

# Mark Twain *Pilots a Steamboat*



**ABOUT THE READING** Mark Twain wrote *Life on the Mississippi* in 1883, in which he describes his adventures as a cub pilot of a steamboat on the Mississippi River. In this humorous excerpt, he has persuaded the pilot of the *Paul Jones* to teach him the stretch of the river between New Orleans and St. Louis.

## VOCABULARY

**stern** rear part of a ship

**levee** an embankment next to a river

**flaying** to strip the skin off

**imminent** about to happen

**prudence** good sense



As you read the passage below, pay attention to how the author uses humor as he tells the story.

## A Cub Pilot's Experience

The boat backed out from New Orleans at four in the afternoon, and it was “our watch” until eight. Mr. Bixby, my chief, “straight-ended her up,” plowed her along past the **sterns** of the other boats that lay at the **levee**, and then said, “Here, take her, shave those steamships as close as you’d peel an apple.” I took the wheel and my heart went down into my boots; for it seemed to me that we were about to scrape the side off every ship in the line, we were so close. I held my breath and began to claw the boat away from the danger, and I had my own opinion of the pilot who had known no better than to get us into such peril, but I was too wise to express it. In half a minute I had a wide margin of safety intervening between the *Paul Jones* and the ships, and within ten seconds more I was set aside in disgrace and Mr. Bixby was going into danger again and **flaying** me alive with abuse of my cowardice. I was stung but I was obliged to admire the easy confidence with which my chief loafed from side to side of his wheel and trimmed the ships so closely that disaster seemed ceaselessly **imminent**. When he had

Exaggeration is often used as a technique in humorous writing. Underline two examples in the first paragraph.

Source: *Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain. James R. Osgood and Company, Boston 1883.

cooled a little he told me that the easy water was close ashore and the current outside, and therefore we must hug the bank upstream, to get the benefit of the former, and stay well out downstream, to take advantage of the latter. In my own mind I resolved to be a down-stream pilot and leave the upstreaming to people dead to **prudence**. . .

The watch was ended at last, and we took supper and went to bed. At midnight the glare of a lantern shone in my eyes. . .

Here was something fresh—this thing of getting up in the middle of the night to go to work. It was a detail in piloting that had never occurred to me at all. I knew that boats ran all night but somehow I had never happened to reflect that somebody had to get up out of a warm bed to run them. I began to fear that piloting was not quite so romantic as I had imagined it was; there was something very real and work-like about this new phase of it.

**Why do you think Bixby calls the water close to shore “easy water”?**

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## ANALYZING LITERATURE

**1. Main Idea** Why did Mr. Bixby get so angry with Mark Twain?

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**2. Critical Thinking: Making Predictions** Do you think Mark Twain will make a good steamship pilot?

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**3. Activity** You have just finished your first watch as a steamship pilot. Write a letter home describing the realities of your first day as a steamship pilot. Write about your challenges and accomplishments.