



Gleanings From Eminent Writers.

A Daring Deed.

From "Life on the Mississippi," by Mark Twain.

"Next morning I felt pretty rusty and low-spirited. We went blooming along, taking a good many chances, for we were anxious to 'get out of the river' (as getting 'out to Cairo' was called) before night should overtake us. But Mr. Bixby's partner, the other pilot, presently grounded the boat, and we lost so much time in getting her off that it was plain that darkness would overtake us a long way above the mouth. This was a great misfortune, especially to certain of our visiting pilots, whose boats would have to wait for their return, no matter how long that might be. It sobered the pilot-house talk a good deal. Coming up-stream pilots did not mind low water or any kind of darkness; nothing stopped them but fog. But down-stream work was different; a boat was too nearly helpless, with a stiff current pushing behind her; so it was not customary to run down-stream at night in low water.

"There seemed to be one small hope, however: if we could get through the intricate and dangerous Hat Island crossing before night, we could venture the rest, for we would have plainer sailing and better water. But it would be insanity to attempt Hat Island at night. So there was a deal of looking at watches all the rest of the day, and a constant ciphering upon the speed we were making; Hat Island was the eternal subject; sometimes hope was high, and sometimes we were delayed in a bad crossing, and down it went again. For hours all hands lay under the burden of this suppressed excitement; it was even communicated to me, and I got to feeling so solicitous about Hat Island, and under such an awful pressure of responsibility, that I wished I might have five minutes on shore to draw a good, full, relieving breath, and start all over again. We were standing no regular watches. Each of our pilots ran such portions of the river as he had run when coming up-stream, because of his greater familiarity with it; but both remained in the pilot-house constantly.

"An hour before sunset, Mr. Bixby took the wheel and Mr. W— stepped aside. For the next thirty minutes every man held his watch in his hand and was restless, silent and uneasy. At last somebody said, with a doleful sigh:

"Well, yonder's Hat Island—and we can't make it."

"All the watches closed with a snap, everybody sighed and muttered something about its being 'too bad, too bad—oh, if we could only have got here half an hour sooner!' and the place was thick with the atmosphere of disappointment. Some started to go out, but loitered, hearing no bell-tap to land. The sun dipped behind the horizon, the boat went on. Inquiring looks passed from one guest to another; and one who had his hand on the doorknob and had turned it, waited, then presently took away his hand and let the knob turn back again. We bore steadily down the bend. More looks were exchanged, and nods of surprised admiration—but no words. Insensibly the men drew together behind Mr. Bixby, as the sky darkened and one or two dim stars came out. The dead silence and sense of waiting became oppressive. Mr. Bixby pulled

the cord, and two deep, mellow notes from the big bell floated off on the night. Then a pause, and one more note was struck. The watchman's voice followed, from the hurricane deck—

"'Labboard lead, there! Stabboard lead!'

"The cries of the leadsmen began to rise out of the distance, and were gruffly repeated by the word passers on the hurricane deck.

"'M-a-r-k three! . . . M-a-r-k three! . . . Quarter-less three! . . . Half twain! . . . Quarter twain! . . . M-a-r-k twain! . . . Quarter-less—'

"Mr. Bixby pulled two bell-ropes, and was answered by faint jinglings far below in the engine room, and our speed slackened. The steam began to whistle through the gauge-cocks. The cries of the leadsmen went on—and it is a weird sound, always, in the night. Every pilot in the lot was watching now, with fixed eyes, and talking under his breath. Nobody was calm and easy but Mr. Bixby. He would put his wheel down and stand on a spoke, and as the steamer swung into her (to me) utterly invisible marks—for we seemed to be in the midst of a wide and gloomy sea—he would meet and fasten her there. Out of the murmur of half-audible talk, one caught a coherent sentence now and then—such as—

"'There; she's over the first reef all right!'

"After a pause another subdued voice—

"'Her stern's coming down just exactly right, by George!'

"'Now she's in the marks; over she goes!'

"'Somebody else muttered—

"'Oh, it was done beautiful—beautiful!'

"Now the engines were stopped altogether, and we drifted with the current. Not that I could see the boat drift, for I could not, the stars being all gone by this time. This drifting was the dimmest work; it held one's heart still. Presently I discovered a blacker gloom than that which surrounded us. It was the head of the island. We were closing right down upon it. We entered its deeper shadow, and so imminent seemed the peril that I was likely to suffocate; and I had the strongest impulse to do something, anything, to save the vessel. But still Mr. Bixby stood by his wheel, silent, intent as a cat, and all the pilots stood shoulder to shoulder at his back.

"'She'll not make it!' somebody whispered.

"The water grew shoaler and shoaler, by the leadsmen's cries, till it was down to—

"'Eight-and-a-half! . . . E-i-g-h-t feet! . . . E-i-g-h-t feet! . . . Seven-and—'

"Mr. Bixby said warningly through his speaking tube to the engineer—

"'Stand by, now!'

"'Aye-aye, sir!'

"'Seven-and-a-half! Seven feet! Six-and—'

"We touched bottom! Instantly Mr. Bixby set a lot of bells ringing, shouted through the tube, 'Now let her have it—every ounce you've got!' Then to his partner, 'Put her hard down! Snatch her! Snatch her!' The boat rasped and ground her way through the sand, hung upon the apex of disaster a single tremendous instant, and then over she went! And such a shout as went up at Mr. Bixby's back never loosened the roof of a pilot-house before!

"There was no more trouble after that. Mr. Bixby was a hero that night; and it was some little time, too, before his exploit ceased to be talked about by river men.

"Fully to realize the marvellous precision required in laying the great steamer in her marks in that murky waste of water, one should know that not only must she pick her intricate way through snags and blind reefs, and then shave the head of the island so closely as to brush the overhanging foliage with her stern, but at one place she must pass almost within arm's reach of a sunken and invisible wreck that would snatch the hull timbers from under her if she should strike it, and destroy a quarter of a million dollars' worth of steamboat and cargo in five minutes, and maybe a hundred and fifty human lives into the bargain.

"The last remark I heard that night was a compliment to Mr. Bixby, uttered in soliloquy and with unction by one of our guests. He said:—

"'By the Shadow of Death, but he's a lightning pilot!'

Mark Twain's Account of His First Lecture.

From John Cumden Hatten's biography of the humorist.

At length the time came for Mark's return (from the Sandwich Islands) to San Francisco. He had spent several months in the islands in "luxurious vagrancy," to use his own expression; and his task as a correspondent of the Sacramento Union had been accomplished. The voyage back occupied nearly five weeks, and when he at length reached Frisco, the future before him seemed just about as blank and as uncertain as it was in those old mining days. He tells us himself that he landed "without means and without employment"; but it was not long before an idea occurred to him: he would try a lecture. He would describe what he had seen in various places, and he would scatter a few jokes through his discourse and make it go off well. Having written out the lecture, he next submitted it to friends; but, of course, like true advisers, who wish to be on the safe side, they unanimously shook their heads. As he was unknown, they were quite sure nobody would go to hear him; and then he had never spoken in public, and for that reason was bound to come to grief. This job's comfort made Mark very disconsolate, and nearly knocked the whole scheme on the head. However, a friendly editor was at hand, one of those joyous souls with a big spirit. He slapped the would-be lecturer on the back, and told him to "go ahead." To give Twain's own account:—

"Take the largest house in the town," said the editor, "and charge a dollar a ticket."

"The audacity of the proposition was charming; it seemed fraught with practical, worldly wisdom, however. The proprietor of the several theatres endorsed the advice, and said I might have his handsome new opera house at half price—fifty dollars. In sheer desperation I took it—on credit, for sufficient reasons. In three days I did a hundred and fifty dollars' worth of printing and advertising, and was the most distressed and frightened creature on the Pacific Coast. I could not sleep—who could, under such circumstances? For other people there was facetiousness in the last line of my posters, but to me it was very

plaintive, with a pang when I wrote it—

'DOORS OPEN AT 7½; THE TROUBLE WILL BEGIN AT 8.'

"That line has done good service since. Showmen have borrowed it frequently. I have even seen it appended to a newspaper advertisement reminding school pupils in vacation what time next term would begin. As those three days of suspense dragged by, I grew more and more unhappy. I had sold two hundred tickets among my personal friends, but I feared they might not come. My lecture, which had seemed 'humorous' to me at first, grew steadily more and more dreary, till not a vestige of fun seemed left; and I grieved that I could not bring a coffin on the stage and turn the thing into a funeral. I was so panic-stricken at last, that I went to three old friends, giants in stature, cordial by nature, and stormy-voiced, and said:

"'This thing is going to be a failure; the jokes in it are so dim that nobody will ever see them; I would like to have you sit in the parquette, and help me through.'

"They said they would. Then I went to the wife of a popular citizen, and said that if she was willing to do me a very great kindness, I would be glad if she and her husband would sit prominently in the left-hand stage-box, where the whole house could see them. I explained that I should need help, and would turn toward her and smile, as a signal, when I had been delivered of an obscure joke,—and then, I added, 'don't wait to investigate, but respond!'

"She promised. Down the street I met a man I never had seen before. He had been drinking, and was beaming with smiles and good-nature. He said:

"'My name's Sawyer. You don't know me, but that doesn't matter. I haven't a cent, but if you know how bad I wanted to laugh, you'd give me a ticket. Come now, what do you say?'

"'Is your laugh hung on a hair-trigger?—that is, is it critical, or can you get it off easy?'

"My drawing infirmity of speech so affected him that he laughed a specimen or two that struck me as being about the article I wanted, and I gave him a ticket, and appointed him to sit in the second circle, in the center, and be responsible for that division of the house. I gave him minute instructions about how to detect indistinct jokes, and then went away and left him chuckling placidly over the novelty of the idea.

"I ate nothing on the last of the three eventful days—I only suffered. I had advertised that on this third day the box-office would be opened for the sale of reserved seats. I crept down to the theatre at four in the afternoon to see if any sales had been made. The ticket-seller was gone, the box-office was locked up. I had to swallow suddenly, or my heart would have got out. 'No sales,' I said to myself; 'I might have known it.' I thought of suicide, pretended illness, flight. I thought of these things in earnest, for I was very miserable and scared. But, of course, I had to drive them away, and prepare to meet my fate. I could not wait for half-past seven—I wanted to face the horror, and end it—the feeling of many a man doomed to hang, no doubt. I went down back streets at six o'clock and entered the theatre by the back door.