In this memoir, Mark Twain recalls the two years he spent in apprenticeship for steamboat pilots. An apprentice is someone who works for a master craftsman in exchange for training. Twain credits these years for his ability to understand different types of people, whether real or fictional.

The figure that comes before me oftenest, out of the shadows of that vanished time, is that of Brown, of the steamer Pennsylvania. He was a middle-aged, long, slim, bony, smooth-shaven, horse-faced, ignorant, stingy, malicious, snarling, fault-hunting, mote magnifying tyrant.1 I early got the habit of coming on watch with dread at my heart.

Twain says that whenever he had to work under Brown, a steamboat pilot, he feared going on duty. He recalls that he first met Brown on a trip out of St. Louis. Brown was on duty, so Twain waited for Brown to acknowledge him. When he finally did, Brown inspected him closely and then asked many questions, which Twain answered politely. Brown asked him, “What’s your name?”

I told him. He repeated it after me. It was probably the only thing he ever forgot; for although I was with him many months he never addressed himself to me in any other way than “Here!” and then his command followed.

In a rude manner, Brown continues to ask Twain questions about his life and his training.

It must have been all of fifteen minutes—fifteen minutes of dull homesick silence—before that long horse-face swung round upon me again—and then what a change! It was as red as fire, and every muscle in it was working. Now came this shriek: “Here! You going to set there all day?”

Twain scrambles to figure out what his duties are, looking for orders from Brown. In return, Brown is rude and mean to him. Brown finds fault in everything Twain does. He cannot be pleased no matter how hard the cub pilot works. Brown even scolds him for having manners.

“Fill up the stove.”

I proceeded to do so. He watched me like a cat. Presently he shouted: “Put down that shovel! Derndest numskull I ever saw—ain’t even got sense enough to load up a stove.”

1. mote magnifying tyrant cruel authority figure who exaggerates every tiny fault.
All through the watch this sort of thing went on. Yes, and the subsequent watches were much like it during a stretch of months. As I have said, I soon got the habit of coming on duty with dread. The moment I was in the presence, even in the darkest night, I could feel those yellow eyes upon me, and knew their owner was watching for a pretext to spit out some venom on me.

The other pilot of the Pennsylvania, George Ealer, was very kind. His cub, George Ritchie, had worked under Brown the year before and was more comfortable in his job than Twain was. Ritchie would tease Twain by pretending to be Brown, giving out orders and yelling insults at him. This made any shift Twain worked (even when he wasn’t with Brown) an unpleasant one.

I often wanted to kill Brown, but this would not answer. A cub had to take everything his boss gave, in the way of vigorous comment and criticism; and we all believed that there was a United States law making it a penitentiary offense to strike or threaten a pilot who was on duty.

However, I could imagine myself killing Brown; there was no law against that; and that was the thing I used always to do the moment I was abed. Instead of going over my river in my mind, as was my duty, I threw business aside for pleasure, and killed Brown. I killed Brown every night for months; not in old, stale, commonplace ways, but in new and picturesque ones—ways that were sometimes surprising for freshness of design and ghastliness of situation and environment.

Brown continues to find fault with everything Twain does, even if he has to make up a reason to be dissatisfied. Every word he says to Twain is posed as an insult. One day, Brown tells Twain to steer the ship a certain way. The cub is sure it's a trap and that he's going to get caught in it.

This was simply bound to be a success; nothing could prevent it; for he had never allowed me to round the boat to before; consequently, no matter how I might do the thing, he could find free fault with it.

Watched by Brown, Twain is nervous and makes mistake after mistake while steering, but he quickly makes corrections. At one point, he becomes so confused that Brown has to take the wheel back from Twain. He pushes the cub out of the way and screams insults at him.

In the course of this speech he called me all the different kinds of hard names he could think of, and once or twice I thought he was even going to swear—but he had never done that, and he didn’t this time. “Dod dern” was the nearest he ventured to the luxury of swearing.

A few trips later, Twain is on duty with Brown. Twain's younger brother, Henry, comes on deck to give Brown an order from the captain to stop at a landing a mile ahead. Brown is nearly deaf but would never admit it. He doesn’t hear the captain’s order, but Twain does. As it’s never wise to get on Brown’s bad side, Twain keeps the information to himself.

When they miss the port that Brown was supposed to steer the steamboat to, Captain Klinefelter comes on deck to find out what happened. He questions Brown, who claims...
that Henry never gave any orders to him. When the captain questions Twain, Twain admits that he heard the order. Brown accuses both him and Henry of lying.

Brown glared at me in unaffected surprise; and for as much as a moment he was entirely speechless; then he shouted to me: “I’ll attend to your case in a half a minute!” then to Henry, “And you leave the pilothouse; out with you!”

It was pilot law, and must be obeyed. The boy started out, and even had his foot on the upper step outside the door, when Brown, with a sudden access of fury, picked up a ten-pound lump of coal and sprang after him; but I was between, with a heavy stool, and I hit Brown a good blow which stretched him out.

I had committed the crime of crimes—I had lifted my hand against a pilot on duty! I supposed I was booked for the penitentiary sure, and couldn’t be booked any surer if I went on and squared my long account with this person while I had the chance; consequently I stuck to him and pounded him with my fists a considerable time.

While Twain was beating Brown, no one was at the wheel of the steamboat. Luckily, the boat doesn’t hit anything. When Brown regains his footing, he orders Twain out of the pilothouse. The cub tries to find someplace to hide until the boat lands so that he can slip off and perhaps avoid being punished for his crime. Before he can hide though, the captain finds him and calls him into his parlor.

When speaking with the captain, Twain acknowledges that he put the crew and passengers in serious danger by knocking the pilot away from the wheel. The captain questions him about the fight, and Twain answers truthfully. He admits that he not only hit the pilot first with a stool, but he hit him hard and then continued to beat Brown with his fists. The captain’s reaction is surprising.

“I’m deuced glad of it! Hark ye, never mention that I said that. You have been guilty of a great crime; and don’t you ever be guilty of it again, on this boat. But—lay for him ashore! Give him a good sound thrashing, do you hear? I’ll pay the expenses. Now go—and mind you, not a word of this to anybody. Clear out with you!

Later, Brown threatens the captain, saying that he refuses to work on the same ship as Twain. The captain fires Brown, excusing him from the ship. Twain is relieved and happy by the captain’s response.

During the brief remainder of the trip I knew how an emancipated slave feels, for I was an emancipated slave myself.