

MARK TWAIN

*An Encounter with an Interviewer*

The nervous, dapper, “peart” young man took the chair I offered him, and said he was connected with the *Daily Thunderstorm*, and added, —

“Hoping it’s no harm, I’ve come to interview you.”

“Come to what?”

“Interview you.”

“Ah! I see. Yes, — yes. Um! Yes, — yes.”

I was not feeling bright that morning. Indeed, my powers seemed a bit under a cloud. However, I went to the bookcase, and when I had been looking six or seven minutes, I found I was obliged to refer to the young man. I said, —

“How do you spell it?”

“Spell what?”

“Interview.”

“O my goodness! What do you want to spell it for?”

“I don’t want to spell it; I want to see what it means.”

“Well, this is astonishing, I must say. I can tell you what it means, if you — if you —”

“O, all right! That will answer, and much obliged to you, too.”

“I n, *in*, t e r, *ter*, *inter* —”

“Then you spell it with an *I*?”

“Why, certainly!”

“O, that is what took me so long.”

“Why, my *dear* sir, what did *you* propose to spell it with?”

“Well, I — I — I hardly know. I had the Unabridged, and I was ciphering around in the back end, hoping I might tree her among the pictures. But it’s a very old edition.”

“Why, my friend, they would n’t have a *picture* of it in even the latest e — My dear sir, I beg your pardon, I mean no harm in the world, but you do not look as — as — intelligent as I had expected you would. No harm, — I mean no harm at all.”

“O, don’t mention it! It has often been said, and by people who would not flatter and who could have no inducement to flatter, that I am quite remarkable in that way. Yes, — yes; they always speak of it with rapture.”

"I can easily imagine it. But about this interview. You know it is the custom, now, to interview any man who has become notorious."

"Indeed! I had not heard of it before. It must be very interesting. What do you do it with?"

"Ah, well,—well,—well,—this is disheartening. It *ought* to be done with a club in some cases; but customarily it consists in the interviewer asking questions and the interviewed answering them. It is all the rage now. Will you let me ask you certain questions calculated to bring out the salient points of your public and private history?"

"O, with pleasure,—with pleasure. I have a very bad memory, but I hope you will not mind that. That is to say, it is an irregular memory,—singularly irregular. Sometimes it goes in a gallop, and then again it will be as much as a fortnight passing a given point. This is a great grief to me."

"O, it is no matter, so you will try to do the best you can."

"I will. I will put my whole mind on it."

"Thanks. Are you ready to begin?"

"Ready."

*Q.* How old are you?

*A.* Nineteen, in June.

*Q.* Indeed! I would have taken you to be thirty-five or six. Where were you born?

*A.* In Missouri.

*Q.* When did you begin to write?

*A.* In 1836.

*Q.* Why, how could that be, if you are only nineteen now?

*A.* I don't know. It does seem curious, somehow.

*Q.* It does, indeed. Who do you consider the most remarkable man you ever met?

*A.* Aaron Burr.

*Q.* But you never could have met Aaron Burr, if you are only nineteen years—

*A.* Now, if you know more about me than I do, what do you ask me for?

*Q.* Well, it was only a suggestion; nothing more. How did you happen to meet Burr?

A. Well, I happened to be at his funeral one day, and he asked me to make less noise, and—

Q. But, good heavens! If you were at his funeral, he must have been dead; and if he was dead, how could he care whether you made a noise or not?

A. I don't know. He was always a particular kind of a man that way.

Q. Still, I don't understand it at all. You say he spoke to you and that he was dead.

A. I did n't say he was dead.

Q. But was n't he dead?

A. Well, some said he was, some said he was n't.

Q. What did you think?

A. O, it was none of my business! It was n't any of my funeral.

Q. Did you— However, we can never get this matter straight. Let me ask about something else. What was the date of your birth?

A. Monday, October 31, 1693.

Q. What! Impossible! That would make you a hundred and eighty years old. How do you account for that?

A. I don't account for it at all.

Q. But you said at first you were only nineteen, and now you make yourself out to be one hundred and eighty. It is an awful discrepancy.

A. Why, have you noticed that? (*Shaking hands.*) Many a time it has seemed to me like a discrepancy, but somehow I could n't make up my mind. How quick you notice a thing!

Q. Thank you for the compliment, as far as it goes. Had you, or have you, any brothers or sisters?

A. Eh! I—I—I think so,—yes,—but I don't remember.

Q. Well, that is the most extraordinary statement I ever heard!

A. Why, what makes you think that?

Q. How could I think otherwise? Why, look here! who is this a picture of on the wall? Is n't that a brother of yours?

A. Oh! yes, yes, yes! Now you remind me of it, that *was* a brother of mine. That's William,—*Bill* we called him. Poor old Bill!

Q. Why? Is he dead, then?

A. Ah, well, I suppose so. We never could tell. There was a great mystery about it.

Q. That is sad, very sad. He disappeared, then?

A. Well, yes, in a sort of general way. We buried him.

Q. *Buried* him! *Buried* him without knowing whether he was dead or not?

A. O no! Not that. He was dead enough.

Q. Well, I confess that I can't understand this. If you buried him and you knew he was dead—

A. No! no! we only thought he was.

Q. O, I see! He came to life again?

A. I bet he did n't.

Q. Well, I never heard anything like this. *Somebody* was dead. *Somebody* was buried. Now, where was the mystery?

A. Ah, that 's just it! That 's it exactly. You see we were twins,—defunct and I,—and we got mixed in the bath-tub when we were only two weeks old, and one of us was drowned. But we did n't know which. Some think it was Bill, some think it was me.

Q. Well, that *is* remarkable. What do *you* think?

A. Goodness knows! I would give whole worlds to know. This solemn, this awful mystery has cast a gloom over my whole life. But I will tell you a secret now, which I never have revealed to any creature before. One of us had a peculiar mark, a large mole on the back of his left hand,—that was *me*. *That child was the one that was drowned*.

Q. Very well, then, I don't see that there is any mystery about it, after all.

A. You don't? Well, *I* do. Anyway I don't see how they could ever have been such a blundering lot as to go and bury the wrong child. But, 'sh!—don't mention it where the family can hear of it. Heaven knows they have heart-breaking troubles enough without adding this.

Q. Well, I believe I have got material enough for the present, and I am very much obliged to you for the pains you have taken. But I was a good deal interested in that account of Aaron Burr's funeral. Would you mind telling me what particular circumstance it was that made you think Burr was such a remarkable man?

A. O, it was a mere trifle! Not one man in fifty would have

noticed it at all. When the sermon was over, and the procession all ready to start for the cemetery, and the body all arranged nice in the hearse, he said he wanted to take a last look at the scenery, and so he *got up and rode with the driver*.

Then the young man reverently withdrew. He was very pleasant company, and I was sorry to see him go.