

# Jim Smily and His Jumping Frog

Mark Twain

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Selected by Charles William Eliot

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## Biographical Note

SAMUEL LANGHORNE CLEMENS, the son of a country merchant from Tennessee, was born at Florida Missouri, on November 30, 1835. His boyhood was spent in Hannibal, Missouri; but his father's death in 1847 cut short the boy's schooling and sent him out into the world at an early age. He learned type-setting, and in the pursuit of this craft he wandered as far east as New York. When he was seventeen he returned to the west and became a pilot on the Mississippi, an occupation he followed until traffic was interrupted by the war. Drifting farther west to Nevada, he saw something of mining and began to write for the newspapers, using as his pen name "Mark Twain," from a call used in recording soundings on the Mississippi. Finally reaching California, he made the acquaintance of Bret Harte, then in the San Francisco Mint, and told him the story of "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." It was the publication of this famous yarn that first brought him into notice; and a San Francisco newspaper enabled him to join a party which had chartered a steamer for a Mediterranean tour. His first book, "The Innocents Abroad," was made from the letters written on this trip, and it immediately achieved a wide popularity. Availing himself of the publicity thus won, he took to the lecture platform, where he delighted his audiences with his extraordinary talent for story-telling and his droll humor. After a short

period as editor of a Buffalo newspaper, he settled with his wife at Hartford, Connecticut, and devoted himself to writing. The chief publications of the next few years were “Roughing It” (1872); “The Gilded Age,” in which he collaborated with C. D. Warner and which was successfully dramatized; and “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” (1875), the first of his novels of the Mississippi Valley. A second trip to Europe produced “A Tramp Abroad” (1880), followed by “The Prince and the Pauper,” “Life on the Mississippi,” “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” (1884) a sequel to “Tom Sawyer;” “A Connecticut Yankee at the Court of King Arthur;” and “The American Claimant.”

Meantime he had become heavily interested in a New York publishing house, which went into bankruptcy about 1893. Like Sir Walter Scott in similar circumstances, he set himself to pay off his indebtedness, and by 1900 he was again clear. In the interval he had produced his third novel of the Mississippi Valley, “The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson” (1894) and a historical romance, “Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc.” He made a tour of the world, lecturing and collecting material for his “Following the Equator,” and arranged for a complete edition of his works, issued in 1899–1900.

Though he continued to write almost to the end, his most distinguished work was done, and during the last ten years of his life he reaped the reward he had richly earned. His books brought him in a large income, and he had become the “grand old man” of American letters. Oxford University gave him the degree of doctor of literature in 1907, and his reception in England was marked by great enthusiasm. He died at Redding, Connecticut, on April 21, 1910.

Mark Twain is most widely known as a humorist, and among American humorists it may fairly be claimed that he stands first. In his comic exaggeration and solemn, inextricable mingling of fact and absurdity he was carried to its highest point the type of humor most characteristic of this country. But he was much more than a humorist. He was a master of simple and effective narrative and of vivid description; and his novels of the Mississippi belong to that valuable class which have fixed for posterity a whole phase of life that has passed away. Moreover, underneath his comedy there lay depths of a somewhat melancholy wisdom, and a great capacity for righteous indignation. More and more America has come to recognize that her chief master of comedy was also a sage.

W. A. N.

## **Criticisms and Interpretations**

### **I. By T. Edgar Pemberton**

BRET HARTE has himself told the story of how while occupied with his secretarial duties at the San Francisco Mint—and his literary work religiously carried on outside mint hours—George Barnes, a brother journalist, introduced him to a young man whose appearance was decidedly interesting. “His head” he writes, “was striking. He had the curly hair, the aquiline nose, and even the aquiline eye—an eye so eagle-like that a second lid would not have surprised me—of an unusual and dominant nature. His eyebrows were very thick and bushy. His dress was careless, and his general manner one of supreme indifference to surroundings and circumstances. Barnes introduced him as Mr. Sam Clemens, and remarked that he had shown a very unusual talent in a number of newspaper articles contributed over the signature of ‘Mark Twain.’ We talked on different topics, and about a month afterwards Clemens dropped in upon me again. He had been away in the mining districts on some newspaper assignment in the meantime. In the course of conversation he remarked that the unearthly laziness that prevailed in the

town he had been visiting was beyond anything in his previous experience. He said the men did nothing all day long but sit around the bar-room stove, spit, and “swop lies.” He spoke in a slow, rather satirical drawl, which was in itself irresistible. He went on to tell one of those extravagant stories, and half unconsciously dropped into the lazy tone and manner of the original narrator. It was as graphic as it was delicious. I asked him to tell it again to a friend who came in, and then asked him to write it out for “The Californian.” He did so, and when published it was an emphatic success. It was the first work of his that attracted general attention, and it crossed the Sierras for an Eastern reading. The story was “The Jumping Frog of Calaveras.” It is known and laughed over, I suppose, wherever the English language is spoken; but it will never be as funny to anyone in print as it was to me, told for the first time by the unknown Twain himself on that morning in San Francisco Mint.—From “Bret Harte” (1900).

## Criticisms and Interpretations

### II. By Albert Bigelow Paine

IT is difficult to judge the Jumping Frog story to-day. It has the intrinsic fundamental value of one of Æsop’s Fables. [1](#) It contains a basic idea which is essentially ludicrous, and the quaint simplicity of its telling is convincing and full of charm. It appeared in print at a time when American humor was chaotic, the public taste unformed. We had a vast appreciation for what was comic, with no great number of opportunities for showing it. We were so ready to laugh that when a real opportunity came along we improved it and kept on laughing and repeating the cause of our merriment, directing the attention of our friends to it. Whether the story of “Jim Smily’s Frog,” offered for the first time to-day, would capture the public, and become the initial block of a towering fame, is another matter. That the author himself *under-rated* it is certain. That the public, receiving it at what we now term the psychological moment, may have *over-rated* it is by no means impossible. In any case, it does not matter now. The stone rejected by the builder was made the corner-stone of his literary edifice. As such it is immortal.—From “Mark Twain” (1912).

## Criticisms and Interpretations

### III. By Archibald Henderson

MARK TWAIN was a great humorist—more genial than grim, more good-humored than ironic, more given to imaginative exaggeration than to intellectual sophistication, more inclined to pathos than to melancholy. He was a great story-teller and fabulist; and he has enriched the literature of the world with a gallery of portraits so human in their likenesses as to rank them with the great figures of classic comedy and picaresque romance. He was a remarkable observer and faithful reporter, never allowing himself, in Ibsen’s phrase, to be “frightened by the venerableness of the institutions”; and his sublimated journalism reveals a mastery of the naïvely comic thoroughly human and democratic. He is the most eminent product of our American democracy, and, in profoundly shocking Great Britain by preferring Connecticut to Camelot, he exhibited that robustness of outlook, that buoyancy of spirit, and that faith in the contemporary which stamps America in perennial and inexhaustible youth. Throughout his long life, he has been a factor of high ethical influence in our civilization, and the philosopher and the humanitarian look out through the twinkling eyes of the humorist.—From “Mark Twain” (1900).

# Jim Smily and His Jumping Frog

MR. A. WARD, [2](#)

DEAR SIR:—

Well, I called on good-natured, garrulous old Simon Wheeler, and I inquired after your friend Leonidas W. Smily, as you requested me to do, and I hereunto append the result. If you can get any information out of it you are cordially welcome to it. I have a lurking suspicion that your Leonidas W. Smily is a myth—that you never knew such a personage, and that you only conjectured that if I asked old Wheeler about him it would remind him of his infamous Jim Smily, and he would go to work and bore me nearly to death with some infernal reminiscence of him as long and tedious as it should be useless to me. If that was your design, Mr. Ward, it will gratify you to know that it succeeded.

I found Simon Wheeler dozing comfortably by the barroom stove of the little old dilapidated tavern in the ancient mining camp of Boomerang, and I noticed that he was fat and bald-headed, and had an expression of winning gentleness and simplicity upon his tranquil countenance. He roused up and gave me good-day. I told him a friend of mine had commissioned me to make some inquiries about a cherished companion of his boyhood named Leonidas W. Smily—Rev. Leonidas W. Smily—a young minister of the gospel, who he had heard was at one time a resident of this village of Boomerang. I added that if Mr. Wheeler could tell me anything about this Rev. Leonidas W. Smily, I would feel under many obligations to him.

Simon Wheeler backed me into a corner and blockaded me there with his chair—and then sat down and reeled off the monotonous narrative which follows this paragraph. He never smiled, he never frowned, he never changed his voice from the quiet, gently-flowing key to which he turned the initial sentence, he never betrayed the slightest suspicion of enthusiasm—but all through the interminable narrative there ran a vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity, which showed me plainly that so far from his imagining that there was anything ridiculous or funny about his story, he regarded it as a really important matter, and admired its two heroes as men of transcendent genius in finesse. To me, the spectacle of a man drifting serenely along through such a queer yarn without ever smiling was exquisitely absurd. As I said before, I asked him to tell me what he knew of Rev. Leonidas W. Smily, and he replied as follows. I let him go on in his own way, and never interrupted him once:

There was a feller here once by the name of Jim Smily, in the winter of '49—or maybe it was the spring of '50—I don't recollect exactly, somehow, though what makes me think it was one or the other is because I remember the big flume wasn't finished when he first come to the camp; but anyway, he was the curiosest man about always betting on anything that turned up you ever see, if he could get anybody to bet on the other side, and if he couldn't he'd change sides—any way that suited the other man would suit him—any way just so's he got a bet, he was satisfied. But still, he was lucky—uncommon lucky; he most always come out winner. He was always ready and laying for a chance; there couldn't be no solitary thing mentioned but what that feller'd offer to bet on it—and take any side you please, as I was just telling you; if there was a horse race, you'd find him flush or you'd find him busted at the end of it; if there was a dog-fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a cat-fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a chicken-fight, he'd bet on it; why if there was two birds setting on a fence, he would bet you which one would fly first—or if there was a camp-meeting he would be there reglar to bet on parson Walker, which he judged to be the best exhorter about here, and so he was, too, and a good man; if he even see a straddle-bug start to go anywheres, he would bet you how long it would take him to get wherever he was going to, and if

you took him up he would foller that straddle-bug to Mexico but what he would find out where he was bound for and how long he was on the road. Lots of the boys here has seen that Smily and can tell you about him. Why, it never made no difference to him—he would bet on anything—the dangdest feller. Parson Walker’s wife laid very sick, once, for a good while, and it seemed as if they warn’t going to save her; but one morning he come in and Smily asked him how she was, and he said she was considerable better—thank the Lord for his infinite mercy—and coming on so smart that with the blessing of Providence she’d get well yet—and Smily, before he thought, says, “Well, I’ll resk two-and-a-half that she don’t, anyway.”

Thish-yer Smily had a mare—the boys called her the fifteen-minute nag, but that was only in fun, you know, because, of course, she was faster than that—and he use to win money on that horse, for all she was so slow and always had the asthma, or the distemper, or the consumption, or something of that kind. They use to give her two or three hundred yards’ start, and then pass her under way; but always at the fag-end of the race she’d get excited and desperate-like, and come cavorting and spraddling up, and scattering her legs around limber, sometimes in the air, and sometimes out to one side amongst the fences, and kicking up m-o-r-e dust, and raising m-o-r-e racket with her coughing and sneezing and blowing her nose—and always fetch up at the stand just about a neck ahead, as near as you could cipher it down.

And he had a little small bull-pup, that to look at him you’d think he warn’t worth a cent, but to set around and look onery, and lay for a chance to steal something. But as soon as money was up on him he was a different dog—his under-jaw’d begin to stick out like the for’castle of a steamboat, and his teeth would uncover, and shine savage like the furnaces. And a dog might tackle him, and bullyrag him, and bite him, and throw him over his shoulder two or three times, and Andrew Jackson—which was the name of the pup—Andrew Jackson would never let on but what he was satisfied, and hadn’t expected nothing else—and the bets being doubled and doubled on the other side all the time, till the money was all up—and then all of a sudden he would grab that other dog just by the joint of his hind legs and freeze to it—not chaw, you understand, but only just grip and hang on till they throwed up the sponge, if it was a year. Smily always came out winner on that pup till he harnessed a dog once that didn’t have no hind legs, because they’d been sawed off in a circular saw, and when the thing had gone along far enough, and the money was all up, and he came to make a snatch for his pet holt, he saw in a minute how he’d been imposed on, and how the other dog had him in the door, so to speak, and he ’peared surprised, and then he looked sorter discouraged like, and didn’t try no more to win the fight, and so he got shucked out bad. He gave Smily a look as much as to say his heart was broke, and it was his fault, for putting up a dog that hadn’t no hind legs for him to take holt of, which was his main dependence in a fight, and then he limped off a piece, and laid down and died. It was a good pup, was that Andrew Jackson, and would have made a name for hisself if he’d lived, for the stuff was in him, and he had genius—I know it, because he hadn’t no opportunities to speak of, and it don’t stand to reason that a dog could make such a fight as he could under them circumstances, if he hadn’t no talent. It always makes me feel sorry when I think of that last fight of his’n, and the way it turned out.

Well, thish-yer Smily had rat-terriers and chicken-cocks, and tom-cats, and all them kind of things, till you couldn’t rest, and you couldn’t fetch nothing for him to bet on but he’d match you. He ketched a frog one day and took him home and said he cal’lated to educate him; and so he never done nothing for three months but set in his back yard and learn that frog to jump. And you bet you he did learn him, too. He’d give him a little hunch behind, and the next minute you’d see that frog whirling in the air like a doughnut—see him turn one summerset, or maybe a couple, if he got a good start, and come down

flat-footed and all right, like a cat. He got him up so in the matter of ketching flies, and kept him in practice so constant, that he'd nail a fly every time as far as he could see him. Smily said all a frog wanted was education, and he could do most anything—and I believe him. Why, I've seen him set Dan'l Webster down here on this floor—Dan'l Webster was the name of the frog—and sing out, "Flies! Dan'l, flies," and quicker'n you could wink, he'd spring straight up, and snake a fly off'n the counter there, and flop down on the floor again as solid as a gob of mud, and fall to scratching the side of his head with his hind foot as indifferent as if he hadn't no idea he'd done any more'n any frog might do. You never see a frog so modest and straightfor'ard as he was, for all he was so gifted. And when it come to fair-and-square jumping on a dead level, he could get over more ground at one straddle than any animal of his breed you ever see. Jumping on a dead level was his strong suit, you understand, and when it come to that, Smily would ante up money on him as long as he had a red. Smily was monstrous proud of his frog, and well he might be, for fellers that had travelled and been everywheres all said he laid over any frog that ever they see.

Well, Smily kept the beast in a little lattice box, and he used to fetch him down town sometimes and lay for a bet. One day a feller—a stranger in the camp, he was—come across him with his box, and says:

"What might it be that you've got in the box?"

And Smily says, sorter indifferent like, "It might be a parrot, or it might be a canary, maybe, but it ain't—it's only just a frog."

And the feller took it, and looked at it careful, and turned it round this way and that, and says, "H'm—so 'tis. Well, what's he good for?"

"Well," Smily says, easy and careless, "He's good enough for one thing I should judge—he can out-jump ary frog in Calaveras county."

The feller took the box again, and took another long, particular look, and give it back to Smily and says very deliberate, "Well—I don't see no points about that frog that's any better'n any other frog."

"Maybe you don't," Smily says. "Maybe you understand frogs, and maybe you don't understand 'em; maybe you've had experience, and maybe you ain't only a amature, as it were. Anyways, I've got my opinion, and I'll resk forty dollars that he can outjump ary frog in Calaveras county."

And the feller studied a minute, and then says, kinder sad like, "Well—I'm only a stranger here, and I ain't got no frog—but if I had a frog I'd bet you."

And then Smily says, "That's all right—that's all right—if you'll hold my box a minute I'll go and get you a frog;" and so the feller took the box, and put up his forty dollars along with Smily's, and set down to wait.

So he set there a good while thinking and thinking to hisself, and then he got the frog out and prized his mouth open and took a teaspoon and filled him full of quail-shot—filled him pretty near up to his chin—and set him on the floor. Smily he went out to the swamp and slopped around in the mud for a long time, and finally he ketched a frog and fetched him in and give him to this feller and says:

"Now if you're ready, set him alongside of Dan'l, with his fore-paws just even with Dan'l's, and I'll give the word." Then he says, "one—two—three—jump!" and him and the feller touched up the frogs from behind, and the new frog hopped off lively, but Dan'l give a heave, and hysted up his

shoulders—so—like a Frenchman, but it wasn't no use—he couldn't budge; he was planted as solid as an anvil, and he couldn't no more stir than if he was anchored out. Smily was a good deal surprised, and he was disgusted too, but he didn't have no idea what the matter was, of course.

The feller took the money and started away, and when he was going out at the door he sorter jerked his thumb over his shoulder—this way—at Dan'l, and says again, very deliberate, “Well—I don't see no points about that frog that's any better'n any other frog.”

Smily he stood scratching his head and looking down at Dan'l a long time, and at last he says, “I do wonder what in the nation that frog throwed off for—I wonder if there ain't something the matter with him—her 'pears to look mighty baggy, somehow—and he ketched Dan'l by the nap of the neck, and lifted him up and says, “Why blame my cats if he don't weigh five pound”—and turned him upside down, and he belched out about a double-handful of shot. And then he see how it was, and he was the maddest man—he set the frog down and took out after that feller, but he never ketched him. And—

[Here Simon Wheeler heard his name called from the front-yard, and got up to go and see what was wanted.] And turning to me as he moved away, he said: “Just sit where you are, stranger, and rest easy—I ain't going to be gone a second.”

But by your leave, I did not think that a continuation of the history of the enterprising vagabond Jim Smily would be likely to afford me much information concerning the Rev. Leonidas W. Smily, and so I started away.

At the door I met the sociable Wheeler returning, and he button-holed me and recommenced:

“Well, thish-yer Smily had a yaller one-eyed cow that didn't have no tail, only just a short stump like a bannanner, and—”

“O, curse Smily and his afflicted cow!” I muttered, good-naturedly, and bidding the old gentleman good-day, I departed.

Yours, truly,

MARK TWAIN.

## Footnotes

**Note 1.** The resemblance of the frog story to the early Greek tales must have been noted by Prof. Henry Sidgwick, who synopsised it in Greek form and phrase for his book, *Greek Prose Composition*. Through this originated the impression that the story was of Athenian root. Mark Twain himself was deceived, until in 1899, when he met Professor Sidgwick, who explained that the *Greek* version was the translation and Mark Twain's the original; that he had thought it unnecessary to give credit for a story so well known. See *The Jumping Frog*, Harper & Bros., 1903, p. 64. [[back](#)]

**Note 2.** From the New York “Saturday Press,” November 18, 1865. [[back](#)]

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