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Winfield Townley Scott

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. . . there ain't anything that is so interesting to look at as a place that a book has talked about.

—Huckleberry Finn in *Tom Sawyer Abroad*

I have yet to see more than one of the places in which he lived—including that most important of all, his boyhood village on the Mississippi River, Hannibal, Mo. But no doubt thousands of his readers feel exactly as I do: I feel that I have been in Hannibal. Not perhaps Hannibal as it is today, but Hannibal as it is forever.

—W. T. Scott in *The Providence Journal*, 1952

IT WAS A HOT AFTERNOON in mid-July when I took a cab from the airport in Quincy, Illinois, to cover the twenty miles to Hannibal, Missouri. The rural Illinois landscape, now no longer quilted country below me, seemed familiar: without the stone walls or the occasional abruptness of New England, yet like New England in its barns and farmhouse and its fields of brown-eyed Susans and Queen Anne's lace. But then within half an hour we came to the great river and sight of the town on the other side and with, for me, a tremendous sense of adventure we crossed, so it seemed, from midwestern America to the south, from the present to (as I supposed) the past, from a lifetime of anticipation to a complex of two days' experience which was bewilderingly riddled with both past and present. I longed for the sentimental surge of feeling that I had been in Hannibal before, that in some blood-stirring way I "remembered" it. No, the two days were instead a kind of rambling amongst an archeology of toys, a blundering grasp to equate the everyday reality of streets and houses with the towering reality of art.

## Hannibal and the Bones of Art

*in Mark Twain's pastures*

WINFIELD TOWNLEY SCOTT

So I arrived at the town which Dixon Wecter called Mark Twain's "predestined great good place." One hundred and twenty years ago the Clemens family had moved there from the village of Florida, Missouri, where Mark was born. At the time of their moving he was four years old. For fourteen years he grew up there, acquiring the material of his most enduring work. After 1853 he returned only as a visitor—from his tramp printing days, from his gaudy years as a pilot, later from his western mining and newspaper-writing sojourns, but always on the move; and still later there were infrequent visits over the many years of his titanic fame, last of all as a white-haired man in 1902, eight years before his death. But of course he had the town with him all his life. He was obsessed with his childhood. It is testimony to the world-altering changes of the nineteenth

century that in so young a country the greatest of our writers should be also the most nostalgic.

I had planned my stay of two nights and days because I wanted the sense of *being there*—unhurried, loafing. This is not customary. That July afternoon Hill Street, where the Clemens—or Tom Sawyer—house stands, was thronged with a continual replenishment of tourists; they parked their luggage-topped cars; they got out—fathers and mothers and children, everybody in shorts and cameras—and did the house and the Mark Twain Museum adjacent to it, the Becky Thatcher house across the street; they bought souvenirs, they took photographs, then they drove away: many, no doubt, two miles south to the Mark Twain Cave, but all of them in and out of town in a couple of hours. According to that excellent newspaper, the *Hannibal Chronicle*, which runs a daily box score, over 1400 had registered at the museum on the previous day. And so it goes all summer, the mass invasion of a little town of 20,000 population.

The winter months must be quiet. But winter? There is no winter in the St. Petersburg of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*; nor in the Dawson's Landing of *Pudd'n'head Wilson*; nor in the Hadleyburg that got corrupted. Whatever its names in literature, Hannibal drowns always in the summer sun athwart the river. Not until the last transformation does snow fall upon it, when it becomes the Austrian Eseldorf in *The Mysterious Stranger* and when we are deep in the winter of Mark Twain's discontent. And even then, we are told, the town "was a paradise for us boys." But how interesting it is that Hannibal in its own locale exists in the unsuccessful drafts of the *Stranger*: as though Mark Twain had to move the town from the idyllic pastures of his childhood before he could focus and perfect that bitter, final masterpiece of renunciation of all life's values excepting only death. As Mark Twain declared, *Tom Sawyer* is a hymn, and although it shares with *Huckleberry Finn* a God's plenty of fright and horror, of murder and mayhem, it nonetheless remains a preserve of amber in that summer sun. This is Hannibal as it is forever.

In a way it is there. I climbed Cardiff Hill—Holliday's Hill—at the north end of Main Street and sat for an hour on the ground at the foot of the lighthouse where I could look steeply down at the town and the river. This hill of course is the world of the boys' Robin Hood play and other adventures, and the edge of it, where I sat, the site of the Widow Douglas' house. There are

houses here and there, but the hill is fairly wooded still. A wild rabbit hopped past me, descendant of those that ran the forest when Sam Clemens rushed by in his shirt-tail. Nobody but myself came there that afternoon. There were the silence and the sense I wanted. I would have welcomed only a doodlebug—and a few young ghosts.

In the town, as abruptly below one as though at the foot of a long flight of stairs—as in fact it is: there are wooden steps built all the way up the hillside—the streets were crowded with traffic, the sidewalks with shoppers; it was any American town busy in its shirtsleeves on a hot Monday afternoon. Nevertheless a size is recapturable from the past: only ten blocks or so south, Main Street comes abreast of Lovers' Leap, an even more sudden bluff than Cardiff Hill. Westward the town slopes up hill to more shops and a residential district, but this is no matter to the Twain enthusiast; *his* town is all there within a small compass by the river, all there within one lift of the eyes. Although a literary map of it has in many instances to note only "the site of" this and that vanished structure—Huck Finn's house, Joe Harper's, the jail where Muff Potter was held—this is the heartland.

Over toward Lovers' Leap, Bear Creek still runs into the Mississippi. Close by the foot of Cardiff, I could see the roof of the Clemens house. Of course, moving past it all as always, the broad, magnificent river, and out on the river the silent islands: Jackson's Island and others, wooded, mysterious. It was unimportant on Cardiff Hill that the ascending whistles were not from steamboats but from the incessant shifting, siding, shunting and bucking of freight trains on the tracks which now make a wide iron belt between the streets and the river bank; it was even amusing that the only activity on the simmering water that afternoon was one wildly swerving skier at the tail of a zippy motorboat off the Illinois shore. What seemed to happen was a rise of essence, from the river most powerfully, from the remainders of Tom Sawyer's village, that was held in a suspension of dream within a heat-misted, lovely stillness. And I think the hill itself was the compellent agent. So much there below had vanished, was altered, was buried beneath a century of paving. But on Cardiff Hill the trees smelled thickly of summer, caught the odors of the everlasting river; and here against my hands was the earth where boys race barefoot through an eternal summer.

There were a few comparable moments, the others having to do with darkness, one of them in the Mark Twain Cave.

I cannot care for caves, whether in Bermuda or New Mexico or wherever. They are freaks, and freaks are not seriously interesting. No mere oddity is seriously interesting. (I am not forgetting that Mark Twain seemed incapable of recovering from a fascination with Siamese twins; but he was prone to a lifelong, Tom Sawyer-ish beguilement by anything weird in the line of medicine or invention, or just some natural outcropping of rock which resembled Napoleon. Mark's era, after all, was also P. T. Barnum's.) Even to lovers of caves, the famous one in Hannibal cannot rate highly. It is unbeautiful. Its narrow passages of murky limestone open to no breathtaking palaces and towers. The walls are smoky from the candles of the past and are scratched with uncounted names—among them Laura Hawkins (the original of Becky Thatcher) and Mark's one grandchild, Nina Gabrilowitsch. No Sam Clemens.

But you have to go there. The interest of the cave is altogether literary, and that is vibrant enough. Along the electric-lighted, guided tour, half the "attractions" are blobs of limestone alleged to "look like" an ape, an Indian, an old man, Adam's footprint, and similar stupidities. Yet the cave is one of the stagesets in a great book and it has its authenticity. Here Tom and Becky were lost. Here (though filled in) was the dip where Tom reached to find a way out and saw Injun Joe. Here, that book aside, Sam Clemens and his chums played and hid and hollered, and many a generation of Hannibal youngsters after them. Simply—as Huck is made to say in that observation which alone demonstrates how literary a man, after all, Mark Twain was—it is "a place that a book has talked about."

The guide did an imaginative, fetching thing. In one of the wider passages, first warning us of his intent, he doused the electric lights, and our tourist group stood speechless in black darkness, utter darkness, unmitigated darkness. That is how it is to be lightless in an underground cave. And then the guide lit a candle, and we knew what it was to be so faintly, so closely lighted by one candle in an underground cave. Specifically, in *that* cave. Pages in literature that we all knew and loved (I suppose) had been suddenly personified, ourselves—no less—within the drama. I wondered what stage director *manqué* first thought of intruding into the shallow world of tourism so deeply graceful a gesture as momentarily to bless it.

Outside the cave the land is unchanged. There too is a nearness with the past if you sight above the souvenir stand and the parked cars to the old en-

trance in the hillside and over it all the woods that range the sky. There is a quietness, as though it were the past.

One touches the limestone in the cave—touches the balustrade in the house at 206 Hill Street—because one has to. The determined chastity of our contemporary literary criticism, however admirable for scholarship and the classroom, cannot obviate the passionate concern of the common reader for the biographical associations of the authors he reveres.

The Clemens house has a pretty setting, for down the hill between it and Main Street other structures have been removed and the lot planted with a rose garden. The white-clapboarded house is such a little house, so frail and thin-walled and inward-leaning, with its tiny ell to the rear, that all-important ell where Sam and his brother Henry slept—Henry doing the bulk of the sleeping, and Sam skinning out into the night. Mark Twain in 1902, like any old man returned to his childhood home, thought it astonishingly small and that, if he should return again after ten years, it might by then have shrunk to a bird house. The cat and the pain-killer, the spilled sugar and the whack with the thimble, Aunt Polly and Joe Harper's mother tearfully talking by the bedside when they thought their boys were drowned in the river: these scenes throng in the head. Here is the stage, but it is an empty stage: touching, if one imagines it to be so, and yet incomparably diminished beside what came of it.

Mark himself is all around one in the museum, a stone building which serves also as entrance to the house. (The whole thing, by the way, is maintained by the City of Hannibal, is noncommercial and thus has a memorial dignity. Souvenir sales go on at Becky Thatcher's house, opposite.) The museum contains a typical proportion of extraneous exhibits: era stuff; stills from various Twain movies which were better filed; a loan exhibit of Norman Rockwell's paintings for *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* which are shallow shadows of the true depth of Mark Twain's prose. Nevertheless, and overwhelmingly, hundreds of priceless mementos: photographs, newspapers, letters; one of Mark's pipes, and his high-backed cane chair; a cast of his right hand, wrinkled, delicately tapered, not large; startlingly, a death-mask of his baby son Langdon; a white jacket from one of those suits; his gray and scarlet Oxford gown which he flagrantly wore at his daughter Clara's wedding to Ossip Gabrilowitsch; the table he used at Quarry Farm while writing much

of *Tom Sawyer*; his antique typewriter; the fantastic orchestrelle which he so expensively had lugged from New York to New Hampshire to Connecticut, and the three rolls of music which Albert Bigelow Paine played on the orchestrelle that last Christmas night at Stormfield while Mark at an upper window watched through lantern light in falling snow his daughter Jean's body being taken away to Elmira.

Although it was for me a secondary question as I walked back and forth on Main Street or tried to find a patch of shade in the baking hot park by the river's edge, I found myself wondering what it is like to live in Hannibal. That is, what is it like to live always in the glare of a great memory? I had just spent a day in Springfield, Illinois, but despite the supreme greatness of Lincoln with whom a visitor is bound to be preoccupied, a visitor is aware that Springfield is a big modern city with infinite preoccupations of its own. But Hannibal is a small town, looking like thousands of its size all over America. Yet it is known for one reason, mobbed by tourists for one reason; and besides the actual shrines it has a statue of Mark Twain in Riverview Park, a statue of Tom and Huck at the foot of Cardiff Hill; and there are the Tom Sawyer Movie Theater, the Mark Twain Produce Company, the Mark Twain Beauty Shop, the Mark Twain Hotel; the bridge linking its shore with Illinois is the Free Mark Twain Memorial Bridge, and the bridge sweeps west into Route 36/61, Mark Twain Avenue. I omit a few samples, but these are testimony enough that here is no ordinary city—it bears the scar of greatness, it has been injured with immortality.

Maybe the inhabitants, if not sometimes bored by this or even resentful of it, can ignore it. Bankers, lawyers, newspapermen, teachers, shopkeepers and clerks, waitresses, housewives, gas station attendants have their own lives to lead. And the children—let's not forget—have theirs. And everybody looks like their own kind all over America. But to the visiting spy they dwell, all the same, in a special light; and when assembling Rotarians fill the hotel lobby right after twelve noon and they greet each other with "Good evening!", the visiting spy—no matter what *they* are thinking—thinks, "Ah, just as people do in the book."

The Mark Twain Hotel stamps its drinking glasses "America's Stratford-on-Avon." That is all right with me as far as hotel business is concerned. But the comparison is totally erroneous. The thing about Hannibal, to Mark Twain's readers, is that it is deeply involved in his work. There is no such



association in Stratford, where one goes because Shakespeare was born and grew up there and after a life elsewhere returned, died and is buried there. But Stratford is not the locale of his plays. Here in Hannibal, on the contrary, are the river and its islands, the woods and streets and alleyways and, even, three or four still standing houses which figure in our greatest literature.

Hannibal was for decades in my mind the place above all others in America that I most wanted to see. At last to be there was a contentment, more vivid at moments (as on Cardiff Hill) than at others, but still a sort of completion; to touch the (substitute) white-washed fence, the (I suppose original) doorways in the Clemens house, to walk its little rooms.

I was not as moved as I had expected to be.

Here was the town. It was not the village. Yet it contained artifacts, reminders, the very bones of art. Then that was it: the bones of art. A closet of some of the actual costumes, some of the actual props. But such actuality is not the play. I had walked head-on into untheorised proof that the reality of art transcends the reality of everyday life. My two days, however beautiful, were vague shadows on the river water of the thing that had mattered: the thing of imagination. What else could cause the dimness I felt? I had been closer when I was not here. To be in Hannibal made for both a nearness and a new distance. Here change and emptiness puzzled me with interpenetrations of resemblance to what I had long known. This town has been used and it exists elsewhere, on a higher dimension than here. So in a sense it cannot be here. It died into art. It is immortal in the one great good place capable of perpetual renewal.

I walked the streets again at night. There is so much night in *Tom Sawyer*. And the streets were quiet, the lamplight dim on the side streets such as Hill. On the corner of Hill Street and Main is the Levering house which, with its elegance of Greek pilasters, little Sam Clemens thought the loveliest house he had ever seen. It is being restored now as an old-fashioned apothecary shop, such as occupied it when Sam was a boy. It is an important building, among our props: on that ground floor Uncle Sam Smarr breathed his last, shot down in the street outside just as it was all to be described years later when Colonel Sherburn shot down old Boggs in *Huckleberry Finn*. Upstairs, the Clemenses, in their most impecunious straits, had lived for a while; and Mark Twain's father died there and Sam witnessed through a keyhole a secret postmortem and did his nightmarish sleepwalking and also, by his father's

coffin, took his pledge to his mother to try to be a better boy. It is an important house.

Behind it is the tiny building which was John Clemens' law office. A short way above that, Becky Thatcher's house. I crossed the street to walk once more past the museum, past the little white-clapboarded house. Thus in real life do we settle for coffins, whether in the snow upon Stormfield or as tourists on a literary pilgrimage—touching the doorknob, touching the cold stone. The smell of the river dampened the night air on Hill Street. Off in the night a dog howled—I had seen many complacent mongrels, sleeping by day in shady doorways, under parked cars: throwbacks to the town I had always known and used to feel I had been in. He howled, so far away as to sound lonesome. And then, somewhere toward the riverbank, just for a moment, a whip-poor-will called. Those two haunted sounds—miraculously, like a cry to me from a century past—of dog and bird, so dread with fatal portent to Tom and Huck. I thought, without thinking how I knew what to think: Who's going to die?

