

Colonel Sherburn and the Cowards
(from Huckleberry Finn, Chapters 21 and 22, by Mark Twain)

It was after sun-up now, but we went right on and didn't tie up. The king and the duke turned out by and by looking pretty rusty; but after they'd jumped overboard and took a swim it chippered them up a good deal.

After breakfast the king he took a seat on the corner of the raft, and pulled off his boots and rolled up his britches, and let his legs dangle in the water, so as to be comfortable, and lit his pipe, and went to getting his Romeo and Juliet by heart.

When he had got it pretty good him and the duke begun to practice it together.

The duke had to learn him over and over again how to say every speech; and he made him sigh, and put his hand on his heart, and after a while he said he done it pretty well; "only," he says, "you mustn't bellow out Romeo! that way, like a bull -- you must say it soft and sick and languishy, so -- R-o-o-meo! that is the idea; for Juliet's a dear sweet mere child of a girl, you know, and she doesn't bray like a jackass."

Well, next they got out a couple of long swords that the duke made out of oak laths, and begun to practice the sword fight -- the duke called himself Richard III.; and the way they laid on and pranced around the raft was grand to see.

But by and by the king tripped and fell overboard, and after that they took a rest, and had a talk about all kinds of adventures they'd had in other times along the river.

The first chance we got the duke he had some showbills printed; and after that, for two or three days as we floated along, the raft was a most uncommon lively place, for there warn't nothing but sword fighting and rehearsing -- as the duke called it -- going on all the time.

One morning, when we was pretty well down the State of Arkansaw, we come in sight of a little one-horse town in a big bend; so we tied up about three-quarters of a mile above it, in the mouth of a crick which was shut in like a tunnel by the cyress trees, and all of us but Jim took the canoe and went down there to see if there was any chance in that place for our show.

We struck it mighty lucky; there was going to be a circus there that afternoon, and the country people was already beginning to come in, in all kinds of old shackly wagons, and on horses. The circus would leave before night, so our show would have a pretty good chance. The duke he hired the courthouse, and we went around and stuck up our bills.

Then we went loafing around town.

The stores and houses was most all old, shackly, dried up frame concerns that hadn't ever been painted; they was set up three or four foot above ground on stilts, so as to be out of reach of the water when the river was overflowed.

The houses had little gardens around them, but they didn't seem to raise hardly anything in them but jimpson-weeds, and sunflowers, and ash piles, and old curled-up boots and shoes, and pieces of bottles, and rags, and played-out tinware. The fences was made of different kinds of boards, nailed on at different times; and they leaned every which way, and had gates that didn't generly have but one hinge -- a leather one. Some of the fences had been whitewashed some time or another, but the duke said it was in Clumbus' time, like enough. There was generly hogs in the garden, and people driving them out.

All the stores was along one street. They had white domestic awnings in front, and the country people hitched their horses to the awning-posts.

There was empty drygoods boxes under the awnings, and loafers roosting on them all day long, whittling them with their Barlow knives; and chawing tobacco, and gaping and yawning and stretching -- a mighty ornery lot.

They generly had on yellow straw hats most as wide as an umbrella, but didn't wear no coats nor waistcoats, they called one another Bill, and Buck, and Hank, and Joe, and Andy, and talked lazy and drawly, and used considerable many cuss words.

There was as many as one loafer leaning up against every awning-post, and he most always had his hands in his britches-pockets, except when he fetched them out to lend a chaw of tobacco or scratch.

What a body was hearing amongst them all the time was:

"Gimme a chaw 'v tobacker, Hank "

"Cain't; I hain't got but one chaw left. Ask Bill."

Maybe Bill he gives him a chaw; maybe he lies and says he ain't got none. Some of them kinds of loafers never has a cent in the world, nor a chaw of tobacco of their own.

They get all their chawing by borrowing; they say to a fellow, "I wisht you'd len' me a chaw, Jack, I jist this minute give Ben Thompson the last chaw I had" -- which is a lie pretty much everytime; it don't fool nobody but a stranger; but Jack ain't no stranger, so he says:

"You give him a chaw, did you? So did your sister's cat's grandmother. You pay me back the chaws you've awready borry'd off'n me, Lafe Buckner, then I'll loan you one or two ton of it, and won't charge you no back intrust, nuther."

"Well, I did pay you back some of it wunst."

"Yes, you did -- 'bout six chaws. You borry'd store tobacker and paid back nigger-head."

Store tobacco is flat black plug, but these fellows mostly chaws the natural leaf twisted.

When they borrow a chaw they don't generly cut it off with a knife, but set the plug in between their teeth, and gnaw with their teeth and tug at the plug with their hands till they get it in two; then sometimes the one that owns the tobacco looks mournful at it when it's handed back, and says, sarcastic: "Here, gimme the chaw, and you take the plug."

All the streets and lanes was just mud; they warn't nothing else but mud -- mud as black as tar and nigh about a foot deep in some places, and two or three inches deep in all the places.

The hogs loafed and grunted around everywheres. You'd see a muddy sow and a litter of pigs come lazing along the street and whollop herself right down in the way, where folks had to walk around her, and she'd stretch out and shut her eyes and wave her ears whilst the pigs was milking her, and look as happy as if she was on salary.

And pretty soon you'd hear a loafer sing out, "Hi! so boy! sick him, Tige!" and away the sow would go, squealing most horrible, with a dog or two swinging to each ear, and three or four dozen more a-coming; and then you would see all the loafers get up and watch the thing out of sight, and laugh at the fun and look grateful for the noise.

Then they'd settle back again till there was a dog fight. There couldn't anything wake them up all over, and make them happy all over, like a dog fight -- unless it might be putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tin pan to his tail and see him run himself to death.

On the river front some of the houses was sticking out over the bank, and they was bowed and bent, and about ready to tumble in, The people had moved out of them.

The bank was caved away under one corner of some others, and that corner was hanging over.

People lived in them yet, but it was dangersome, because sometimes a strip of land as wide as a house caves in at a time.

Sometimes a belt of land a quarter of a mile deep will start in and cave along and cave along till it all caves into the river in one summer.

Such a town as that has to be always moving back, and back, and back, because the river's always gnawing at it.

The nearer it got to noon that day the thicker and thicker was the wagons and horses in the streets, and more coming all the time.

Families fetched their dinners with them from the country, and eat them in the wagons.

There was considerable whisky drinking going on, and I seen three fights.

By and by somebody sings out: "Here comes old Boggs! -- in from the country for his little old monthly drunk; here he comes, boys!"

Boggs comes a-tearing along on his horse, whooping and yelling like an Injun, and singing out: "Cler the track, thar. I'm on the waw-path, and the price uv coffins is a-gwyne to raise."

He was drunk, and weaving about in his saddle; he was over fifty year old, and had a very red face.

Everybody yelled at him and laughed at him and sassed him, and he sassed back, and said he'd attend to them and lay them out in their regular turns, but he couldn't wait now because he'd come to town to kill old Colonel Sherburn, and his motto was, "Meat first, and spoon vittles to top off on."

He see me, and rode up and says: "Whar'd you come f'm, boy? You prepared to die?"

Then he rode on.

I was scared, but a man says: "He don't mean nothing; he's always a-carryin' on like that when he's drunk. He's the best naturedest old fool in Arkansaw -- never hurt nobody, drunk nor sober."

Boggs rode up before the biggest store in town, and bent his head down so he could see under the curtain of the awning and yells: "Come out here, Sherburn! Come out and meet the man you've swindled. You're the houn' I'm after, and I'm a-gwyne to have you, too!"

And so he went on, calling Sherburn everything he could lay his tongue to, and the whole street packed with people listening and laughing and going on.

By and by a proud-looking man about fifty-five -- and he was a heap the best dressed man in that town, too -- steps out of the store, and the crowd drops back on each side to let him come.

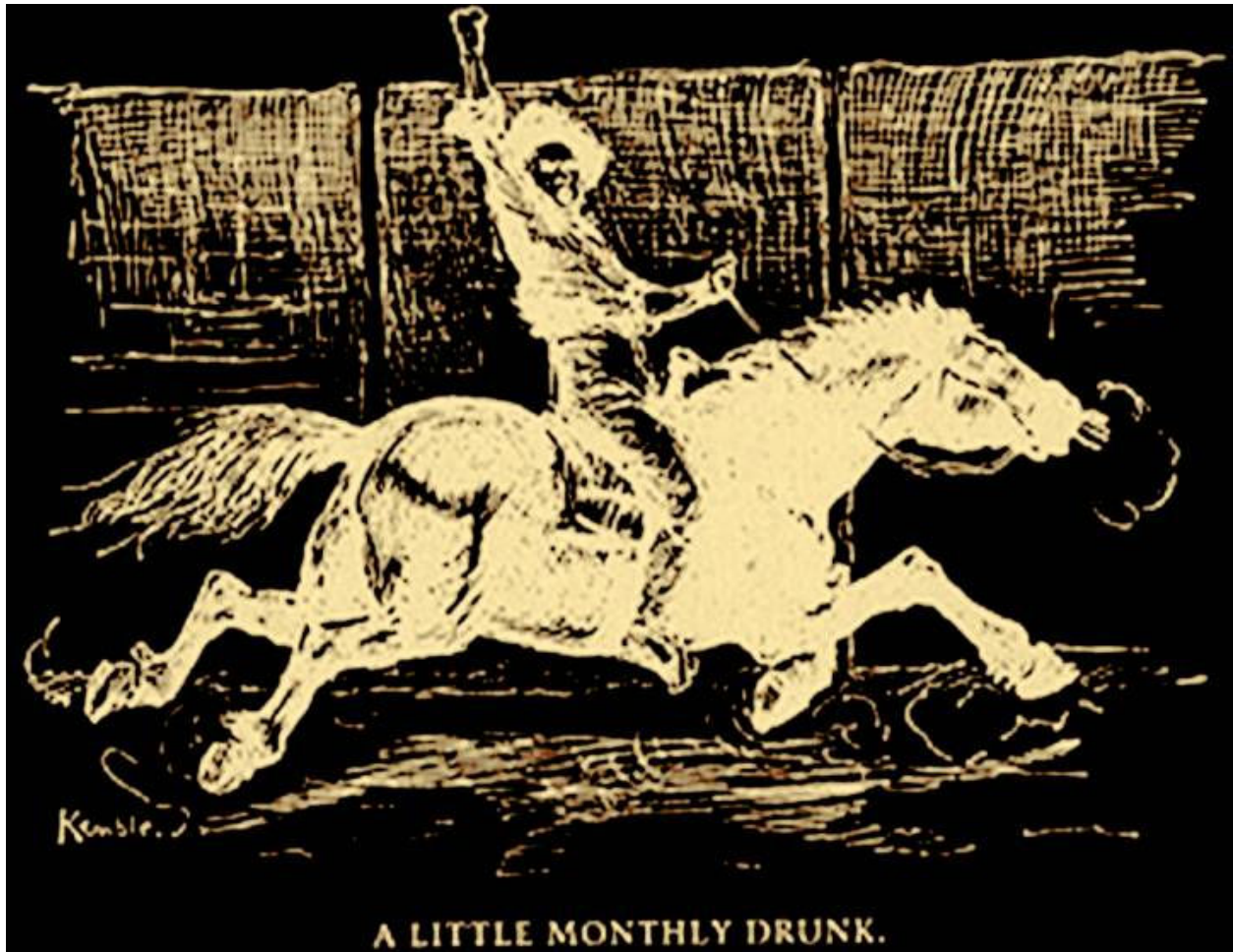
He says to Boggs, mighty ca'm and slow -- he says: "I'm tired of this, but I'll endure it till one o'clock. Till one o'clock, mind -- no longer. If you open your mouth against me only once after that time you can't travel so far but I will find you."

Then he turns and goes in. The crowd looked mighty sober; nobody stirred, and there warn't no more laughing.

Boggs rode off blackguarding Sherburn as loud as he could yell, all down the street; and pretty soon back he comes and stops before the store, still keeping it up.

Some men crowded around him and tried to get him to shut up, but he wouldn't; they told him it would be one o'clock in about fifteen minutes, and so he must go home -- he must go right away.

But it didn't do no good.



Kemble, Edward Winsor (1861–1933) (artist)
Boggs: A Little Monthly Drunk
In Twain, Mark (author and US publisher)
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
London (England): Chatto & Windus (1884)
New York (NY): Charles L. Webster and Company (1885)

He cussed away with all his might, and threw his hat down in the mud and rode over it, and pretty soon away he went a-raging down the street again, with his gray hair a-flying.

Everybody that could get a chance at him tried their best to coax him off of his horse so they could lock him up and get him sober; but it warn't no use -- up the street he would tear again, and give Sherburn another cussing.

By and by somebody says: "Go for his daughter! -- quick, go for his daughter; sometimes he'll listen to her. If anybody can persuade him, she can."

So somebody started on a run.

I walked down street a ways and stopped.

In about five or ten minutes here comes Boggs again, but not on his horse.

He was a-reeling across the street towards me, bareheaded, with a friend on both sides of him a-holt of his arms and hurrying him along.

He was quiet, and looked uneasy; and he warn't hanging back any, but was doing some of the hurrying himself.

Somebody sings out: "Boggs!"

I looked over there to see who said it, and it was that Colonel Sherburn.

He was standing perfectly still in the street, and had a pistol raised in his right hand -- not aiming it, but holding it out with the barrel tilted up towards the sky.

The same second I see a young girl coming on the run, and two men with her.

Boggs and the men turned round to see who called him, and when they see the pistol the men jumped to one side, and the pistol-barrel come down slow and steady to a level -- both barrels cocked.

Boggs throws up both of his hands and says, "O Lord, don't shoot!"

Bang! goes the first shot, and he staggers back, clawing at the air -- bang! goes the second one, and he tumbles backwards on to the ground, heavy and solid, with his arms spread out.

That young girl screamed out and comes rushing, and down she throws herself on her father, crying, and saying, "Oh, he's killed him, he's killed him!"

The crowd closed up around them, and shouldered and jammed one another, with their necks stretched, trying to see, and people on the inside trying to shove them back and shouting, "Back, back! give him air, give him air!"

Colonel Sherburn he tossed his pistol on to the ground, and turned around on his heels and walked off.

They took Boggs to a little drug store, the crowd pressing around just the same, and the whole town following, and I rushed and got a good place at the window, where I was close to him and could see in.

They laid him on the floor and put one large Bible under his head, and opened another one and spread it on his breast; but they tore open his shirt first, and I seen where one of the bullets went in.

He made about a dozen long gasps, his breast lifting the Bible up when he drawed in his breath, and letting it down again when he breathed it out -- and after that he laid still; he was dead.

Then they pulled his daughter away from him, screaming and crying, and took her off.

She was about sixteen, and very sweet and gentle looking, but awful pale and scared.

Well, pretty soon the whole town was there, squirming and scrounging and pushing and shoving to get at the window and have a look, but people that had the places wouldn't give them up, and folks behind them was saying all the time, "Say, now, you've looked enough, you fellows; 'tain't right and 'tain't fair for you to stay thar all the time, and never give nobody a chance; other folks has their rights as well as you."

There was considerable jawing back, so I slid out, thinking maybe there was going to be trouble.

The streets was full, and everybody was excited. Everybody that seen the shooting was telling how it happened, and there was a big crowd packed around each one of these fellows, stretching their necks and listening.

One long, lanky man, with long hair and a big white fur stovepipe hat on the back of his head, and a crooked-handled cane, marked out the places on the ground where Boggs stood and where Sherburn stood, and the people following him around from one place to t'other and watching everything he done, and bobbing their heads to show they understood, and stooping a little and resting their hands on their thighs to watch him mark the places on the ground with his cane; and then he stood up straight and stiff where Sherburn had stood, frowning and having his hat-brim down over his eyes, and sung out, "Boggs!" and then fetched his cane down slow to a level, and says "Bang!" staggered backwards, says "Bang!" again, and fell down flat on his back.

The people that had seen the thing said he done it perfect; said it was just exactly the way it all happened.

Then as much as a dozen people got out their bottles and treated him.

Well, by and by somebody said Sherburn ought to be lynched.

In about a minute everybody was saying it; so away they went, mad and yelling, and snatching down every clothes-line they come to to do the hanging with.

They swarmed up towards Sherburn's house, awhooping and raging like Injuns, and everything had to clear the way or get run over and tromped to mush, and it was awful to see.

Children was heeling it ahead of the mob, screaming and trying to get out of the way; and every window along the road was full of women's heads, and there was nigger boys in every tree, and bucks and wenchies looking over every fence; and as soon as the mob would get nearly to them they would break and skaddle back out of reach.

Lots of the women and girls was crying and taking on, scared most to death.

They swarmed up in front of Sherburn's palings as thick as they could jam together, and you couldn't hear yourself think for the noise.

It was a little twenty-foot yard. Some sung out "Tear down the fence! tear down the fence!"

Then there was a racket of ripping and tearing and smashing, and down she goes, and the front wall of the crowd begins to roll in like a wave.

Just then Sherburn steps out on to the roof of his little front porch, with a double-barrel gun in his hand, and takes his stand, perfectly ca'm and deliberate, not saying a word.

The racket stopped, and the wave sucked back.

Sherburn never said a word -- just stood there, looking down. The stillness was awful creepy and uncomfortable.

Sherburn run his eye slow along the crowd; and wherever it struck the people tried a little to outgaze him, but they couldn't; they dropped their eyes and looked sneaky.

Then pretty soon Sherburn sort of laughed; not the pleasant kind, but the kind that makes you feel like when you are eating bread that's got sand in it.

Then he says, slow and scornful: "The idea of you lynching anybody! It's amusing. The idea of you thinking you had pluck enough to lynch a man!

"Because you're brave enough to tar and feather poor friendless cast-out women that come along here, did that make you think you had grit enough to lay your hands on a man?

"Why, a man's safe in the hands of ten thousand of your kind -- as long as it's daytime and you're not behind him.

"Do I know you?

"I know you clear through because I was born and raised in the South, and I've lived in the North; so I know the average all around.

"The average man's a coward. In the North he lets anybody walk over him that wants to, and goes home and prays for a humble spirit to bear it.

"In the South one man all by himself, has stopped a stage full of men in the daytime, and robbed the lot.

"Your newspapers call you a brave people so much that you think you are braver than any other people -- whereas you're just as brave, and no braver.

"Why don't your juries hang murderers? Because they're afraid the man's friends will shoot them in the back, in the dark -- and it's just what they would do.

"So they always acquit; and then a man goes in the night, with a hundred masked cowards at his back and lynches the rascal.

"Your mistake is, that you didn't bring a man with you; that's one mistake, and the other is that you didn't come in the dark and fetch your masks.

"You brought part of a man -- Buck Harkness, there -- and if you hadn't had him to start you, you'd a taken it out in blowing.

"You didn't want to come. The average man don't like trouble and danger. You don't like trouble and danger.

"But if only half a man -- like Buck Harkness, there - - shouts 'Lynch him! lynch him!' you're afraid to back down -- afraid you'll be found out to be what you are -- cowards -- and so you raise a yell, and hang yourselves on to that half-a-man's coat-tail, and come raging up here, swearing what big things you're going to do.

"The pitifulest thing out is a mob; that's what an army is -- a mob; they don't fight with courage that's born in them, but with courage that's borrowed from their mass, and from their officers.

"But a mob without any man at the head of it is beneath pitifulness.

"Now the thing for you to do is to droop your tails and go home and crawl in a hole.

"If any real lynching's going to be done it will be done in the dark, Southern fashion; and when they come they'll bring their masks, and fetch a man along.

"Now leave -- and take your half-a-man with you" -- tossing his gun up across his left arm and cocking it when he says this.

The crowd washed back sudden, and then broke all apart, and went tearing off every which way, and Buck Harkness he heeled it after them, looking tolerable cheap.

I could a stayed if I wanted to, but I didn't want to.