

FROM THE PREFACE

In this *Autobiography*, I shall keep in mind the fact that I am speaking from the grave... I shall be dead when the book issues from the press... It seemed to me that I could be as frank and free as in a love letter if I knew that what I was writing would be exposed to no eye until I was dead, and unaware, and indifferent.

Mark Twain

CHAPTER 1

I was born the 30th of November, 1835, in the almost invisible village of Florida, Missouri. My parents removed to Missouri in the early 'thirties; I do not remember just when, for I was not born then and cared nothing for such things. The village contained a hundred people and I increased the population by one per cent. It is more than many of the best men in history could have done for a town. There is no record of a person doing as much—not even Shakespeare. But I did it for Florida.

Recently someone in Missouri has sent me a picture of the house I was born in. Heretofore I have always stated that it was a palace but I shall be more careful now.

The village has two streets, each a couple of hundred yards long, covered with stiff black mud in wet times, deep dust in dry. Most of the houses were of logs. There were none of brick and none of stone. There was a log church, which was a schoolhouse on week days. There

were two stores in the village. My uncle owned one of them. It was very small, with a few rolls of cloth; a few barrels of salt fish, coffee, sugar, brooms, axes, and other tools here and there; a lot of cheap hats and tin pans strung from the walls. At the other end of the room there were bags of shot, a cheese or two, and a barrel or so of whisky. If a boy bought five or ten cents' worth of anything he was entitled to a handful of sugar from the barrel; if a woman bought a few yards of cloth she was entitled to some thread; if a man bought something he was at liberty to swallow as big a drink of whisky as he wanted.

CHAPTER 2

My uncle was also a farmer, and his place was in the country four miles from Florida. I have not come across a better man than he was. I was his guest for two or three months every year, from the fourth year after we removed to Hannibal until I was eleven or twelve years old.

It was a heavenly place for a boy, that farm. The house was a double log one, with a spacious floor (roofed in) connecting it with the kitchen. In the summer the table was set in the middle of that shady and breezy floor, and the wonderful meals—well, it makes me cry to think of them.

The farmhouse stood in the middle of a very large yard and the yard was fenced on three sides; against these stood the smokehouse; beyond were the fruit trees and beyond them the Negro quarters and the tobacco fields. Down a way from the house stood a little log cabin against the fence, and there the woody hill fell sharply away to a brook which sang along over its stony bed and curved in and out and here and

there in the deep shade of overhanging greenery—a divine place for going in barefoot, and it had swimming pools, too, which were forbidden to us and therefore much frequented by us. For we were little Christian children and had early been taught the value of forbidden fruit.

In the little log cabin lived a bedridden white-headed slave woman whom we visited daily and looked upon with wonder, for we believed she was upward of a thousand years old and had talked with Moses. We called her “Aunt” Hannah. Like the other Negroes, she was deeply religious.

All the Negroes were friends of ours. We had a faithful good friend, ally, and adviser in “Uncle Dan’l,” a middle-aged slave whose head was the best one in the quarter, whose sympathies were wide and warm and whose heart was honest and simple. I have not seen him for more than half a century and yet spiritually I have had his welcome company a good part of that time. It was on the farm that I got my strong liking for his race and my appreciation of certain of its fine qualities. This feeling and this estimate have stood the test of sixty years and more.

CHAPTER 3

I can see the farm yet, with perfect clearness; I can see all its belongings, all its details; the family room of the house, the vast fireplace, piled high on winter nights with flaming logs; the lazy cat spread out in front of it; the sleepy dogs; my aunt in one chimney corner, knitting; my uncle in the other, smoking his pipe; the shiny and carpetless floor faintly mirroring the dancing flames; half a dozen children playing in the background.

Along outside of the front fence ran the country road, dusty in the summertime and a good place for snakes—they liked to lie in it and sun themselves. Beyond the road was a thick young woods and through it a dim-lighted path led a quarter of a mile. Down the forest slope to the left were the swings. They were made from young trees. When they became dry they were dangerous. They usually broke when a child was forty feet in the air and this was why so many bones had to be mended every year. I had no ill luck myself, but none of my cousins escaped.

There were eight of them and at one time and another they broke fourteen arms among them. But it cost next to nothing, for the doctor worked by the year—twenty-five dollars for the whole family.

Doctors were not called in cases of ordinary illness; the family grandmother attended to those. Every old woman was a doctor and gathered her own medicines in the woods.

Doctor Meredith was our family physician and saved my life several times. Still, he was a good man and meant well. Let it go.

I was always told that I was a sickly and weak and tiresome and uncertain child and lived mainly on medicines during the first seven years of my life. I asked my mother about this, in her old age—she was in her eighty-eighth year—and said:

“I suppose that during all that time you were uneasy about me?”

“Yes, the whole time.”

“You were afraid I wouldn’t live?”

After a thoughtful pause she said, “No—afraid you would.”

CHAPTER 4

The country schoolhouse was three miles from my uncle's farm. It stood in a clearing in the woods, and would hold about twenty-five boys and girls. We attended the school with more or less regularity once or twice a week, in summer, walking to it in the cool of the morning by the forest paths and back in the growing dark. All the pupils brought their dinners in baskets and sat in the shade of the trees at noon and ate them. It is the part of my education which I look back upon with the most satisfaction.

As I have said, I spent some part of every year at the farm until I was twelve or thirteen years old. The life which I led there with my cousins was full of charm, and so is the memory of it yet. I can call back the mystery of the deep woods, the earthly smells, the faint odors of the wild flowers, the shining look of rainwashed leaves, the sound of drops when the wind shook the trees, the far-off noise of birds, the glimpses of disturbed wild creatures hurrying through the grass—I can call it all back and make it as

real as it ever was, and as blessed. I can see the woods in their autumn dress of purple and gold and red, and I can hear the sound of the fallen leaves as we walked through them, and I can feel the pounding rain, upon my head, of the nuts as they fell when the wind blew them loose. I know the look of Uncle Dan'l's kitchen as it was at night, and I can see the white and black children with the firelight playing on their faces and the shadows dancing on the walls.

I can remember the bare wooden stairway in my uncle's house, and the turn to the left above the landing, and the sloping roof over my bed, and the squares of moonlight on the floor, and the white cold world of snow outside. I can remember the noise of the wind and the shaking of the house on stormy nights, and how warm and happy one felt, under the blankets, listening. I can remember how very dark that room was, in the dark of the moon—and on summer nights how pleasant it was to lie and listen to the rain on that roof, and enjoy the white glory of the lightning and the majestic crashing of the thunder. I remember the hunts for game and birds, and how we turned out, mornings, while it was still dark, [to go on these expeditions](#), and how chilly it was, and how often I regretted that I was well enough to go. Sounding a tin horn brought

twice as many dogs as were needed, and in their happiness they raced about and knocked small people down and made no end of unnecessary noise. But presently the gray dawn stole over the world, the birds piped up, then the sun rose and poured light and comfort all around, everything was fresh and dewy and smelled good, and life was a joy again. And after three hours of tramping we would arrive back, tired, hungry, and just in time for breakfast.

CHAPTER 5

My father was John Marshall Clemens of Virginia; my mother Jane Lampton of Kentucky. My mother married my father in Lexington in 1823, when she was twenty years old and he twenty-four. Neither of them had very much in the way of property. She brought him two or three Negroes but nothing else, I think. They moved to the village of Jamestown, in the mountains. There their first children were born, but as I came at a much later time I do not remember anything about it. I was born in Missouri, an unknown new state and in need of attractions.

My father left a fine estate behind him in the region around Jamestown—75,000 acres. When he died in 1847 he had owned it about twenty years. He had always said that the land would not become valuable in his time, but that it would be a good provision for his children some day. I wish I owned a couple of acres of that land right now, in which case I would not be writing autobiographies for a living. My mother's favorite cousin, James Lampton, always said of

that land—and said it with blazing enthusiasm, too—“There’s millions in it—millions.” It is true that he always said that about everything—and was always mistaken, too, but this time he was right; which shows that if a man will keep up his heart and fire at everything he sees he will surely hit something.

James Lampton floated, all his days, in a world of dreams and died at last without seeing a one of them realized. He was, when I saw him last in 1884, old and white-haired but he entertained me in the same old way of his earlier life and he still had a happy light in his eye and hope in his heart—and he could still share the secret riches of the world with me.