

An Encounter with an Interviewer

Mark Twain

1874

The nervous, dapper, “pearl” young man took the chair I offered him, and said he was connected with the Daily Thunderstorm, and added,—

“Hoping it’s no harm, I’ve come to interview you.”

“Come to what?”

“Interview you.”

“Ah! I see. Yes, —yes. Um! Yes, —yes.”

I was not feeling bright that morning. Indeed, my powers seemed a bit under a cloud. However, I went to the bookcase, and when I had been looking six or seven minutes, I found I was obliged to refer to the young man. I said, —

“How do you spell it?”

“Spell what?”

“Interview.”

“O my goodness! What do you want to spell it for?”

“I don’t want to spell it; I want to see what it means.”

“Well, this is astonishing, I must say. I can tell you what it means, if you—if you—”

“O, all right! That will answer, and much obliged to you, too.”

“I n, in, t e r, ter, inter—”

“Then you spell it with an I?”

“Why, certainly!”

“O, that is what took me so long.”

“Why, my dear sir, what did you propose to spell it with?”

“Well, I—I—I hardly know. I had the Unabridged, and I was ciphering around in the back end, hoping I might tree her among the pictures. But it’s a very old edition.”

“Why, my friend, they wouldn’t have a picture of it in even the latest e— My dear sir, I beg your pardon, I mean no harm in the world, but you do not look as— as—intelligent as I had expected you would. No harm, —I mean no harm at all.”

“O, don’t mention it! It has often been said, and by people who would not flatter and who could have no inducement to flatter, that I am quite remarkable in that way. Yes, —yes; they always speak of it with rapture.”

“I can easily imagine it. But about this interview. You know it is the custom, now, to interview any man who has become notorious.”

“Indeed! I had not heard of it before. It must be very interesting. What do you do it with?”

“Ah, well, —well, —well, —this is disheartening. It ought to be done with a club in some cases; but customarily it consists in the interviewer asking questions and the interviewed answering them. It is all the rage now. Will you let me ask you certain questions calculated to bring out the salient points of your public and private history?”

“O, with pleasure, —with pleasure. I have a very bad memory, but I hope you will not mind that. That is to say, it is an irregular memory, —singularly irregular. Sometimes it goes in a gallop, and then again it will be as much as a fortnight passing a given point. This is a great grief to me.”

“O, it is no matter, so you will try to do the best you can.”

“I will. I will put my whole mind on it.”

“Thanks. Are you ready to begin?”

“Ready.”

Q. How old are you?

A. Nineteen, in June.

Q. Indeed! I would have taken you to be thirty-five or six. Where were you born?

A. In Missouri.

Q. When did you begin to write?

A. In 1836.

Q. Why, how could that be, if you are only nineteen now?

A. I don’t know. It does seem curious somehow.

Q. It does, indeed. Who do you consider the most remarkable man you ever met?

A. Aaron Burr.

Q. But you never could have met Aaron Burr, if you are only nineteen years—

A. Now, if you know more about me than I do, what do you ask me for?

Q. Well, it was only a suggestion; nothing more. How did you happen to meet Burr?

A. Well, I happened to be at his funeral one day, and he asked me to make less noise, and—

Q. But, good heavens! If you were at his funeral, he must have been dead; and if he was dead, how could he care whether you made a noise or not?

94 A. I don't know. He was always a particular kind of
95 a man that way.
96 Q. Still, I don't understand it at all. You say he
97 spoke to you and that he was dead.
98 A. I didn't say he was dead.
99 Q. But wasn't he dead?
100 A. Well, some said he was, some said he wasn't.
101 Q. What do you think?
102 A. O, it was none of my business! It wasn't any of
103 my funeral.
104 Q. Did you—However, we can never get this
105 matter straight. Let me ask about something else. What
106 was the date of your birth?
107 A. Monday, October 31, 1693.
108 Q. What! Impossible! That would make you a
109 hundred and eighty years old. How do you account for
110 that?
111 A. I don't account for it at all.
112 Q. But you said at first you were only nineteen,
113 and now you make yourself out to be one hundred and
114 eighty. It is an awful discrepancy.
115 A. Why, have you noticed that? (Shaking hands.)
116 Many a time it has seemed to me like a discrepancy,
117 but somehow I couldn't make up my mind. How quick
118 you notice a thing!
119 Q. Thank you for the compliment, as far as it goes.
120 Had you, or have you, any brothers or sisters?
121 A. Eh! I—I—I think so, —yes, —but I don't
122 remember.
123 Q. Well, that is the most extraordinary statement I
124 ever heard!
125 A. Why, what makes you think that?
126 Q. How could I think otherwise? Why, look here!
127 who is this a picture of on the wall? Isn't that a brother
128 of yours?
129 A. Oh! yes, yes, yes! Now you remind me of it,
130 that was a brother of mine. That's William, —Bill we
131 called him. Poor old Bill!
132 Q. Why? Is he dead, then?
133 A. Ah, well, I suppose so. We never could tell.
134 There was a great mystery about it.
135 Q. That is sad, very sad. He disappeared, then?
136 A. Well, yes, in a sort of general way. We buried
137 him.
138 Q. Buried him! Buried him without knowing
139 whether he was dead or not?
140 A. O no! Not that. He was dead enough.

141 Q. Well, I confess that I can't understand this. If
142 you buried him and you knew he was dead—
143 A. No! no! we only thought he was.
144 Q. O, I see! He came to life again?
145 A. I bet he didn't.
146 Q. Well, I never heard anything like this.
147 Somebody was dead. Somebody was buried. Now,
148 where was the mystery?
149 A. Ah, that's just it! That's it exactly. You see we
150 were twins, —defunct and I, —and we got mixed in
151 the bath-tub when we were only two weeks old, and
152 one of us was drowned. But we didn't know which.
153 Some think it was Bill, some think it was me.
154 Q. Well, that is remarkable. What do you think?
155 A. Goodness knows! I would give whole worlds to
156 know. This solemn, this awful mystery has cast a
157 gloom over my whole life. But I will tell you a secret
158 now, which I never have revealed to any creature
159 before. One of us had a peculiar mark, a large mole on
160 the back of the left hand, —that was me. That child
161 was the one that was drowned.
162 Q. Very well, then, I don't see that there is any
163 mystery about it, after all.
164 A. You don't? Well, I do. Anyway I don't see how
165 they could ever have been such a blundering lot as to
166 go and bury the wrong child. But, 'sh!—don't mention
167 it where the family can hear of it. Heaven knows they
168 have heart-breaking troubles enough without adding
169 this.
170 Q. Well, I believe I have got material enough for
171 the present, and I am very much obliged to you for the
172 pains you have taken. But I was a good deal interested
173 in that account of Aaron Burr's funeral. Would you
174 mind telling me what particular circumstance it was
175 that made you think Burr was such a remarkable man?
176 A. O, it was a mere trifle! Not one man in fifty
177 would have noticed it at all. When the sermon was
178 over, and the procession all ready to start for the
179 cemetery, and the body all arranged nice in the hearse,
180 he said he wanted to take a last look at the scenery, and
181 so he got up and rode with the driver.
182 Then the young man reverently withdrew. He was
183 very pleasant company, and I was sorry to see him go.
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