Excerpts from Roughing It
By Mark Twain
1872

Samuel Clemens (1835-1910), recognized by his pen name Mark Twain, was an American author and humorist. Roughing It, his second published book, is a semi-autobiographical, humorous collection of stories loosely based on Twain's actual travels through the “Wild West” from 1861-1866. Twain had traveled west to find work and escape fighting during the Civil War. The protagonist, presented as a young Twain, recounts his adventures as a naive and inexperienced easterner, during the beginning of his time out West. As you read, take notes on how Twain narrates his own experiences to create a comic effect.

Prefatory

This book is merely a personal narrative, and not a pretentious history or a philosophical dissertation. It is a record of several years of variegated vagabondizing, and its object is rather to help the resting reader while away an idle hour than afflict him with metaphysics, or goad him with science. Still, there is information in the volume; information concerning an interesting episode in the history of the Far West, about which no books have been written by persons who were on the ground in person, and saw the happenings of the time with their own eyes. I allude to the rise, growth and culmination of the silver-mining fever in Nevada — a curious episode, in some respects; the only one, of its peculiar kind, that has occurred in the land; and the only one, indeed, that is likely to occur in it.

Yes, take it all around, there is quite a good deal of information in the book. I regret this very much; but really it could not be helped: information appears to stew out of me naturally, like the precious ottar of roses out of the otter. Sometimes it has seemed to me that I would give worlds if I could retain my facts; but it cannot be. The more I caulk up the sources, and the tighter I get, the more I leak wisdom. Therefore, I can only claim indulgence at the hands of the reader, not justification.

THE AUTHOR.

[...]

1. **Dissertation (noun)**: a long piece of writing about a particular subject
2. Twain invents this word from the root “vagabond” in order to describe the act of traveling from place to place without a home or job.
3. The “Far West” refers to the “Wild West,” a large area of the growing United States in the 1800s west of the Mississippi River and stretching towards the Pacific Coast. Many people traveled west throughout the 1800s looking for adventure, opportunity, or a new life.
4. **Allude (verb)**: subtly reference
5. An alternative spelling of caulk, which means to seal so that something is waterproof.
Chapter 42

What to do next?

It was a momentous question. I had gone out into the world to shift\(^6\) for myself, at the age of thirteen (for my father had endorsed for friends; and although he left us a sumptuous legacy of pride in his fine Virginian stock and its national distinction, I presently found that I could not live on that alone without occasional bread to wash it down with). I had gained a livelihood in various vocations,\(^7\) but had not dazzled anybody with my successes; still the list was before me, and the amplest liberty in the matter of choosing, provided I wanted to work — which I did not, after being so wealthy. I had once been a grocery clerk, for one day, but had consumed so much sugar in that time that I was relieved from further duty by the proprietor;\(^8\) said he wanted me outside, so that he could have my custom. I had studied law an entire week, and then given it up because it was so prosy and tiresome. I had engaged briefly in the study of blacksmithing, but wasted so much time trying to fix the bellows\(^9\) so that it would blow itself, that the master turned me adrift in disgrace, and told me I would come to no good. I had been a bookseller's clerk for awhile, but the customers bothered me so much I could not read with any comfort, and so the proprietor gave me a furlough\(^10\) and forgot to put a limit to it. I had clerked in a drug store part of a summer, but my prescriptions were unlucky, and we appeared to sell more stomach pumps than soda water. So I had to go.

\(^5\) I had made of myself a tolerable printer, under the impression that I would be another Franklin some day, but somehow had missed the connection thus far. There was no berth\(^11\) open in the Esmeralda Union, and besides I had always been such a slow compositor\(^12\) that I looked with envy upon the achievements of apprentices of two years' standing; and when I took a “take,” foremen\(^13\) were in the habit of suggesting that it would be wanted “some time during the year.”

I was a good average St. Louis and New Orleans pilot\(^14\) and by no means ashamed of my abilities in that line; wages were two hundred and fifty dollars a month and no board to pay, and I did long to stand behind a wheel again and never roam any more — but I had been making such an ass of myself lately in grandiloquent\(^15\) letters home about my blind lead and my European excursion that I did what many and many a poor disappointed miner had done before; said “It is all over with me now, and I will never go back home to be pitied — and snubbed.” I had been a private secretary, a silver miner and a silver mill operative, and amounted to less than nothing in each, and now —

What to do next?

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6. When prospecting, or looking for valuable minerals, one often shifts sandy, rocky sediment through a screened pan to look for small flecks of minerals.
7. **Vocation (noun)**: a job
8. **Proprietor (noun)**: a person who owns a business or property
9. **Bellows (noun)**: a device with an air bag that blows out a stream of air when two handles are squeezed together, often used for blowing air into a fire
10. **Furlough (noun)**: official permission to leave one's work for a certain amount of time because there is not enough work to do
11. **Berth (noun)**: an appointment or employment
12. **Compositor (noun)**: one who arranges the text and pictures of a book, magazine, or newspaper before it is printed
13. **Foremen (noun)**: people who are in charge of groups of workers
14. A pilot is a mariner who can navigate ships through dangerous or busy waterways, often rivers. Twain was a river-boat pilot on the Mississippi River for two years before journeying out west.
15. **Grandiloquent (adjective)**: formal and exaggerated, often describing language
I yielded to Higbie’s appeals and consented to try the mining once more. We climbed far up on the mountain side and went to work on a little rubbishy claim of ours that had a shaft on it eight feet deep. Higbie descended into it and worked bravely with his pick till he had loosened up a deal of rock and dirt and then I went down with a long-handled shovel (the most awkward invention yet contrived by man) to throw it out. You must brace the shovel forward with the side of your knee till it is full, and then, with a skilful toss, throw it backward over your left shoulder. I made the toss, and landed the mess just on the edge of the shaft and it all came back on my head and down the back of my neck. I never said a word, but climbed out and walked home. I inwardly resolved that I would starve before I would make a target of myself and shoot rubbish at it with a long-handled shovel.

I sat down, in the cabin, and gave myself up to solid misery — so to speak. Now in pleasanter days I had amused myself with writing letters to the chief paper of the Territory, the Virginia Daily Territorial Enterprise, and had always been surprised when they appeared in print. My good opinion of the editors had steadily declined; for it seemed to me that they might have found something better to fill up with than my literature. I had found a letter in the post office as I came home from the hill side, and finally I opened it. Eureka! [I never did know what Eureka meant, but it seems to be as proper a word to heave in as any when no other that sounds pretty offers.] It was a deliberate offer to me of Twenty-Five Dollars a week to come up to Virginia and be city editor of the Enterprise.

I would have challenged the publisher in the “blind lead” days — I wanted to fall down and worship him, now. Twenty-Five Dollars a week — it looked like bloated luxury — a fortune a sinful and lavish waste of money. But my transports cooled when I thought of my inexperience and consequent unfitness for the position — and straightway, on top of this, my long array of failures rose up before me. Yet if I refused this place I must presently become dependent upon somebody for my bread, a thing necessarily distasteful to a man who had never experienced such a humiliation since he was thirteen years old. Not much to be proud of, since it is so common — but then it was all I had to be proud of. So I was scared into being a city editor. I would have declined, otherwise. Necessity is the mother of “taking chances.” I do not doubt that if, at that time, I had been offered a salary to translate the Talmud from the original Hebrew, I would have accepted — albeit with diffidence and some misgivings — and thrown as much variety into it as I could for the money.

I went up to Virginia and entered upon my new vocation. I was a rusty looking city editor, I am free to confess — coatless, slouch hat, blue woolen shirt, pantaloons stuffed into boot-tops, whiskered half down to the waist, and the universal navy revolver slung to my belt. But I secured a more Christian costume and discarded the revolver.

I had never had occasion to kill anybody, nor ever felt a desire to do so, but had worn the thing in deference to popular sentiment, and in order that I might not, by its absence, be offensively conspicuous, and a subject of remark. But the other editors, and all the printers, carried revolvers. I asked the chief editor and proprietor (Mr. Goodman, I will call him, since it describes him as well as any name could do) for some instructions with regard to my duties, and he told me to go all over town and ask all sorts of people all sorts of questions, make notes of the information gained, and write them out for publication. And he added:

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16. Mr. Higbie is a character who appears earlier in Roughing It and who prospects for silver with Twain.
17. Virginia City, Nevada
18. A “blind lead” is a style of writing in newspapers in which writers hurry into a story without including too many facts in the lead, or first paragraph, of the story. This strategy aims to keep readers from being overwhelmed so that they will continue reading.
19. The Talmud is a Jewish religious text central to Rabbinic teachings and written originally in Hebrew.
20. **Misgiving** *(noun)*: a feeling of doubt about something
“Never say ‘We learn’ so-and-so, or ‘It is reported,’ or ‘It is rumored,’ or ‘We understand’ so-and-so, but go to headquarters and get the absolute facts, and then speak out and say ‘It is so-and-so.’ Otherwise, people will not put confidence in your news. Unassailable certainty is the thing that gives a newspaper the firmest and most valuable reputation.”

It was the whole thing in a nut-shell; and to this day when I find a reporter commencing his article with “We understand,” I gather a suspicion that he has not taken as much pains to inform himself as he ought to have done. I moralize well, but I did not always practice well when I was a city editor; I let fancy get the upper hand of fact too often when there was a dearth of news. I can never forget my first day’s experience as a reporter. I wandered about town questioning everybody, boring everybody, and finding out that nobody knew anything. At the end of five hours my notebook was still barren. I spoke to Mr. Goodman. He said:

[15] “Dan used to make a good thing out of the hay wagons in a dry time when there were no fires or inquests. Are there no hay wagons in from the Truckee? If there are, you might speak of the renewed activity and all that sort of thing, in the hay business, you know.

“It isn’t sensational or exciting, but it fills up and looks business like.”

I canvassed the city again and found one wretched old hay truck dragging in from the country. But I made affluent use of it. I multiplied it by sixteen, brought it into town from sixteen different directions, made sixteen separate items out of it, and got up such another sweat about hay as Virginia City had never seen in the world before.

This was encouraging. Two nonpareil columns had to be filled, and I was getting along. Presently, when things began to look dismal again, a desperado killed a man in a saloon and joy returned once more. I never was so glad over any mere trifle before in my life. I said to the murderer:

“Sir, you are a stranger to me, but you have done me a kindness this day which I can never forget. If whole years of gratitude can be to you any slight compensation, they shall be yours. I was in trouble and you have relieved me nobly and at a time when all seemed dark and drear. Count me your friend from this time forth, for I am not a man to forget a favor.”

[20] If I did not really say that to him I at least felt a sort of itching desire to do it. I wrote up the murder with a hungry attention to details, and when it was finished experienced but one regret — namely, that they had not hanged my benefactor on the spot, so that I could work him up too.

21. **Deference (noun):** a polite and respectful attitude
22. **Conspicuous (adjective):** noticed easily
23. **Fancy (noun):** the power of the mind to imagine
24. **Dearth (noun):** absence or deficiency
25. This uncommon use of the word affluent means abundant.
26. **Nonpareil (adj.):** having no match or equal; unrivaled
27. **Desperado (noun):** a desperate or reckless person, often a criminal
28. **Trifle (noun):** something that does not have much value or importance
Next I discovered some emigrant\textsuperscript{29} wagons going into camp on the plaza and found that they had lately come through the hostile Indian country and had fared rather roughly. I made the best of the item that the circumstances permitted, and felt that if I were not confined within rigid limits by the presence of the reporters of the other papers I could add particulars that would make the article much more interesting. However, I found one wagon that was going on to California, and made some judicious\textsuperscript{30} inquiries of the proprietor. When I learned, through his short and surly answers to my cross-questioning, that he was certainly going on and would not be in the city next day to make trouble, I got ahead of the other papers, for I took down his list of names and added his party to the killed and wounded. Having more scope here, I put this wagon through an Indian fight that to this day has no parallel in history. My two columns were filled. When I read them over in the morning I felt that I had found my legitimate occupation at last. I reasoned within myself that news, and stirring news, too, was what a paper needed, and I felt that I was peculiarly endowed with the ability to furnish it. Mr. Goodman said that I was as good a reporter as Dan. I desired no higher commendation. With encouragement like that, I felt that I could take my pen and murder all the immigrants on the plains if need be and the interests of the paper demanded it.

\textit{Roughing It by Mark Twain (1872) is in the public domain.}

\textsuperscript{29}Emigrant (noun): those who have left their own land or country for a new land

\textsuperscript{30}Judicious (adj.): of good judgment or sense
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. How are the details about Twain's failures in his odd jobs important to our understanding of the character?
   A. They reinforce the notion that the character is lazy, does not want to work, and is not capable of working hard.
   B. They detail how prospects in the American West were much dimmer than advertised, making for a harder life for those who sought fame and fortune in the new frontier.
   C. They mark his development from an inexperienced easterner trying to make-it-rich to an experienced yet cynical Western writer.
   D. They show that he is eager to work but has few useful skills, making him a loveable but pathetic figure.

2. PART A: Which statement best expresses a central theme of the text?
   A. The West is a great place for people with no skills to succeed.
   B. Stories of the West are often invented myths of exaggerated characters and events.
   C. Twain supports liars because lying is the key to impressing others.
   D. Book knowledge is more important to success than personal experience.

3. PART B: What phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “Yes, take it all around, there is quite a good deal of information in the book.” (Paragraph 2)
   B. “I did long to stand behind a wheel again and never roam any more” (Paragraph 6)
   C. “Unassailable certainty is the thing that gives a newspaper the firmest and most valuable reputation.” (Paragraph 13)
   D. “(I) found one wretched old hay truck dragging in from the country... I multiplied it by sixteen... and got up such another sweat about hay as Virginia City had never seen” (Paragraph 17)

4. What effect does the comedic resolution of this excerpt have on the passage's overall meaning?
   A. It provides insight into Twain's uncertainty about his future out West and the opportunities in the new territory.
   B. It suggests that in the end, everything works out well for Western adventurers when individuals reflect on their experiences.
   C. It relieves tension regarding the constant possibility of uncertainty and tragedy awaiting Westerners in an unfamiliar context.
   D. It undermines the seriousness of any moral lesson that might be found in Roughing It and highlights the personal narrative of Twain.
5. Explain how Twain uses "sorrow," whether through making fun of himself or others' poor circumstances, to achieve humor, using evidence from the text.
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In your opinion, is Twain's use of exaggeration and hyperbole amusing or does it make him an unreliable narrator? Why?

2. What allows Twain to succeed out West? Do you think that he wants readers to follow in his footsteps? Why or why not?

3. Roughing It is loosely based on Twain's own experiences out West. Think of a time when you have embellished or altered the truth of a story for an audience, and what was your motivation? (ex. comedy, tragedy, joy, defeat, glory)

4. Theatre experts claim that the only difference between comedy and tragedy lies in the ending of a story. Yet Twain alters happy or semi-happy endings of news stories into tragedies in order to sensationalize and sell a story. What does Twain's mingling of the comic and the tragic reveal about the absurdity of the world around us, especially in the “Wild West?”