“A Cub Pilot”

From *Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain

...First of all, there is one faculty which a pilot must incessantly cultivate until he has brought it to absolute perfection. Nothing short of perfection will do. That faculty is memory. He cannot stop with merely thinking a thing is so and so; he must know it; for this is eminently one of the ‘exact’ sciences. With what scorn a pilot was looked upon, in the old times, if he ever ventured to deal in that feeble phrase ‘I think,’ instead of the vigorous one ‘I know!’ One cannot easily realize what a tremendous thing it is to know every trivial detail of twelve hundred miles of river and know it with absolute exactness. If you will take the longest street in New York, and travel up and down it, conning its features patiently until you know every house and window and door and lamp-post and big and little sign by heart, and know them so accurately that you can instantly name the one you are abreast of when you are set down at random in that street in the middle of an inky black night, you will then have a tolerable notion of the amount and the exactness of a pilot’s knowledge who carries the Mississippi River in his head. And then if you will go on until you know every street crossing, the character, size, and position of the crossing-stones, and the varying depth of mud in each of those numberless places, you will have some idea of what the pilot must know in order to keep a Mississippi steamer out of trouble. Next, if you will take half of the signs in that long street, and change their places once a month, and still manage to know their new positions accurately on dark nights, and keep up with these repeated changes without making any mistakes, you will understand what is required of a pilot’s peerless memory by the fickle Mississippi.

1. Explain why memory is important to a person working as a riverboat pilot.
2. In what other jobs is memory important?
3. In what other jobs is memory unimportant?

I think a pilot’s memory is about the most wonderful thing in the world. To know the Old and New Testaments by heart, and be able to recite them glibly, forward or backward, or begin at random anywhere in the book and recite both ways and never trip or make a mistake, is no extravagant mass of knowledge, and no marvelous facility, compared to a pilot’s massed knowledge of the Mississippi and his marvelous facility in the handling of it. I make this comparison deliberately, and believe I am not expanding the truth when I do it. Many will think my figure too strong, but pilots will not...

A pilot must have a memory; but there are two higher qualities which he must also have. He must have good and quick judgment and decision, and a cool, calm courage that no peril can shake. Give a man the merest trifle of pluck to start with, and by the time he has become a pilot he cannot be unmanned by any danger a steamboat can get into; but one cannot quite say the same for judgment. Judgment is a matter of brains, and a man must start with a good stock of that article or he will never succeed as a pilot.

4. Describe the additional character traits that a riverboat pilot should possess. How are these character traits important to the job?
The growth of courage in the pilot-house is steady all the time, but it does not reach a high and satisfactory condition until some time after the young pilot has been ‘standing his own watch,’ alone and under the staggering weight of all the responsibilities connected with the position. When an apprentice has become pretty thoroughly acquainted with the river, he goes clattering along so fearlessly with his steamboat, night or day, that he presently begins to imagine that it is his courage that animates him; but the first time the pilot steps out and leaves him to his own devices he finds out it was the other man’s. He discovers that the article has been left out of his own cargo altogether. The whole river is bristling with exigencies in a moment; he is not prepared for them; he does not know how to meet them; all his knowledge forsakes him; and within fifteen minutes he is as white as a sheet and scared almost to death. Therefore pilots wisely train these cubs by various strategic tricks to look danger in the face a little more calmly. A favorite way of theirs is to play a friendly swindle upon the candidate.

5. Why are the beginning pilots called “cubs”?
6. What examples of figurative language is included in this section?
7. What does the narrator mean by “a friendly swindle upon the candidate”?

Mr. Bixby, my chief, served me in this fashion once, and for years afterward I used to blush even in my sleep when I thought of it. I had become a good steersman; so good, indeed, that I had all the work to do on our watch, night and day; Mr. Bixby seldom made a suggestion to me; all he ever did was to take the wheel on particularly bad nights or in particularly bad crossings, land the boat when she needed to be landed, play gentleman of leisure nine-tenths of the watch, and collect the wages. The lower river was about bank-full, and if anybody had questioned my ability to run any crossing between Cairo and New Orleans without help or instruction, I should have felt irreparably hurt. The idea of being afraid of any crossing in the lot, in the day-time, was a thing too preposterous for contemplation. Well, one matchless summer’s day I was bowling down the bend above island 66, brimful of self-conceit and carrying my nose as high as a giraffe’s, when Mr. Bixby said,

“I am going below awhile. I suppose you know the next crossing?”

This was almost an affront. It was about the plainest and simplest crossing in the whole river. One couldn’t come to any harm, whether he ran it right or not; and as for depth, there never had been any bottom there. I knew all this, perfectly well.

“Know how to run it? Why, I can run it with my eyes shut.” “How much water is there in it?”

“Well, that is an odd question. I couldn’t get bottom there with a church steeple.”

“You think so, do you?”

8. How does the narrator feel towards Mr. Bixby and Mr. Bixby’s workload?
9. How does the narrator feel about his own abilities at this point?
The very tone of the question shook my confidence. That was what Mr. Bixby was expecting. He left, without saying anything more. I began to imagine all sorts of things. Mr. Bixby, unknown to me, of course, sent somebody down to the forecastle with some mysterious instructions to the leadsmen, another messenger was sent to whisper among the officers, and then Mr. Bixby went into hiding behind a smoke-stack where he could observe results. Presently the captain stepped out on the hurricane deck; next the chief mate appeared; then a clerk. Every moment or two a straggler was added to my audience; and before I got to the head of the island I had fifteen or twenty people assembled down there under my nose. I began to wonder what the trouble was. As I started across, the captain glanced aloft at me and said, with a sham uneasiness in his voice,

“Where is Mr. Bixby?”

“Gone below, sir.”

10. What has occurred in this section?
11. What do you predict will happen in the next section?
12. Is the dialogue easy to follow? Why or why not?

But that did the business for me. My imagination began to construct dangers out of nothing, and they multiplied faster than I could keep the run of them. All at once I imagined I saw shoal water ahead! The wave of coward agony that surged through me then came near dislocating every joint in me. All my confidence in that crossing vanished. I seized the bell-rope; dropped it, ashamed; seized it again; dropped it once more; clutched it tremblingly one again, and pulled it so feebly that I could hardly hear the stroke myself. Captain and mate sang out instantly, and both together:

“Starboard lead there! and quick about it!”

This was another shock. I began to climb the wheel like a squirrel; but I would hardly get the boat started to port before I would see new dangers on that side, and away I would spin to the other; only to find perils accumulating to starboard, and be crazy to get to port again. Then came the leadsman’s sepulchral cry:

“D-e-e-p four!”

Deep four in a bottomless crossing! The terror of it took my breath away.

“M-a-r-k three!... M-a-r-k three... Quarter less three!... Half twain!”

This was frightful! I seized the bell-ropes and stopped the engines.

“Quarter twain! Quarter twain! Mark twain!”

I was helpless. I did not know what in the world to do. I was quaking from head to foot, and I could have hung my hat on my eyes, they stuck out so far.

“Quarter less twain! Nine and a half!”
We were drawing nine! My hands were in a nerveless flutter. I could not ring a bell intelligibly with them. I flew to the speaking-tube and shouted to the engineer,

“Oh, Ben, if you love me, back her! Quick, Ben! Oh, back the immortal soul out of her!”

I heard the door close gently. I looked around, and there stood Mr. Bixby, smiling a bland, sweet smile. Then the audience on the hurricane deck sent up a thundergust of humiliating laughter. I saw it all, now, and I felt meaner than the meanest man in human history. I laid in the lead, set the boat in her marks, came ahead on the engines, and said,

“It was a fine trick to play on an orphan, wasn’t it? I suppose I’ll never hear the last of how I was [dumb] enough to heave the lead at the head of 66.”

“Well, no, you won’t, maybe. In fact I hope you won’t; for I want you to learn something by that experience. Didn’t you know there was no bottom in that crossing?”

“Yes, sir, I did.”

“Very well, then. You shouldn’t have allowed me or anybody else to shake your confidence in that knowledge. Try to remember that. And another thing: when you get into a dangerous place, don’t turn coward. That isn’t going to help matters any.”

It was a good enough lesson, but pretty hardly learned. Yet about the hardest part of it was that for months I so often had to hear a phrase which I had conceived a particular distaste for. It was, “Oh, Ben, if you love me, back her!”

13. What has occurred in this section? (2-3 sentences)
14. Using textual evidence, what does the term “Mark Twain” mean?
15. “Oh, Ben, if you love me, back her! Quick, Ben! Oh, back the immortal soul out of her!” is an off thing to say. Why would the narrator use this particular terminology?

16. What lesson did Mr. Bixby wish to teach the narrator?
17. Is this lesson the theme of the story? Explain.

Reflection

18. How does the use of first person point of view effect the narrative? Why is this important?
19. What is the main conflict of the story (Internal versus External)?
20. Why would the narrator describe the Mississippi as “fickle”?

Vocabulary

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty (n.)</th>
<th>Incessantly (adv.)</th>
<th>Glib (adj.)</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Fickle (adj.)</td>
<td>Peerless (adj.)</td>
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<td>Conning (v.)</td>
<td>Cultivate (v.)</td>
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