Opening extract from

Huckleberry Finn

Written by

Mark Twain

Published by

Usborne

Contents

ABOUT *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

Mark Twain published over twenty books in his lifetime, but most readers consider *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to be his masterpiece. It first appeared in 1884 and describes a dangerous journey made by a runaway slave and a young boy through the southern states of America. Jim, the black slave, is trying to reach one of the northern states, where slavery has been abolished and he can live as a free man. But the book's main character, Huck, is on the run from his own family and friends: his vicious, alcoholic father and the 'respectable life' offered by his new guardian, Widow Douglas. It is Huck who narrates the book, and it is through his eyes that we see the violent and vibrant world stretching along the banks of the mighty Mississippi River.

Huckleberry Finn first appeared in one of Twain's earlier novels, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). Set in the sleepy fictional town of St. Petersburg before the turmoil of the American Civil War in 1861, this book follows the adventures of Tom's young gang as they explore the backwoods and hunt for buried treasure. Huck is a tramp, the penniless son of a wandering drunk, who lives off the land and sleeps in

a barrel. Other boys envy his 'untamed' existence. Despite his poverty and the regular beatings he receives from his father, Huck is never bitter or self-pitying. He is content with his simple life in the woods. When he and Tom discover a box of gold, Huck even worries that his new riches will bring nothing but problems.

Mark Twain was fascinated by the rough, river tramp he had created in the character of Huck and wanted to give him his own story. He made the daring decision to let Huck narrate the adventure, using all the rich expression and comedy of his own local slang. This bold – and inspired – move gives Twain's novel a unique, American voice and soon earned it a place alongside the country's greatest books. Some critics attacked the author for writing in a coarse and crude style and his book was banned from several libraries. But Huck's account of his adventure rings true, even when he is confronted by corruption, cruelty and the widespread curse of slavery.

Huck was born into a community in the southern states of America that aggressively supported slavery. Slave owners used religion and the law to enforce their message that slavery was necessary and good. Twain's choice of Huck as hero and narrator was difficult for many readers when the book was published, and his portrayal of slavery and racism remains controversial today. As a part of that world, Huck's language and attitudes can seem racist to some modern readers and the novel has been banned in parts of the United

States. But Huck's defenders argue that he challenges and defies the racist attitudes of his times. His struggles with his conscience as he helps Jim to escape are among the most powerful and important scenes in the novel. Forced to choose between freeing his friend or going to hell, Huck finally rejects his racist society and rescues Jim.

Although the book ends with him safe and rich in St. Petersburg, Huck still feels like a restless outsider. He decides to head out to the frontier wilderness of the New Territory for fresh adventures. This open ending shocked many people at the time, but it has inspired many writers. Among them was the famous American novelist Ernest Hemingway, who wrote:

"*All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn...*"

A Civilized Boy

You won't know about me unless you've read a book called *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. It was Mr. Mark Twain who wrote that book and he told the truth, mostly. He stretched a few things, but I've never met anyone who doesn't tell a few 'stretchers' now and again, except Tom's Aunt Polly or the Widow Douglas, or maybe Mary. You can read about them all in that book of his, which is mostly true as I said before.

The story ends with Tom and me finding the robbers' money hidden in the cave. We got six thousand dollars apiece – in gold. That was quite a sight when it was all piled up. Judge Thatcher banked it for us and the interest worked out at a dollar a day, which is more than a boy knows what to do with. Widow Douglas took me in as her adopted son and set to work 'civilizing' me, but there were too many rules and regulations at her house for my liking. So I returned to my old life – wearing rags and sleeping in a barrel – which suited me just fine. But Tom Sawyer found me and said he was starting a band of robbers and if I lived at the widow's I could join the gang. So I went back.

The widow cried over me and put me in clean new clothes, so all I could do was sweat and itch and hardly

breathe. She rang a bell for supper and you had to come right away, but she wouldn't let you eat until she'd grumbled a few words over the dishes. There was nothing wrong with the food that I could see, but I couldn't understand why they didn't just throw everything into the pan and serve it all mixed up. Things taste better to me that way.

After dinner the widow took out her Bible and taught me about the baby Moses floating on his river. I was all in a sweat to find out what happened to him until she told me he'd been dead a long while. After that I stopped listening. I don't see the sense in worrying about dead people.

The widow's sister, Miss Watson, came to live with us and put me to work at her spelling book. She had me at it for an hour until the widow made her stop the torture. I couldn't have taken another minute. The next hour was deadly dull and I started to fidget. Miss Watson would say: "Don't put your feet on the table, Huckleberry," or "Don't yawn and stretch like that, boy. Can't you behave?" Then she told me all about *the bad place* and I said I wished I was there. She got mad at me then, but I didn't mean any harm. All I wanted was a change of scene; I wasn't fussy where it was. She said it was a wicked thing for me to say and she was going to live well and go to *the good place*. That put me right off going there myself, but I kept quiet about that. I didn't want to make trouble.

Miss Watson told me that all you had to do in the good place was to wander around with a harp and

sing, forever and forever. I asked her if she thought Tom Sawyer would go there and she shook her head. I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to stick together.

Miss Watson kept pecking at me about the good place until I was feeling worn down and lonesome. At last it was time for prayers and everyone went to bed. I took a candle up to my room and tried to think of something cheerful, but it was no use. I was so lonely I almost wished I were dead. The stars were shining and the woods were full of strange noises. I heard the wind whispering among the trees, like a ghost who can't find any rest and has to go around bothering folks. I got so sad and scared I wished I had someone with me. Then I saw a spider on my arm and I brushed him off without thinking, right into the

candle flame. I didn't need anyone to tell me that killing a poor spider brings the worst kind of luck and I got so jumpy I was almost shaking my clothes off. After a long time I heard the clock in the town booming twelve times and after that the night was still. A twig broke, down in the dark between the trees and something called: "Mia-yow, mia-yow." My heart jumped for joy when I heard that sound. I put out the light, scrambled out of the window and dropped onto the shed. When I reached the ground, Tom Sawyer was standing there waiting.

We tiptoed through the trees, stooping down so the branches wouldn't brush our heads. But, as we crept past the kitchen door, I tripped over a root and made a noise. One of Miss Watson's slaves, Jim, was sitting in the doorway, framed by the light. He looked up and stared out into the darkness, listening for almost a minute.

"Well, who's there?" he asked finally.

He listened some more and then he came tiptoeing out and stood right between us. It was too dark to see anything but he was so close he could have touched me. Crouching there, I got an itch on my ankle but I couldn't tend to it – I knew he'd hear me if I scratched it. My ear began to itch and then I got another itch between my shoulder blades. I thought I'd die if I couldn't start scratching. I've noticed the same thing plenty of times since. If you're at a funeral or in fine company, or trying to sleep when you're not sleepy, you start to itch in a thousand places.

"Speak up now," said Jim suddenly. "I know I heard something. Well, I'm going to sit right here until I hear it again."

He sat down between us and leaned against a tree. My nose began to itch, on the outside, inside and underneath, and soon my eyes were streaming with tears. But I didn't dare scratch. I was in this misery for six or seven minutes – though it seemed a lot longer – until I thought I couldn't stand another second. Just then, Jim began breathing heavily and started to snore – and I was saved.

Tom smacked his lips to give me the sign we could creep away, but when we'd crawled ten feet off he

stopped. In a whisper he told me it would be a fine joke to tie Jim to the tree. Well, I didn't want Jim to start shouting and wake the house, so I said no. Then Tom said he needed some candles from the kitchen. I didn't want to risk it but Tom wouldn't listen, so we slipped in and took three candles. Tom left five cents on the table as payment and we hurried outside. I was in a sweat to get away but nothing would stop Tom from playing some prank on Jim. He crawled off into the dark and was gone for what seemed like ages. When he got back we cut along the path and ended up on the top of the hill on the other side of the house.

Tom told me he'd slipped Jim's hat off his head and left it hanging on a branch. Afterwards, Jim told everyone some witches must have put him in a trance, rode him all over the state and left the hat there to show who'd done it. Jim was a great believer in witches and their magic powers. The next time he told the story, those witches took him all the way to New Orleans, and he went further each time he told it.

Pretty soon, Jim was going all around the world and his back was covered in saddle sores. He was proud of his adventure. Other slaves came from miles around to hear the tale, standing there with their mouths open while Jim gave them all the details. And if Jim came in and found some other slave telling stories about magic and witches around the fire, he'd huff and puff and say: "And just what do *you* know about witches?"

He even wore our five-cent coin around his neck on a string and said it was a charm given to him personally by the devil. All Jim had to do was say a few

words and the devil would come – but Jim never told anyone what those words might be. Slaves came over to stare at that coin, but they didn't dare touch it since it had been stroked by Lucifer. Jim was ruined as a servant, because he got so full of himself with all his devilish adventures and wild rides with witches.

Standing on the hill we looked down on our small town of St. Petersburg and the mile-wide Mississippi River, still and grand in the moonlight. We went down the hill to where Jo Harper and two or three other boys were waiting for us, ready with a flat-bottomed boat. Two miles downriver we landed and Tom led us to a secret hole hidden by some bushes. We lit candles and crawled inside, following Tom through great caves and twisting passages until at last he stopped.

"Anyone who wants to join my gang of robbers," he whispered to us, "has to make an oath and sign for it in blood."

Everyone was willing, so Tom took a piece of paper from his pocket and read the oath he'd drawn up. It was full of wild language and murderous threats to kill any boy who revealed the gang's secrets. We all thought it was about the best oath we'd ever come across. Tom owned up that he'd borrowed parts of it from all the pirate and robber books he liked to read.

One boy said we should kill the families of any boy who betrayed the gang, and there I hit a snag. Ben Rogers said I didn't have any family to kill.

"What about his pap?" cried Tom.

"But where's he gone to?" asked Ben. "He used to sleep with the hogs in the tannery yard but nobody's seen him for more than a year."

They talked it over and it looked like I was out of the club. I was ready to cry when suddenly an idea came to me.

"There's Miss Watson," I offered. "You could kill her if I squeal."

"She'll do," they all cried at once, and then every boy pricked his finger with a pin to sign the membership form. It took hours to decide on what crimes the gang should commit, and whether we should murder people or just hold them for ransom. By the time I was climbing through my bedroom window it was almost daylight. My new clothes were all greasy and covered in clay and I was as tired as a dog.

THE HOMECOMING

Miss Watson gave me a good scolding the next morning, on account of my dirty clothes. The widow didn't say a word. She cleaned off the grease and dirt and looked so sad I decided to behave for a while – if I could. Then Miss Watson asked me to pray with her and I tried. She told me if I prayed every day, I'd get what I asked for, but it didn't work. I prayed for some fish-hooks but they never came, and when I asked Miss Watson to try for me she said I was a fool.

I walked deep into the woods and had a long think about this praying business. If people can get what they want by praying, why are so many people poor and unhappy? I asked the widow about it and she told me that praying brings a person 'spiritual gifts' and not fish-hooks. She said I had to be good and kind to everyone I met and never think of myself, but I couldn't see the advantage in that. Perhaps I was just too ignorant and low-down for the good place, but I decided I'd go if I got the invitation.

We played at robbers for a month or two and then the gang broke up. Tom Sawyer was always planning new schemes and promising us riches, but he never

delivered the goods. One time we raided a picnic gathering in the woods and Tom said it was a camel train loaded with diamonds and gold bars. It looked like a plain Sunday school outing to me, but Tom said I'd been enchanted by an evil magician and I couldn't trust my own eyes. He said I should read a book called *Don Quixote* and then I'd understand all about enchanters and their spells. We had a long talk about magic and genies after that and I even took an old lamp out to the woods to see if I could make a genie come out of it. I rubbed at that lamp until my arm almost fell off, but nothing happened.

Four months went by and winter set in. I'd been going to school most days and I could read and write a little. At first I hated the lessons, but they got easier. Life at the widow's got easier too, and although I still liked the old ways best I was beginning to like the new ones too.

But one morning I overturned the saltcellar on the breakfast table and I knew it was a sure sign I was due some bad luck. When I was climbing over the stile at the end of the garden I noticed some footprints in the snow. It looked as though someone had been pacing around there, watching and waiting. I was curious so I crouched down to study the tracks. When I saw a cross in one of the footprints, I stood up and started running. I knew that cross all too well. It was made of nails hammered into a boot heel, and it was a charm to keep off the devil.

I ran all the way to Judge Thatcher's house.

"Why, my boy," he declared, "you're out of breath.

What's your hurry?"

"I've got news for you, sir," I replied.

"I've got news too," he smiled. "Your six-month interest payment has come in. Shall I bank it with the rest?"

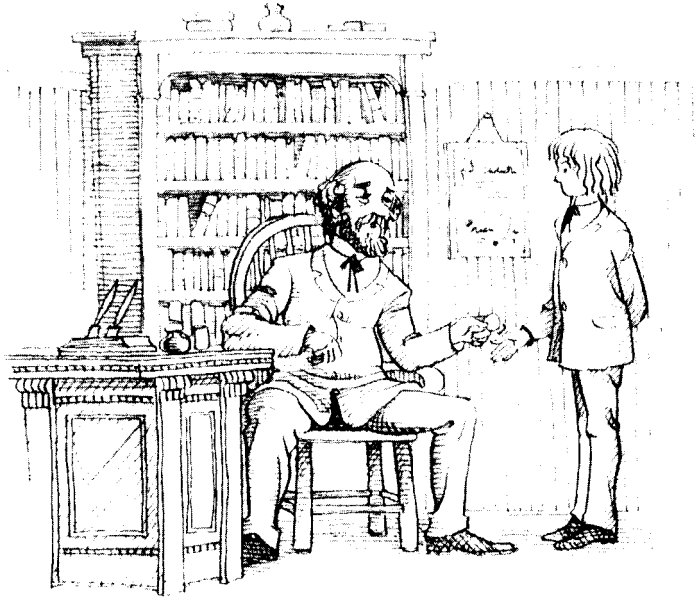
"Keep it, sir," I said. "I want you to have every cent of it, and the six thousand too."

"Do you really mean that, Huck?" he cried in amazement. "But why?"

"I can't tell you, sir," I answered. "Just take it all."

"Perhaps you want to sign it over to me?" he suggested. "Well, that should be possible."

The judge wrote a few words on a piece of paper and handed me a silver dollar. "Sign this contract," he said, "and take this dollar as a token payment, to make it official."



So I signed and left. I knew trouble was coming my way and all the money in the world wasn't going to help me. When I went up to my room that night, Pap was sitting in the chair waiting for me.

I was always scared of him before, when he used to beat me. But after I got over the shock of seeing him there, I realized I wasn't scared of him at all. He was about fifty years old and he looked every bit of it. His hair was long, matted and greasy. It was black as coal, the same as his beard, and his bright eyes glared at me through the tangle. What I could see of his face made my flesh crawl. The skin was a sickly white, like the belly of a toad or a dead fish. As for his clothes – just rags, that was all. His boots were so broken and torn I could see two toes sticking out, and his old black hat was caved in and ruined.

I put the candle down and saw that the window was open. He must have climbed up over the shed.

"Think you're a big shot now, don't you," he spat at me, when all the staring was over.

"Maybe," I said, "maybe not."

"Don't give me any lip, boy," he snapped. "You've lost your manners while I've been away. I suppose that's what happens when you hang around a school, like you've been doing. Who told you to start fooling around trying to get educated?"

"The widow told me," I replied.

"She's got no business meddling," he grumbled. "You stay away from that school, do you hear? We never had any readers in this family and I won't put up with it from you. If I catch you around that school I'll tan you black and blue."

He sat there mumbling and growling for a moment before he started up again. "And what are you doing sleeping in a bed," he snapped, "and your own father's got to sleep with the hogs in the tannery? Well, I'll take you down a peg or two, yes I will. They say you're rich. How'd that happen?"

"It didn't," I told him. "They lied."

"Don't get sassy with me. I've been in town two days and all I hear about is how rich you are. I even heard it upriver, that's why I came back. You'll get me that money tomorrow."

"I can't," I answered. "I haven't got any money."

"I know," he sneered, "Judge Thatcher's looking after it for you. Well, I'll ask him for it and I'll make

him pay. How much have you got in your pocket?"

"One dollar," I told him. "And I want it."

"It doesn't make any difference what you want," he barked, "pass it over."

He took it and bit it to see if it was the real thing. "I haven't had a drink all day," he grumbled. "I'm going into town for some whiskey."

Pap climbed awkwardly through the open window and rested his weight on the roof of the shed. "You stay away from that school," he warned me in a snarl, before he dropped to the ground. "I don't want you getting any more of these airs and graces. You understand?"

In the morning he was drunk and he went to see Judge Thatcher, but he couldn't make him hand over the money. Widow Douglas tried to get custody of me, but we had a new county judge and he was dead set against breaking up a family. He didn't know Pap.

The new judge invited my old man into his house and Pap said he was going to give up drinking and lead a decent, sober life from that day on. Pap broke down in tears and said he'd fooled away too many precious years already, and soon everyone in the house was weeping and the judge hugged the old man and gave him some new clothes. Pap said he was 'reformed' and all he needed was a second chance – and a little sympathy. So the judge made him a guest in his house and Pap cried some more and thanked him and hugged him again before going up to bed.

But in the night Pap got thirsty and he shinned down the side of the house and went into town. He

traded his new clothes for some rotgut whiskey and, when he was good and drunk, he smashed all the furniture in his bedroom and fell out of the window. Pap broke his left arm in two places. The new judge was disappointed, to say the least. He said the only way to reform a man like Pap was with a shotgun.

When he got better, Pap found a lawyer and went after Judge Thatcher again for the money. He went after me too, thrashing me if he caught me going to school. Then he started hanging around the widow's house, watching for me, until the widow told him she'd make trouble for him if he didn't leave us in peace. That made him mad. "I'm the boss of Huck Finn," Pap shouted. "You wait and see." He caught me one morning in the spring and took me upriver in a skiff. We crossed over to the Illinois shore, to where the woods are lonely, thick and dark. Pap had a log cabin there, so well hidden in the timber you'd never find it unless you knew where to look.