



C H A P T E R 9

IN 1849, WHEN I WAS FOURTEEN YEARS OLD, WE WERE STILL LIVING in Hannibal, on the banks of the Mississippi, in the new frame house built by my father five years before. That is, some of us lived in the new part, the rest in the old part back of it and attached to it.

In the autumn my sister gave a party and invited all the marriageable people of the village. I was too young for this society and too retiring to mix with young ladies, anyway, therefore I was not invited—at least not for the whole evening. Ten minutes of it was to be my whole share. I was to do the part of a bear in a small fairy play. I was to wear a close-fitting suit of brown hairy stuff suitable for a bear. About half past ten I was told to go to my room and put on this suit. I started but changed my mind, for I wanted to practice a little and the room was very small. I crossed over to a large unoccupied house on the corner of Main Street, not knowing that a dozen of the young people were also going there to dress for their parts.

I took my friend Sandy with me and we selected a large, roomy and empty chamber on the second floor. We entered it talking, and that gave a couple of half-dressed ladies an opportunity to hide behind a screen. Their gowns and things were hanging on hooks behind the door but I did not see them.

There was an old screen across the room, with many holes in it, but as I did not know there were girls behind it I was not disturbed by that detail. If I had known, I could not have undressed in the flood of cruel moonlight that was pouring in at the curtainless windows; I should have died of shame. Untroubled by this, I was naked to the skin and I began my practice. I was full of ambition. I was determined to succeed. I was burning to establish a reputation as a bear and get further engagements; so I threw myself into my work with an abandon that promised great things. I went back and forth from one room to the other on all fours, Sandy cheering; I walked upright and made the noises I thought a bear should make. I stood on my head; I danced from side to side; I did everything a bear could do and many things which no bear could ever do and no bear with any dignity would want to do, anyway, and of course I never suspected that I was making a spectacle of myself to anyone but Sandy. At last, standing on my head, I paused in that attitude to take a minute's rest.

All of a sudden there was a burst of girlish laughter from behind the screen. All the strength went out of me and brought the screen right down with my weight, burying the young ladies under it. In their fright they discharged a couple of loud screams. I picked up my clothes and ran, Sandy following. I was dressed in half a minute and out the back way. I made Sandy promise to be silent and then we went and hid until the party was over.

The house was very still and everybody asleep when I finally dared go home. I was very heavy-hearted and full of a bitter sense of my crime. Pinned to my pillow I found a slip of paper which bore a line which read: "You probably couldn't have played bear but you played bare very well—oh, very *very* well!" [Editor's note: bare, meaning naked, and bear, meaning the animal, are pronounced so that they sound the same, and this is a play on words.]

But a boy's life is not all fun; much of the tragic enters into it. The drunken wanderer who was burned up in the village prison lay upon my conscience a hundred nights afterward and filled them with ugly dreams—dreams in which I saw his appealing face as I had seen it in the

sad reality, pressed against the window bars, with the red hell glowing behind him—a face which seemed to say to me, “If you had not given me the matches this would not have happened; you are responsible for my death.” I was *not* responsible, for I had meant him no harm but only good when I let him have the matches. The tramp—who was guilty—suffered ten minutes; I, who was not to blame, suffered three months.

All within the space of a couple of years we had two or three other tragedies and I had the ill luck to be too near by on each occasion. My teaching and training enabled me to see deeper into these tragedies than an uneducated person could have done. But as a rule they could not stand the daylight. They faded out and disappeared in the glad sunshine. They were the creatures of fear and darkness. The day gave me cheer and peace and at night I was sorry all over again. In all my boyhood life I am not sure that I ever tried to lead a better life in the daytime—or wanted to. In my age I should never think of wishing to do such a thing. But in my age, as in my youth, night brings me a deep sorrow for my deeds. I realize that from babyhood up I have been like the rest of the race—never quite right in the mind at night.