



C H A P T E R 17

I WAS EDUCATED NOT ONLY IN THE COMMON SCHOOL AT HANNIBAL but also in my brother Orion's newspaper office. Orion was the family's first-born. When he was fifteen or sixteen he was sent to St. Louis and there he learned the printer's trade. One of his characteristics was eagerness. He woke with an eagerness about some matter or other every morning; it drove him all day; it died in the night and he was on fire with a fresh new interest next morning before he could get his clothes on. But I am forgetting another characteristic, a very pronounced one. That was his deep despairs; these had their place in each and every day along with the eagerness. Thus his day was divided from sunrise to midnight with first brilliant sunshine and then black clouds. Every day he was the most joyous and hopeful man that ever was, I think, and also every day he was the most miserable man that ever was.

He joined a number of churches, one after another, and taught in the Sunday schools—changing his Sunday school every time he changed his religion. He changed his politics too—Whig today, Democrat next week, and anything fresh he could find in the political market the week after. Throughout his long life he was always changing religions and enjoying the change of scenery. Notwithstanding, his honesty was never questioned. His principles were always high and absolutely

unshakable. You could lower his spirits with a single word; you could raise them into the sky again with another one. You could break his heart with a word of disapproval; you could make him as happy as an angel with a word of approval. He was always truthful; he was always free from deceit; he was always honest and honorable. But in light matters—like religion and politics and such things—he never had a belief that could remain alive after a disapproving remark from a cat.

He was always dreaming; he was a dreamer from birth and this characteristic got him into trouble now and then. Once when he was twenty-three or twenty-four years old he thought of the romantic idea of coming to Hannibal from St. Louis without giving us notice, in order that he might give the family a pleasant surprise. If he had given notice he would have been informed that we had moved and that that old deep-voiced sailorman, Doctor Meredith, our family physician, was living in the house which we had formerly occupied and that Orion's former room in that house was now occupied by Doctor Meredith's two ripe old-maid sisters. Orion arrived at Hannibal in the middle of the night. When he arrived at the house he went around to the back door and slipped off his boots and crept upstairs and arrived at the room of those old maids without having wakened any sleepers. He undressed in the dark and got into bed and crowded up against somebody. He was a little surprised, but not much, for he thought it was our brother Ben. It was winter and the bed was comfortable and the supposed Ben added to the comfort—and he was dropping off to sleep very well satisfied with his progress so far and full of happy dreams of what was going to happen in the morning. But something else was going to happen sooner than that, and it happened now. The old maid that was being crowded presently came to a half-waking condition and protested against the crowding. She felt around and found Orion's beard and screamed, "Why, it's a man!" Orion was out of the bed and hunting around in the dark for his clothes. He did not wait to get his whole outfit. He started with such parts of it as he could find. He flew to the head of the stairs and started down. Then he saw the faint yellow flame of a candle coming up the stairs from below. Doctor Meredith was behind it.

He had no clothes on to speak of, but no matter, he was well enough fixed for an occasion like this, because he had a butcher knife in his hand. Orion shouted to him and this saved his life, for the doctor recognized his voice. Then, in those deep tones of his that I used to admire so much when I was a little boy, he explained to Orion the change that had been made, told him where to find the Clemens family, and closed with some quite unnecessary advice about checking in advance before he undertook another adventure like that—advice which Orion probably never needed again as long as he lived.