Chapter 1

Mark Twain's life

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The early life

Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Mark Twain as he is better known) spent his early and formative years in Missouri, on what was then the south-western frontier. He lived first in the small village of Florida, then – from 1839, just before his fourth birthday – in the expanding river town of Hannibal. His father, John Marshall Clemens, was a businessman, property speculator, storekeeper and civic leader (justice of the peace and railroad promoter). His business ventures, though, were generally unsuccessful and he was, from his son's account, an emotionally reserved and stern man, whose Virginian ancestry gave him an exaggerated sense of his own dignity. He died, however, when Twain was still young, in 1847, of pneumonia after being caught in a sleet storm while returning from a neighbouring town.

Twain was much closer to his mother, Jane Lampton Clemens, and she was a key influence in his life. There must necessarily be a large hole in any attempt to trace the full pattern of the mother-son relationship. For, on the death in 1904 of Mollie Clemens, brother Orion's wife, Twain evidently asked that his letters to his mother – apparently 'almost four trunks' full – be destroyed (see *L5*, 728). We know, however, that Jane was warm, witty, outspoken, lively and – like her son – a good story-teller.

It was Jane who brought up the family (the four living children) after her husband's death and always under financial pressure. Her eldest son, Orion, ten years older than Twain, became the main wage-earner for the family, but his eccentricity, otherworldliness, and lack of business sense began a life-long series

of stumbles from one unsuccessful career to the next (Twain would support him financially for much of his later life). Twain himself started full-time work in 1848 or 1849 as an apprentice printer to Joseph Ament's *Missouri Courier*, and then (in January 1851) joined the newspaper Orion was now running (the *Hannibal Journal*) as printer and general assistant. These years were crucial to Twain's development, for his strong interest in the printing business would affect both his future business and literary careers. His experience as printer and compositor would also provide material for a major section in the late manuscript, *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*. His position also gave him a great deal of reading experience in different types of literature – widely reprinted at that time from one newspaper and journal to the next. It prompted him, in turn, to begin to write and publish a series of brief comic squibs and journalistic pieces of his own, mostly at a local level. But he was also published more widely: his earliest-known sketch to appear in the East, 'The Dandy Frightening the Squatter', appeared in the Boston *Carpet-Bag* on 1 May 1852.

Twain's time working for Orion was relatively short. Their different temperaments, Twain's awareness of the narrowness of his opportunities in Hannibal, as well (no doubt) as the sense of rapid economic expansion and movement in the boom economy of the 1850s, led him to leave the town in late May–June 1853. This was a move of huge importance, for he would return to Hannibal on only some seven occasions in his future life, and would – in Ron Powers' words – 'never live there again, never be a boy again, except in his literature and in his dreams.'[1]

Twain's Hannibal boyhood was crucial for the influence it had on the very best of his fiction. *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and a series of other lesser-known texts are imaginatively located around that town and the life Twain lived there, the 'Matter of Hannibal'.[2] Many of Twain's own later memories of his early life are unreliable. And the picture many readers have of Hannibal as an idyllic and dream-like boyhood space is undoubtedly, in part, a product of the gap between the town's rural and pre-modern aspects and the post-Civil War, fast-modernising and urban-based America in which Twain later wrote and lived. But historical records do give us some reliable knowledge of that community.

It is now generally recognised that Twain's close boyhood contacts (through a slave economy) with African Americans, their speech and culture, had a powerful influence on him and his future writing. In Shelley Fisher Fishkin's words, 'black oral traditions and vernacular speech . . . played . . . an important role in shaping [his] art'.[3] But it has only recently become clear that the version of slavery Twain would have known in his boyhood Missouri (one based for the most part on small-scale ownership) was in some ways as demeaning and

brutally violent as in the plantation economy of the deep South. Twain was himself directly affected by the presence of slavery in the town, for his father both traded in individual slaves and, as justice of the peace, enforced the Hannibal slave ordinance through public whippings. Terrell Dempsey recaptures in some detail the slave culture of the immediate region and 'the day-to-day, cradle-to-grave degradation experienced by the men, women, and children who made up one quarter of the population and labored for the other three quarters'[4]

Twain's own memories sometimes edited out the harsher aspects of local Hannibal slave-holding practice. But he became, as his life went on, a fierce opponent of what slavery as an institution meant. In some of his best work, he would depict the warping effect of slavery on both the Euro-Americans who condoned it and its African American victims, and would also undermine standard racial stereotyping. Such literary work can be traced inevitably back to the memories of his boyhood world. But this process was necessarily gradual. Living in a slave-holding society, Twain – when still young – undoubtedly shared its assumptions. This is clear in some of the letters following his June 1853 departure from Hannibal. Twain had gone to St Louis, where his sister Pamela lived. By late August, however, he was in New York, where he found work as a typesetter, reporting back to his family on urban life and on the city's World's Fair. In October he moved on to Philadelphia, then in February 1854 to Washington. His letters contain sharp descriptive detail and (with the later letters home from the West) form a type of apprentice work for his travel writing. But they also show evidence of his narrow-mindedness and bigotry at the time: 'I reckon I had better black my face, for in these Eastern States niggers are considerably better than white people' (*L1*, 4).

Twain's movements in this period can be seen as the start of a life-time pattern of often restless travelling, and also as the first spread of the wings of a lively-minded and adventurous young man. But unemployment followed, the letters dried up and Twain returned to his family (now moved), presumably for rest and recuperation. In January 1856, he was working in Keokuk, Iowa, alongside younger brother Henry in the Ben Franklin Book and Job Office – the business Orion had taken over following his marriage.

River boating, the Civil War, the West

The Mississippi River – Hannibal's main commercial artery – is a powerful geographical and physical presence in Twain's work. Twain's fascination with the river and the role it plays in his literary and mythic imagination has been subject to considerable critical interest.[5] In *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain powerfully

conjured up life in the 'white town' of his boyhood, 'drowsing in the sunshine of a summer's morning', and how the cry from the 'negro drayman' of 'S-t-e-a-m-boat a'comin!' gave a centre to the day, had the 'dead town . . . alive and moving' (63–5). And his own apprenticeship and brief career as a steamboat pilot, romantically and famously recalled as 'the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived in the earth' (166), form the subject-matter of most of the early part of the book.

Twain had not stayed in Iowa long. More restless movement had followed, this time to Cincinnati and further printing work. Plans to travel to Brazil came to nothing. In April 1857 he boarded ship for New Orleans and fulfilled an old ambition by making an arrangement with the pilot, Horace Bixby, to become his steersman and apprentice (borrowing from a relative the considerable sum needed to seal this contract). Twain spent four years, first learning the river, then becoming a pilot himself. It was during this time, in June 1858, that his younger brother Henry – employed on the *Pennsylvania*, as a result of Twain's own efforts on his behalf – died as a result of the severe injuries he received when the boat's boilers exploded: a common occurrence on the river. Twain's grief and self-recrimination (for he was present while Henry was dying and was originally meant to be on the same boat) are clear in the moving letters he wrote at the time, and form part of a recurrent emotional pattern in his life.

Twain was a licensed pilot for just over two years. But in 1861, with the outbreak of the Civil War, Union forces blockaded the river and steamboat traffic was closed down. He then returned to Hannibal and was briefly (for two weeks only) involved with the Marion Rangers, a volunteer group with Confederate sympathies. Later, Twain would mine this incident in the short piece, 'The Private History of a Campaign That Failed', for its comic potential, but also to make serious anti-militaristic comment.

Twain would be conspicuously reticent about the Civil War in his writing career, but seems to have remained a Confederate sympathiser in the period immediately following his own brief part in it. Worried that he might be forced to act as a river pilot in the Union cause, he soon seized the opportunity to remove himself from the site of sectional conflict. So he accompanied Orion – who had managed to obtain the post of secretary of the Nevada Territory – out West. This was another highly significant period in Twain's life, to be imaginatively recreated (and comically distorted) in *Roughing It*. Twain started from St Louis for Nevada on 18 July 1861, intending to stay out West for three months. In fact, he was not to return East until 15 December 1866, when he set out by boat from San Francisco (via Nicaragua) to New York, to further his career there.

The time in the West was a crucial period in Twain's life, when, in his own words, he acknowledged his '"call" to literature, of a low order – *i.e.* humorous' (*L1*, 322). He worked a variety of jobs in Nevada. He was clerk in the legislature at Carson City and worked as a prospector and miner (during the gold and silver rush) in the Humboldt and Esmeralda districts. Finally – and most crucially – from September 1862 to March 1964 he became a newspaper reporter for the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise*, and started using the pseudonym 'Mark Twain'. He then moved on to San Francisco, where he further established his literary identity, writing for newspapers and magazines and becoming a prominent member of the city's artistic community. Twain's life went through both high and low points in this last period (he was near-destitute at one stage and may even have considered suicide) and was punctuated by other activities. He spent two months in Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties (mining areas) from December 1864, and four months in Hawaii (18 March – 19 July 1866), contracted to write a series of travel letters. These two interludes had a greater effect on Twain's long-term career than their relative brevity might suggest. It was in the mining camps that he first heard the story that he rewrote as 'The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County', and which would first bring him nationwide fame. And it was on returning from Hawaii that he commenced his career as a humorous lecturer with 'Our Fellow Savages of the Sandwich Isles' – advertising his performance with the slogan, 'Doors open at 7 o'clock. The Trouble to begin at 8 o'clock'. He quickly gained a reputation in this role and would periodically return to the lecture platform throughout his life. Indeed, his celebrity, in part, depended on it.

Early success, marriage, the Hartford years

Once in New York, Twain quickly became a member of its Bohemian set. He published his first book, a compilation of some of his best sketches to date, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches*, early in 1867. But his literary reputation was made with *The Innocents Abroad*. This best-selling travel book (and a lot more besides) both redefined the genre and caught the national pulse, reflecting a new mood of assertive American self-confidence following the end of the Civil War in 1865. Twain was originally contracted by the San Francisco *Alta California* – on the basis of his own enthusiasm for the venture – to send letters home from this 'pleasure excursion' (*L2*, 15), the voyage of the steamer *Quaker City* to Europe and the Holy Land (June – November, 1867). The letters were followed by their much expanded book-length version, written with the encouragement of the publisher, Elisha Bliss of

Hartford Connecticut. Bliss's American Publishing Company was a subscription company, its books sold in advance direct to the public by nationwide canvassers. Following the success of *Innocents*, Twain would stay with this firm for the next decade.

In late August 1868, Twain fell head-over-heels in love with Olivia Langdon, the sister of Charles ('Charley'), a fellow-traveller on the *Quaker City* trip. Olivia, the daughter of a wealthy businessman, would change the track of Twain's life. The social and moral environment of the Langdon Elmira home (Jervis, Olivia's father, was a committed abolitionist before the War) and the lively intellectual life there, helped play a major part in Twain's rise in status and respectability in the period.[6] He was now mixing in altogether more prestigious social circles and, counselled by Joseph Twichell, the Congregationalist minister and new friend he had met while visiting the wealthy and artistic Hartford community, Twain looked to meet Olivia's expectations and reform his previously bohemian lifestyle. With an (apparently genuine) new commitment to Christianity, he worked to modify his previous reputation as 'the Wild Humorist of the Pacific Slope', and to convince Olivia's parents that he could be a suitable match for their fragile and sensitive daughter. Against all the odds, he succeeded in this last aim.

Twain was honing his skills as a comic lecturer in this period, and boosted his finances with lecturing tours in the East and Midwest in 1868–69, and in New England in 1869–70. He married Olivia on 2 February 1870. Her father, Jervis, established Twain as co-owner and co-editor of the *Buffalo Express*, but the couple never really settled in that city and had to cope with a series of deaths (of Jervis, and Olivia's close friend, Emma Nye), and the poor health of their first child, Langdon (born 7 November 1870). Twain remained busy with the newspaper, lectures, business plans, even inventions, while working (and at first making slow progress) on *Roughing It*.

The move to Hartford in late 1871, though marred by the death of Langdon in June 1872, began the happiest period in Twain's married life. With the success of his early books and the financial support of Olivia, the couple were able to commission the building of the large house that was to serve as the family home from 1874–1891. During this Hartford period, his three daughters were born: Susy in 1872, Clara in 1874 and Jean in 1880.

The stability and friendships Twain found at a personal level in this community were matched by his professional success. However, much of his writing was done not in Hartford, but in the family's summer residence at Quarry Farm, Elmira (the home of Twain's sister-in-law Susan Crane). His first full-length work of fiction, *The Gilded Age* (1873), which gave a name to the political corruption and speculative economy of the times, was co-written with fellow

Hartford resident, Charles Dudley Warner. More travel books, *A Tramp Abroad* (1880) and *Life on the Mississippi* followed, but also the first group of Twain's most successful fictions, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). The last book of real merit written in this period, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), and particularly its dystopian ending, gives evidence of a darkening imaginative vision on the author's part, his bleaker view of human nature and of the process of history itself. But it is still a novel where many elements of his exuberant comic spirit remain intact.

In the early Hartford years, Twain's literary stock was on the rise. His friend, William Dean Howells, gave his books the most generous praise and also published his work in the prestigious literary magazine he edited, the *Atlantic Monthly*. Twain's response – torn as he always was between popular success and literary prestige and respectability – was to claim that 'the Atlantic audience . . . is the only [one] that I sit down before in perfect serenity (for the simple reason that it don't require a "humorist" to paint himself stripèd, & stand on his head every fifteen minutes.)' (*THL*, 49). But this was also the period in which the first signs of Twain's monetary problems started to surface. For he began (in true Gilded Age fashion) to extend himself on what would eventually prove to be too many fronts, establishing his own publishing company (Webster & Co.) in 1884, and sinking money into the development of the Paige Typesetting Machine, the invention that would prove his financial nemesis.

Expatriation, financial loss, family tragedy

Twain made many trips to Europe throughout his career usually with his family, sometimes to lecture, research, or to travel (preparing for his next book in that genre), sometimes just to save money from the expenses of the Hartford family life. But, from 1891–1900, Twain was virtually an expatriate, living most of the time in Europe, though frequently returning to the US. What began mainly as a money-saving exercise came to be more permanent, both because of the benefits to the family (Clara's training for a musical career and the treatment of Jean's epilepsy – first evidenced in 1890 but undiagnosed until 1896) and because of the catastrophic collapse of the family fortune. The drain of the typesetter investments, a general financial depression and a number of bad decisions on behalf of the Webster Company, meant that Twain's publishing business was forced into bankruptcy in 1894. His literary work dipped in quality, too, with *The American Claimant* (1892), though he would stage something of a recovery with his last major novel, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894).

Howells remembered the period as the time when 'night was blackest' for Twain (*THL*, 649). The company's bankruptcy was a major blow and Twain himself took personal responsibility for the squaring of its debts. With the help of new friend, Henry H. Rogers, Vice-President of Standard Oil and, in the expression of the time, a 'robber baron', his finances were put on a firmer footing. And his 1895–96 round-the-world lecture tour (together with some astute financial manoeuvres by Rogers) enabled him to clear his debts by 1898. But in August 1896, following the tour, when Twain was staying just outside London and preparing to write *Following the Equator* (the book based on it), his eldest and best-loved daughter, Susy – who had remained in America during this period – unexpectedly died of spinal meningitis. This was a devastating blow for her parents, from which neither would fully recover. As Twain wrote to Rogers of this time: 'All the heart I had was in Susy's grave and the Webster debts' (*TCR*, 309).

Life however went on. Twain, almost always a prolific writer, plunged himself into his work and published fifteen books between 1889 (*Connecticut Yankee*) and 1900 (*The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg and Other Stories and Essays*). In particular, the period spent by the family in Vienna from 1897–99 was marked by a surge of creativity. In 1900, they returned to New York to live in America but could no longer live in the Hartford house (and sold it) because of the memories it contained. In 1902, Olivia became seriously ill with heart problems. Twain moved the family to Italy in 1904 in search of a better climate for her health, but she died in June, causing further heartbreak for the family. For Twain himself this was a 'thunder-stroke' when, as he says, 'I lost the life of my life' (*TCR*, 569, 580).

The final years

By the last decades of Twain's life he was firmly established as a national and international celebrity and enjoying much of the attention this brought him. When living in New York, for instance, he would walk the Sunday streets in his famous white suit to coincide with the time the churches spilled their worshippers. During this period, he was more likely to speak in his own voice in his writing, giving his own opinions in a non-fiction mode, largely eschewing his comic persona. For example, he would eventually lend his significant public voice and presence to protest against the Philippine-American War of 1899–1902, and (more generally) against the larger combination of Christian missionary activity and western Imperialism.

Twain kept writing in his last decade, though much of it (like *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*) went unpublished at the time and he certainly let up somewhat after his seventieth birthday. But his pronouncements on public policy and historical events (as in *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, 1905) undoubtedly had their influence on his contemporaries. It was in these years that Twain spent much time on his *Autobiography*. He looked to re-invent the genre, using a method of free association and a mixture of material – letters, newspaper clippings, essays, present occurrences and past reminiscences. Bringing these together, he aimed to produce 'a form and method whereby the past and the present are constantly brought face to face, resulting in contrasts which newly fire up the interest all along, like contact of flint with steel'. And he operated what he called a 'deliberate system' of following a topic just as long as it interested him and then moving to another, 'the moment its interest for me is exhausted'.[7] This left him with a huge mass of material, much of it regarded by the author (because of its supposed controversial nature) as unpublishable in his own lifetime (much is still unpublished). One might see this as a Freudian talking cure that failed, a series of stories 'that eventually unraveled rather than affirmed the self'.[8] Or one can view it as an anticipatory form of 'postmodern' experimentation, a recognition that the self has no centre, and that any attempt to formally contain a life is an impossibility. It is, though, a text that has intrigued, and continues to intrigue, a later generation: five part-versions of it have already been published.

There are various conflicting accounts of Twain's final years. One of the most influential has been Hamlin Hill's, who in *Mark Twain: God's Fool* (1973) portrayed Twain as an unpredictably bad-tempered old man, vindictive, sometimes worse-the-wear for drink and with a faltering memory. Estranged from his two remaining children, Twain's interest centred on his 'Angel Fish', the group of young girls he gathered around him in what Hill calls a 'more than avuncular' way. This 'Mark Twain', despairing and pessimistic, showed 'the geriatric manifestations of a personality that had never been quite able to endure itself'.[9]

If there are elements of truth here, this is an over-harsh interpretation. The most recent biography of the later years, Karen Lystra's *Dangerous Intimacy* (2004) revises this account to show an artist and a man who was still able to enjoy life and to write memorably, one who cannot be confined to a single dimension: 'a person of many moods, in and out of print – gloomy and pessimistic but also cheerful, energetic, and loving'. Lystra reads the 'Angel Fish' in terms of the 'compensatory gesture', Twain seeking to fill 'a deep emotional hole' with these 'surrogate children'. For the young girls may have reminded him of the dead

Susy, perhaps recalled 'his own lost youth', or fed 'some lifelong nostalgia for the honesty and simplicity of childhood'.[10]

The author's relationship with his own two daughters was, however, problematic in this period. In the story as Lystra tells it, this was largely caused by the influence of Twain's secretary and housekeeper, Isabel Lyon – a schemer whose 'most treasured goal [was] to walk down the aisle with America's greatest literary celebrity'.[11] The epileptic Jean was more or less banished from her father's house, while Clara, looking to establish a separate identity outside her father's powerful scan, took little part in the emotional life of the household, pursuing her career and separate life, often distancing herself physically from her father's presence.

This whole scenario – and Twain's later banishing of Lyon and her husband, his business advisor Ralph Ashcroft – smacks somewhat of melodrama (lonely and confused old and famous writer controlled by manipulative spinster gold-digger). And it is likely a more balanced version of this undoubtedly complicated story remains to be told – for a reading of Lyon's diary suggests her good faith, that she may have been as much sinned against as sinning. Undoubtedly Twain was very lonely at times in his last years, living in 'Stormfield', the house near Redding, Connecticut, which John Howells (William Dean Howells's son) had designed for him. Undoubtedly too, his relationship with his daughters was difficult and Jean in particular suffered from his neglect. Twain evidently realised this and felt considerable guilt for it, finally bringing her back to Stormfield to live with him, to act as his secretary and housekeeper. But on Christmas Eve, 1909, Jean was found dead in her bath after an epilepsy attack. Twain's telegram message to well-wishers was 'I thank you most sincerely, but nothing can help me'.[12] And on 21 April 1910, he too would die – a victim of the heart trouble that had plagued him in his final year.