before you close up on the next point."

But he wasn't. He was still below when I rounded it and entered upon a piece of river which I had some misgivings about. I did not know that he was hiding behind a chimney to see how I would perform. I went gaily along, getting prouder and prouder, for he had never left the boat in my sole charge such a length of time before. I even got to "setting" her and letting the wheel go, entirely, while I vaingloriously turned my back and inspected the stern marks³³ and hummed a tune, a sort of easy indifference which I had prodigiously admired in Bixby and other great pilots. Once I inspected rather long, and

29. **Ship . . . back:** Put it in reverse.

30. **smelt:** dialect for "smelled." That is, the boat recognized water too shallow for safety.

31. **great dead swell:** huge wave.

32. **make a square crossing:** go directly between crossing marks.

33. **stern marks:** landmarks already passed and thus astern of, or behind, the boat.

when I faced to the front again my heart flew into my mouth so suddenly that if I hadn't clapped my teeth together I should have lost it. One of those frightful bluff reefs was stretching its deadly length right across our bows! My head was gone in a moment; I did not know which end I stood on; I gasped and could not get my breath; I spun the wheel down with such rapidity that it wove itself together like a spider's web; the boat

answered and turned square away from the reef, but the reef followed her! I fled, and still it followed still it kept—right across my bows! I never looked to see where I was going, I only fled. The awful crash was imminent—why didn't that villain come! If I committed the crime of ringing a bell, I might get thrown overboard. But better that than kill the boat. So in blind desperation I started such a rattling "shivaree"³⁴ down below as never had astounded an engineer in this world before, I fancy. Amidst the

frenzy of the bells the engines began to back and fill in a furious way, and my reason forsook its throne—we were about to crash into the woods on the other side of the river. Just then Mr. Bixby stepped calmly into view on the hurricane deck.³⁵ My soul went out to him in gratitude. My distress vanished; I would have felt safe on the brink of Niagara, with Mr. Bixby on the hurricane deck. He blandly and sweetly took his toothpick out of his mouth between his fingers, as if it were a cigar—we were just in the act of climbing an overhanging big tree, and the passengers were scudding astern³⁶ like rats—and lifted up these commands to me ever so gently—

"Stop the starboard. Stop the larboard. Set her back on both."³⁷

34. **shivaree** (shiv'ə·rē'): noisy celebration.

35. **hurricane deck:** topmost deck of a steamboat.

36. **scudding astern:** running to the back of the boat.

37. **Stop . . . both:** Halt the forward motion of the boat by stopping both the right and left paddle wheels, and put both wheels in reverse.

WORDS TO OWN

misgivings (mis'giv'inz) *n. pl.:* doubts; worries.

blandly (bland'lē) *adv.:* mildly.

The boat hesitated, halted, pressed her nose among the boughs a critical instant, then reluctantly began to back away.

"Stop the larboard. Come ahead on it. Stop the starboard. Come ahead on it. Point her for the bar."

I sailed away as serenely as a summer's morning. Mr. Bixby came in and said, with mock simplicity—

"When you have a hail,³⁸ my boy, you ought to tap the big bell three times before you land, so that the engineers can get ready."

I blushed under the sarcasm, and said I hadn't had any hail.

"Ah! Then it was for wood, I suppose. The officer of the watch will tell you when he wants to wood up."

I went on consuming, and said I wasn't after wood.

"Indeed? Why, what could you want over here in the bend, then? Did you ever know of a boat following a bend upstream at this stage of the river?"

"No, sir—and I wasn't trying to follow it. I was getting away from a bluff reef."

"No, it wasn't a bluff reef; there isn't one within three miles of where you were."

"But I saw it. It was as bluff as that one yonder."

"Just about. Run over it!"

"Do you give it as an order?"

"Yes. Run over it."

"If I don't, I wish I may die."

"All right; I am taking the responsibility."

I was just as anxious to kill the boat, now, as I had been to save her before. I impressed my orders upon my memory, to be used at the inquest,³⁹ and made a straight break for the reef. As it disappeared under our bows I held my breath; but we slid over it like oil.

"Now don't you see the difference? It wasn't anything but a *wind* reef. The wind does that."

"So I see. But it is exactly like a bluff reef. How am I ever going to tell them apart?"

"I can't tell you. It is an instinct. By and by you

38. **hail:** call to land.

39. **inquest:** inquiry by a jury or panel investigating a crime.

will just naturally *know* one from the other, but you never will be able to explain why or how you know them apart."

It turned out to be true. The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book—a book that was a dead language to the uneducated passenger, but which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice. And it was not a book to be read once and thrown aside, for it had 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 that you could leave unread without loss, never one that you would want to skip, thinking you could find higher enjoyment in some other thing. There never was so wonderful a book written by man; never one whose interest was so absorbing, so unflagging, so sparklingly renewed with every reperusal. The passenger who could not read it was

charmed with a peculiar sort of faint dimple on its surface (on the rare occasions when he did not overlook it altogether); but to the pilot that was an *italicized* passage; indeed, it was more than that, it was a legend⁴⁰ of the largest capitals, with a string of shouting exclamation points at the end of it; for it meant that a wreck or a rock was buried there that could tear the life out of the strongest vessel that ever floated. It is the faintest and simplest expression the water ever makes, and the most hideous to

a pilot's eye. In truth, the passenger who could not read this book saw nothing but all manner of pretty pictures in it, painted by the sun and shaded by the clouds, whereas to the trained eye these were not pictures at all, but the grimmest and most dead earnest of reading matter.

Now when I had mastered the language of this water and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I

40. **legend:** inscription.

WORDS TO OWN

void (*void*) *adj.:* empty.



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knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river! I still keep in mind a certain wonderful sunset which I witnessed when steamboating was new to me. A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold, through which a solitary log came floating, black and conspicuous; in one place a long, slanting mark lay sparkling upon the water; in another the surface was broken by boiling, tumbling rings, that were as many-tinted as an opal; where the ruddy flush was faintest, was a smooth spot that was covered with graceful circles and radiating lines, ever so delicately traced; the shore on our left was densely wooded, and the somber shadow that fell from this forest was broken in one place by a long, ruffled trail that shone like silver; and high above the forest wall a clean-stemmed dead tree waved a single leafy bough that glowed like a flame in the unobstructed splendor that was flowing from the sun. There were graceful curves, reflected images, woody heights, soft distances; and over the whole scene, far and near, the dissolving lights drifted steadily, enriching it, every passing moment, with new marvels of coloring.

I stood like one bewitched. I drank it in, in a speechless rapture. The world was new to me, and I had never seen anything like this at home. But as I have said, a day came when I began to cease from noting the glories and the charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the river's face; another day came when I ceased altogether to note them. Then, if that sunset scene had been repeated, I should have looked upon it without rapture, and should have commented upon it, inwardly, after this fashion: This sun means that we are going to have wind tomorrow; that floating log means that the river is rising, small thanks to it; that slanting mark on the water refers to a bluff reef which is going to kill somebody's steamboat one of these nights, if it keeps on stretching out like that; those tumbling "boils" show a dissolving bar and a changing channel there; the lines and circles in the slick water over yonder are a warning that that troublesome place is shoaling up dangerously; that silver streak in the shadow of the forest is the "break" from a new snag,⁴¹ and he has located himself in the very best place he could have found to fish for steamboats; that tall dead tree, with a single living branch, is not going to last long, and then how is a body ever going to get through this blind place at night without the friendly old landmark?

No, the romance and the beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat. Since those days, I have pitied doctors from my heart. What does the lovely flush in a beauty's cheek mean to a doctor but a "break" that ripples above some deadly disease? Are not all her visible charms sown thick with what are to him the signs and symbols of hidden decay? Does he ever see her beauty at all, or doesn't he simply view her professionally, and comment upon her unwholesome condition all to himself? And doesn't he sometimes wonder whether he has gained most or lost most by learning his trade?

41. "break" . . . *snag*: ripple or line in the water indicating a newly fallen tree.

WORDS TO OWN

somber (säm'bər) *adj.*: gloomy; dark.