



Tommy and the Old Man

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Tommy woke up, rubbed his eyes, and looked slowly around the room. Suddenly he jumped out of bed. He dressed quickly and ran down to breakfast. His father, already in his mechanic's uniform, was about to leave for work.

"What's your hurry?" his father said.

"I'm going fishing," Tommy announced.

"Bring home some big ones," Mr. Jackson said. "That little catfish you caught last time was hardly enough for one person."

Mrs. Jackson sat down and looked at Tommy.

“Why were you up so late last night?” she said.

“I was reading,” Tommy said.

“It must have been an exciting book,” his father said. “Your light was still on at twelve o’clock.”

“Yes,” Tommy said. “It’s a very good book—all about the Mississippi River.” He reached in the closet for his fishing hat. “Did you know the Mississippi begins way up in Minnesota?”

“I know it comes from up north,” his mother said. “But I didn’t know it started in Minnesota.”

“And it touches ten states,” he said, “and . . .”

“Tommy,” Mr. Jackson said, “if you’re going fishing, you had better get moving.”

Tommy jumped down from his chair and started out the door.

“So long” he called. “I’m going to fish all the big ones out of that river.”

He grabbed his fishing pole and walked toward the levee. He loved New Orleans, especially in summer, when the grass smelled fresh and thousands of flowers lined the streets. On the porches of the old houses that he passed, black women sat and rocked.

Before long, Tommy came to the levee. Slowly he walked up the slope. He could smell water and hear it lapping against the shore. Then he saw it—the Mississippi—one mile wide, flowing powerfully down to the Gulf. In the distance, a tugboat puffed its way upstream, pushing six barges. Gulls

glided along behind a fishing boat. One dived suddenly into the water to catch a fish.

“I hope there’s good fishing today,” Tommy said to himself. He dug for worms with a tin can. After he had a few, he walked onto an old pier that stuck out ten feet into the water. He baited his line and dropped it in.

Five minutes passed. Tommy pulled in his line and looked at the worm. No fish had touched it. He threw the line back in. Tommy hooked his pole between the cracks of the pier. He leaned back on his elbows. Soon he was lying on his back, with his fishing hat shading his eyes.

“Come on, Old Man,” Tommy said to the river. “Give me a fish.”

The water lapped lazily against the side of the pier. The pier rocked like a boat.

“Wouldn’t it be fun to take a trip on this old river!” Tommy thought. “All the way up to Memphis, or even to St. Louis!”

The pier rolled lightly to and fro on the gentle waves. Tommy’s eyes grew heavy.

“Come on, Old Man,” he said.

Before long, the whispering waters had rocked him to sleep. “Come on, Old Man,” he mumbled in his dreams. “Come on.”

Up in the clouds somewhere, Tommy heard a deep voice singing *Ol’ Man River*. “You don’t pick ’taters, and you don’t pick cotton,” Tommy complained in his sleep. “What



*“Old Man River”
The Mississippi*

do you do? You must know sumpin', but you don't say nothin', Old Man. Just what *do* you know?"

"Oh, I've been around a long time," said the Old Man in a very deep voice. "I know a lot."

In his dreams, Tommy looked at the Old Man who had suddenly appeared by his side. It seemed quite natural to Tommy that the Old Man should sit down and talk with him. Tommy didn't even bother to ask, "Who are you?"

The Old Man's hair was like seaweed. His eyes were misty blue. His shoulders wore a tan as dark as Mississippi mud. His whole body glistened like levee grass in the morning sun.

"What would you like to know?" the watery figure asked.

Tommy thought for a minute. "Everything," he said. "I want to know all about you."

"That's easy," the Old Man said. "I like to talk about myself. I guess I've lived around you human beings too long!" He laughed.

"Do you remember a time when there weren't any human beings around?" Tommy asked.

"Why surely!" the Old Man said. "When I was born for the first time, and for many lonely years afterwards, there weren't any men or women on this continent. I'm many millions of years old, and you people have only lived in America some thousands of years. So—a year may mean a lot to you but it doesn't mean much to me. But I do like to talk to you young people. For most of my life I never had any company at all!"

“Where were you born?” asked Tommy.

“Oh, I never stop being born,” the Old Man said. “I’m not like you humans who are just born once. I’m born every day. That’s why I can be young and old at the same time.”

“What do you mean?” said Tommy. The Old Man certainly had strange ways of saying things.

“In my cradle, I’m just a little trickle of water—up in Minnesota. Then I grow a little, build up my strength, and drop off the waterfall of St. Anthony. Did you know that falling water can turn wheels that make electric power?”

“No, I didn’t,” said Tommy.

“Well, if it weren’t for me, many people in Minnesota would not have electricity for their lights at night.”

“How can you be up in Minnesota and down here in New Orleans at the same time?” Tommy asked.

“Easy. We rivers don’t grow tall the way you humans do. We grow long.”

“How long are you?” asked Tommy.

“Oh, I’m about 2000 miles long,” the Old Man said casually; “not the longest in the world, but longer than any river in these parts.”

Tommy tried to imagine 2000 miles. He scratched his head and remembered that the levee was about two miles from home and that distance took him about an hour to walk. *Wow! Two thousand miles!*

“How did you get to be so big?” asked Tommy.

“Well,” the Old Man said, “I eat a lot—dirt from the shore, bushes, trees—even rocks. I have quite an appetite.”

“Don’t you ever get sick?” asked Tommy. He had never eaten a rock or a bush.

“Sometimes. I’m not feeling too well right now, in fact. There’s too much trash in my diet—terrible-tasting wastes you people throw into me. I have a stomach ache right now.”

“If you didn’t eat so much, you wouldn’t be so fat,” said Tommy. “How fat are you, anyway?”

The Old Man smiled. “I don’t mind being fat,” he said. “Right here, I’m a mile wide from shore to shore. But in Minnesota, a good jumper could leap across me without getting wet.”

Tommy thought about this for a while. Just as he was going to speak, the Old Man went on: “Of course,” he said, “I get a lot of help from my friends. My best friend, the Missouri River, joins me near St. Louis. When we meet, we make one grand river. See that big oak tree over there?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m built something like that oak tree, except I grow down instead of up.”

“Down?” Tommy looked puzzled.

“The oak tree starts at the bottom and the branches grow out of the trunk. But big rivers—like me—start growing at the top at the very ends of our branches, and the trunk grows out of the branches. People here call me the great trunk of the largest river system in America. The Missouri is one of my big branches, but I have many large and small rivers flowing into me—the Des Moines River, the Ohio, the Arkansas, the Yazoo, the Red River. . . .”

“Where do you go when you leave New Orleans?” asked Tommy.

“I never leave New Orleans,” the Old Man said, “just as I never leave Minnesota. I begin in Minnesota. But I stretch all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. See that big boat over there?”

“Yes.”

“It comes up to New Orleans from the Gulf. When it leaves here, it goes back down to the Gulf; then it will cross the Atlantic Ocean.”

Tommy thought about big boats crossing the Ocean. “Tell me more,” he said.

“I’m not much of a wanderer,” the Old Man said. “I only get out of my bed now and then. Oh, sometimes I get wild when I’ve had too much to drink—not liquor, boy; I mean rain water and melted snow. I get restless. My stomach starts hurting and I cough up water all over the land. Sometimes, I’ve got so much energy that I hop right out of bed and go spilling over the levee.” He looked at Tommy. “When I do that, you people have a flood.”

“I’ve never been in a flood,” said Tommy.

“In 1973,” the Old Man went on, “I chased a lot of people right out of their homes. I picked up houses in Missouri and set them down again in Tennessee.”

“*That* was a mean thing to do,” said Tommy.

“I couldn’t help it,” the Old Man said. “You were lucky in New Orleans, because people built drains to keep me from washing New Orleans away. But I remember. . . .” Suddenly, he started chuckling to himself.

“What’s so funny?” Tommy demanded.

“I was just thinking of my friend Minnehaha Falls.”

“That’s a strange name!” Tommy said.

“Minnehaha means ‘laughing waters,’” the Old Man said. “She just can’t seem to stop laughing. One of your writers—Longfellow—wrote about her in a poem ‘The Song of Hiawatha’.”

“Is that an Indian name?”

“Yes, indeed. Lots of different kinds of Indians lived along my banks. You Americans still call me by the name the Indians gave me: Missi Sipi—the Great River.”

“What makes you so great?”

The Old Man gave a deep sigh. “I can carry thousands of tons on my back at one time. And my waters touch ten states.”

Tommy was not impressed. “What else do you do?”

“I provide a home for millions of fish,” the Old Man said, “and a playground for thousands of human beings. People like to come sit on my shores.”

“People like me?”

“Like you. Some come to sit and think; others just come to sit. Some come to paint pictures of me in my different moods; other write stories about me and the people I carry on my back. Did you ever hear of Huckleberry Finn?”

“Sure. He was that boy that rode you on a raft, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, Tommy. Mark Twain wrote that story. Huck Finn

and his friend Jim rode me from St. Louis all the way to New Orleans.”

“That was some trip!” said Tommy.

“When Mark Twain was a boy, he made the trip too—on a steamboat. He started up at St. Louis . . .”

“Tell me what St. Louis is like,” Tommy said. “I’ve never been there, but I’ve heard Louis Armstrong play the *St. Louis Blues*. My dad has the record, and boy, is it old!”

“*Old!*” said the Old Man. “What do you know about being old? Let me tell you a little secret: long before Christopher Columbus came to America, there were men and women who built their fires along my shores. People lived near St. Louis thousands and thousands of years ago.”

“Did those people build St. Louis?” asked Tommy.



The Old Man laughed so that his shoulders shook. “No, Tommy,” he said. “In 1764, some French traders set up a trading post to trade for furs with the Osage Indians and other tribes who lived along the Missouri River.”

“What did the traders do with the furs they got from the Indians?” asked Tommy.

“They took them down to New Orleans and sold them. They were very happy when the steamboat began coming all the way to St. Louis—that was in 1817, I believe—because they could ride to New Orleans and back without having to paddle. Then came the railroad.”

“The railroad? I thought the early Americans used covered wagons.”

“They did. And they came as far as my eastern shore. But I’m a pretty big fellow, even at St. Louis,” said the Old Man. “They couldn’t get across me so easily.”

“You are certainly too wide to swim across, and too long to go around,” said Tommy.

The Old Man laughed. “Of course, people could always build ferry boats and rafts, but these were slow and sometimes dangerous. All the trains that came to St. Louis had to unload when they reached my banks—until 1874, when a bridge was built across me.”

“There are a lot of bridges now,” said Tommy.

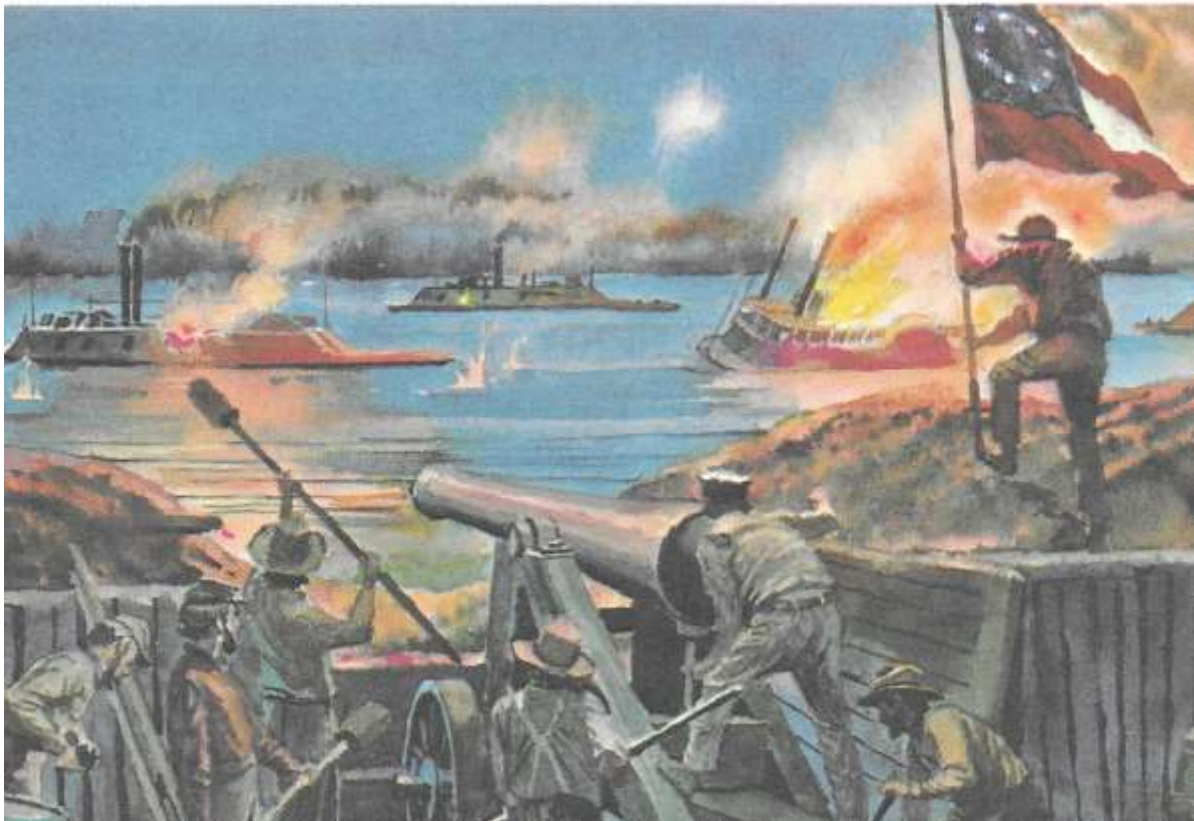
“Yes, but this was the first. So St. Louis got the nickname ‘gateway to the west’. A few years ago, the people of St. Louis built a huge rainbow-shaped arch, called ‘Gateway

Arch'. Day and night it shines high above all buildings in the city."

"Is St. Louis in the North or the South?" Tommy asked.

"Well, it's difficult to say. During that bloody war which you Americans fought against one another—the Civil War—St. Louis stayed with the Union (the North). But many of its citizens wanted to join the Confederacy (the South). Anyway, just about every state down-river from St. Louis went with the South: Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi. . . ." The Old Man frowned. "I still have nightmares about the famous battle of Vicksburg!"

"Where is Vicksburg?" asked Tommy.



“Halfway between Memphis and New Orleans,” answered the Old Man. “Vicksburg sits on a cliff, 350 feet above my waters. That’s why it was so important during your Civil War.”

“Why would that make Vicksburg important?”

“Big guns on those cliffs could keep enemy boats from going up and down the river. I can still hear the booming cannons, the cries of men and women. I can still feel on my back the burning oil of ships on fire. I still carry in my bed the wrecks of many ships and the bones of many brave men.”

“Why did they fight the war?” asked Tommy.

“Some say ‘for honor’; others say ‘for greed’; and others say ‘to free the slaves’.”

“What’s a slave?” asked Tommy.

The Old Man stared at him. “Are you joking with me, son?” he asked.

“No,” Tommy said. “I’ve never met a slave.”

“A slave,” said the Old Man, “is someone who is owned by someone else. He has to do whatever his master tells him to.”

“What happens if he doesn’t?” asked Tommy.

“If he doesn’t, his master either punishes him or sells him.”

“Do you mean that people actually *sell* other people?”

“They used to,” said the Old Man. “In earlier times, if people went to war with other people, whoever won made slaves of the others. For example, when the Romans defeated the Greeks, the Greeks became slaves.”

“Did we have slaves in the United States?”

“Yes,” said the Old Man. He looked at Tommy’s black skin. “There were little boys just like you who were slaves in America,” he said. “You ask your mother about it.”

But Tommy would not be put off. “Tell me about the slaves,” he begged.

The Old Man knew a lot about slaves. Many of them had worked plantations up and down his shoreline. The Old Man could still hear beautiful Negro songs floating out over his waters.

But he could also hear the angry shouts of some white masters as they whipped the slaves until their backs were bloody. He remembered many black families that were sold—the father to a farm in Georgia, the mother to a household in New Orleans, the children, one by one, to traders in St. Louis or Natchez or Memphis.

“You ask your mother to tell you about it,” the Old Man said. “Ask her to tell you how your ancestors were brought over from Africa. Ask her to tell you about famous black men and women: Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver and James Baldwin, Martin Luther King and Shirley Chisholm, Thurgood Marshall and Edward Brooke, Mahalia Jackson and Ella Fitzgerald, Roy Wilkins and Ralph Bunche. These men and women, and thousands of others, helped to improve life for all Americans. Ask your mother to tell you the story, Tommy.”

Tommy was silent for a while. He tried to imagine New Orleans with slaves in it. Yes, he thought, he would ask his mother about it.

Suddenly he turned to the Old Man. "Do you like New Orleans?" he said.

"Yes," the Old Man said, "I love New Orleans."

"Why?" asked Tommy, who was also fond of his home town.

The Old Man thought for a minute. "Many reasons," he said. "My waters are warm and wide here. Willow trees shade my shores, and magnolias blossom along my banks." He turned toward Tommy. "And people like you—thousands of people—keep me company. They stroll along the levee. They sit down for family picnics. They play football. They fish or ride my gentle waves. I like to have people around me."

"Do you like our Mardi Gras parades?" Tommy asked.

"I can't see them very well anymore," the Old Man said "There are so many buildings in the way now. Do people still dress up in colorful costumes and give away trinkets and dance in the French Quarter and march down Canal Street to Dixieland jazz?"

"They sure do," said Tommy. "I like to go in and out among the crowds and to catch doubloons from the big floats in the parades."

"Do people still gather in Jackson Square?" asked the Old Man.



“Yes,” Tommy said. “On Sundays, artists hang their paintings on the old iron fence around the square. And often young people sing near Andrew Jackson’s statue there.”

“Do you know who Andrew Jackson was?” asked the Old Man.

“Sure,” Tommy said. “He was a President of the United States.” His eyes brightened. “My name’s Jackson, too,” he said.

“I know,” said the Old Man. “Have a fish.”

“What?” said Tommy.

“Check your line. I think you’ve caught one.”

Tommy had completely forgotten about fishing. He sat up

suddenly, his eyes wide. The Old Man had disappeared. Tommy grabbed his fishing pole. The line was pulled tight.

“A big one!” he shouted. “Thanks, Old Man!”

But the river, calmly busy with boats, didn't say a word. It just kept rolling along.

