Chapter 1

The scene of this chronicle is the town of Dawson’s Landing, on the Missouri side of the Mississippi, half a day’s journey, per steamboat, below St. Louis.

In 1830 it was a snug little collection of modest one and two-story “frame” dwellings whose whitewashed exteriors were almost concealed from sight by climbing tangles of rose vines, honeysuckles and morning-glories. Each of these pretty homes had a garden in front fenced with white palings and opulently stocked with hollyhocks, marigolds, touch-me-nots, prince’s feathers and other old-fashioned flowers; while on the window-sills of the houses stood wooden boxes containing moss-rose plants, and terra cotta pots in which grew a breed of geranium whose spread of intensely red blossoms accented the prevailing pink tint of the rose-clad house-front like an explosion of flame. When there was room on the ledge outside of the pots and boxes for a cat, the cat was there—in sunny weather—stretched at full length, asleep and blissful, with her furry belly to the sun and a paw curved over her nose. Then that home was complete, and its contentment and peace made manifest to the world by this symbol, whose testimony is infallible. A home without a cat—and a well fed, well petted, and properly revered cat—may be a perfect home, perhaps, but how can it prove title?

All along the streets, on both sides, at the outer edge of the brick sidewalks, stood locust trees, with trunks protected by wooden boxing, and these furnished shade for summer and a sweet fragrance in spring when the clusters of buds came forth. The main street, one block back from the river, and running parallel with it, was the sole business street. It was six blocks long, and in each block two or three brick stores three stories high towered above interjected bunches of little frame shops. Swinging signs creaked in the wind, the street’s whole length. The candy-striped pole which indicates nobility proud and ancient, along the palace-bordered canals of Venice, indicated merely the humble barber shop along the main street of Dawson’s Landing. On a chief corner stood a lofty unpainted pole wreathed from top to bottom with tin
pots and pans and cups, the chief tin-monger’s noisy notice to the world (when the wind blew), that his shop was on hand for business at that corner.

The hamlet’s front was washed by the clear waters of the great river; its body stretched itself rearward up a gentle incline; its most rearward border fringed itself out and scattered its houses about the base line of the hills; the hills rose high, enclosing the town in a half-moon curve, clothed with forests from foot to summit.

Steamboats passed up and down every hour or so. Those belonging to the little Cairo line and the little Memphis line always stopped; the big New Orleans and Cincinnati and Louisville liners stopped for hails only, or to land passengers or freight; and this was the case also with the great flotilla of “transients.” These latter came out of a dozen rivers—the Illinois, the Missouri, the Upper Mississippi, the Ohio, the Monongahela, the Tennessee, the Red river, the White river, and so on; and were bound everywhither and stocked with every imaginable comfort or necessity which the Mississippi’s communities could want, from the frosty Falls of St. Anthony down through nine climates to torrid New Orleans.

Dawson’s Landing was a slave-holding town, with a rich slave-worked grain and pork country back of it. The town was sleepy, and comfortable, and contented. It was fifty years old, and was growing slowly—very slowly, in fact, but still it was growing.

The chief citizen was York Leicester Driscoll, about forty years old, Judge of the county court. He was very proud of his old Virginian ancestry, and in his hospitalities and his rather formal and stately manners he kept up its traditions. He was fine, and just, and generous. To be a gentleman—a gentleman without stain or blemish—was his only religion, and to it he was always faithful. He was respected, esteemed, and beloved by all the community. He was well off, and was gradually adding to his store. He and his wife were very nearly happy, but not quite, for they had no children. The longing for the treasure of a child had grown stronger and stronger as the years slipped away, but the blessing never came—and was never to come.

With this pair lived the Judge’s widowed sister, Mrs. Rachel Pratt, and she also was childless—childless, and sorrowful for that reason, and not to be comforted. The women were good and commonplace people, and did their duty and had their reward in clear consciences and the community’s approbation. They were Presbyterians, the Judge was a freethinker.

Pembroke Howard, lawyer and bachelor, aged about forty, was another old Virginian grandee with proved descent from the First Families. He was a
fine, brave, majestic creature, a gentleman according to the nicest require-
ments of the Virginian rule, a devoted Presbyterian, an authority on
the “code,” and a man always courteously ready to stand up before you in the
field if any act or word of his had seemed doubtful or suspicious to you, and
explain it with any weapon you might prefer, from brad-awls to artillery. He
was very popular with the people, and was the Judge’s dearest friend.

Then there was Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex, another F.V. of formidable
calibre—however, with him we have no concern.

Percy Northumberland Driscoll, brother to the Judge, and younger than
he by five years, was a married man, and had had children around his hearth-
stone; but they were attacked in detail by measles, croup and scarlet fever, and
this had given the doctor a chance with his effective antediluvian methods;
so the cradles were empty. He was a prosperous man, with a good head for
speculations, and his fortune was growing. On the first of February, 1830,
two boy babes were born in his house: one to him, the other to one of his slave
girls, Roxana by name. Roxana was twenty years old. She was up and around
the same day, with her hands full, for she was tending both babies.

Mrs. Percy Driscoll died within the week. Roxy remained in charge of the
children. She had her own way, for Mr. Driscoll soon absorbed himself in his
speculations and left her to her own devices.

In that same month of February Dawson’s Landing gained a new citizen.
This was Mr. David Wilson, a young fellow of Scotch parentage. He had
wandered to this remote region from his birth-place in the interior of the
State of New York, to seek his fortune. He was twenty-five years old, college-
bred, and had finished a post-college course in an eastern law school a couple
of years before.

He was a homely, freckled, sandy-haired young fellow, with an intelligent
blue eye that had frankness and comradeship in it and a covert twinkle
of a pleasant sort. But for an unfortunate remark of his, he would no doubt
have entered at once upon a successful career at Dawson’s Landing. But
he made his fatal remark the first day he spent in the village, and it “gauged”
him. He had just made the acquaintance of a group of citizens when an
invisible dog began to yelp and snarl and howl and make himself very
comprehensively disagreeable; whereupon he said, much as one who is think-
ing aloud—

“I wish I owned half of that dog.”
“Why?” somebody asked.
“Because, I would kill my half.”
The group searched his face with curiosity, with anxiety even, but found no light there, no expression that they could read. They fell away from him as from something uncanny, and went into privacy to discuss him. One said—

“Pears to be a fool.”

“Pears,” said another, “is, I reckon you better say.”

“Said he wished he owned half of the dog, the idiot,” said a third. “What did he reckon would become of the other half if he killed his half? Do you reckon he thought it would live?”

“Why, he must have thought it, unless he is the downrightest fool in the world; because if he hadn’t thought that, he would have wanted to own the whole dog, knowing that if he killed his half and the other half died, he would be responsible for that half just the same as if he had killed that half instead of his own. Don’t it look that way to you, gents?”

“Yes, it does. If he owned one half of the general dog, it would be so; if he owned one end of the dog and another person owned the other end, it would be so, just the same; particularly in the first case, because if you kill one half of a general dog, there ain’t any man that can tell whose half it was, but if he owned one end of the dog, maybe he could kill his end of it and—”

“No, he couldn’t, either; he couldn’t and not be responsible if the other end died, which it would. In my opinion the man ain’t in his right mind.”

“In my opinion he hain’t got any mind.”

No. 3 said—

“Well, he’s a lummux, anyway.”

“That’s what he is,” said No. 4, “he’s a labrick—just a simon-pure labrick, if ever there was one.”

“Yes, sir, he’s a dam fool, that’s the way I put him up,” said No. 5. “Anybody can think different that wants to, but those are my sentiments.”

“I’m with you, gentlemen,” said No. 6. “Perfect jackass—yes, and it ain’t going too far to say he is a pudd’nhead. If he ain’t a pudd’nhead, I ain’t no judge, that’s all.”

Mr. Wilson stood elected. The incident was told all over the town, and gravely discussed by everybody. Within a week he had lost his first name; Pudd’nhead took its place. In time he came to be liked, and well liked, too; but by that time the nickname had got well stuck on, and it stayed. That first day’s verdict made him a fool, and he was not able to get it set aside, or even modified. The nickname soon ceased to carry any harsh or unfriendly feeling with it, but it held its place, and was to continue to hold its place for twenty long years.
Chapter 2

Adam was but human—this explains it all. He did not want the apple for the apple’s sake, he only wanted it because it was forbidden. The mistake was in not forbidding the serpent; then he would have eaten the serpent.—Pudd’nhead Wilson’s Calendar.

Pudd’nhead Wilson had a trifle of money, and he bought a small house on the extreme western verge of the town. Between it and Judge Driscoll’s house there was only a grassy yard, with a paling fence dividing the properties in the middle. He hired a small office down in the town and hung out a tin sign with these words on it:

David Wilson
Attorney and Counselor at Law.
Surveying, Conveyancing, etc.

But his deadly remark had ruined his chance—at least in the law. No clients came. He took down his sign, after a while, and put it up on his own house with the law features knocked out of it. It offered his services now in the humble capacities of land surveyor and expert accountant. Now and then he got a job of surveying to do, and now and then a merchant got him to straighten out his books. With Scotch patience and pluck he resolved to live down his reputation and work his way into the legal field yet. Poor fellow, he could not foresee that it was going to take him twenty years to do it.

He had a rich abundance of idle time, but it never hung heavy on his hands, for he interested himself in every new thing that was born in the universe of ideas, and studied it and experimented upon it at his house. One of his pet fads was palmistry. To another one he gave no name, neither would he explain to anybody what its purpose was, but merely said it was an amusement. In fact he had found that his fads added to his reputation as a pudd’nhead; therefore he was growing chary of being too communicative about them. The fad
without a name, was one which dealt with people’s finger-marks. He carried in his coat pocket a shallow box with grooves in it, and in the grooves strips of glass five inches long and three inches wide. Along the lower edge of each strip was pasted a slip of white paper. He asked people to pass their hands through their hair, (thus collecting upon them a thin coating of the natural oil,) and then make a thumb-mark on a glass strip, following it with the mark of the ball of each finger in succession. Under this row of faint grease-prints he would write a record on the strip of white paper—thus:

“John Smith, right hand”—

and add the day of the month and the year, then take Smith’s left hand on another glass strip, and add name and date and the words “left hand.” The strips were now returned to the grooved box, and took their place among what Wilson called his “records.”

He often studied his records, examining and poring over them with absorbing interest until far into the night; but what he found there—if he found anything—he revealed to no one. Sometimes he copied on paper the involved and delicate pattern left by the ball of a finger, and then vastly enlarged it with a pantagraph so that he could examine its web of curving lines with ease and convenience.

One sweltering afternoon—it was the first day of July, 1830—he was at work over a set of tangled account books in his work-room, which looked westward over a stretch of vacant lots, when a conversation outside disturbed him. It was carried on in yells, which showed that the people engaged in it were not close together:

“Say, Roxy, how does yo’ baby come on?” This from the distant voice.
“Fust rate; how does you come on, Jasper?” This yell was from close by.
“Oh, I’s middlin’; hain’t got noth’n to complain of. I’m gwyne to come a court’n you bimeby, Roxy.”
“You is, you black mud-cat! Yah-yah-yah! I got sump’n better to do den ’sociat’n wid niggers as black as you is. Has ole Miss Cooper’s Nancy done give you de mitten?” Roxy followed this sally with another discharge of care-free laughter.
“You’s jealous, Roxy, dat’s what’s de matter wid you, you huzzy—yah-yah-yah! Dat’s de time I got you!”
“Oh, yes, you got me, hain’t you! ’Clah to goodness if dat conceit o’ yo’n strikes in, Jasper, it gwyne to kill you, sho’. If you b’longed to me I’d sell you
down de river ‘fo’ you git too fur gone. Fust time I runs acrost yo’ marster, I’s gwyne to tell him so.”

This idle and aimless jabber went on and on, both parties enjoying the good-natured duel and each well satisfied with his own share of the wit exchanged—for wit they considered it.

Wilson stepped to the window to observe the combatants; he could not work while their chatter continued. Over in the vacant lots was Jasper, young, coal-black and of magnificent build, sitting on a wheelbarrow in the pelting sun—at work, supposably, whereas he was in fact only preparing for it by taking an hour’s rest before beginning. In front of Wilson’s porch stood Roxy, with a local hand-made baby-wagon, in which sat her two charges—one at each end and facing each other. From Roxy’s manner of speech, a stranger would have expected her to be black, but she was not. Only one-sixteenth of her was black, and that sixteenth did not show. She was of majestic form and stature, her attitudes were imposing and statuesque, and her gestures and movements distinguished by a noble and stately grace. Her complexion was very fair, with the rosy glow of vigorous health in the cheeks, her face was full of character and expression, her eyes were brown and liquid, and she had a heavy suit of fine soft hair which was also brown, but the fact was not apparent because her head was bound about with a checkered handkerchief and the hair was concealed under it. Her face was shapely, intelligent, and comely—perhaps even beautiful. She had an easy, independent carriage—when she was among her own caste—and a high and “sassy” way, withal; but of course she was meek and humble enough where white folks were.

To all intents and purposes Roxy was as white as anybody, but the one-sixteenth of her which was black out-voted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro. She was a slave, and salable as such. Her child was thirty-one parts white, and he, too, was a slave, and by a fiction of law and custom a negro. He had blue eyes and flaxen curls, like his white comrade, but even the father of the white child was able to tell the children apart—little as he had commerce with them—by their clothes: for the white babe wore ruffled soft muslin and a coral necklace, while the other kid wore merely a coarse tow-linen shirt which barely reached to its knees, and no jewelry.

The white child’s name was Thomas à Becket Driscoll, the other’s name was Valet de Chambre: no surname—slaves hadn’t the privilege. Roxana had heard that phrase somewhere, the fine sound of it had pleased her ear, and as she had supposed it was a name, she loaded it onto her darling. It soon got shortened to “Chambers,” of course.
Wilson knew Roxy by sight, and when the duel of wit began to play out, he stepped outside to gather-in a record or two. Jasper went to work energetically, at once—perceiving that his leisure was observed. Wilson inspected the children and asked—

“How old are they, Roxy?”

“Bofe de same age, sir—five months. Bawn de fust o’ February.”

“They’re handsome little chaps. One’s just as handsome as the other, too.”

A delighted smile exposed the girl’s white teeth, and she said:

“Bless yo’ soul, Misto Wilson, it’s pow’ful nice o’ you to say dat, caze one of ’em ain’t on’y a nigger. Mighty prime little nigger, I allays says, but dat’s caze it’s mine, o’ course.”

“How do you tell them apart, Roxy, when they haven’t any clothes on?”

Roxy laughed a laugh proportioned to her size, and said:

“Oh, I kin tell ’em part, Misto Wilson, but I bet Marse Percy couldn’t, not to save his life.”

Wilson chatted along for a while, and presently got Roxy’s finger-prints for his collection—right hand and left—on a couple of his glass strips; then labeled and dated them, and took the “records” of both children, and labeled and dated them also.

Two months later, on the third of September, he took this trio of finger-marks again. He liked to have a “series”—two or three “takings” at intervals during the period of childhood, these to be followed by others at intervals of several years.

The next day—that is to say, on the fourth of September,—something occurred which profoundly impressed Roxana. Mr. Driscoll missed another small sum of money—which is a way of saying that this was not a new thing, but had happened before. In truth it had happened three times before. Driscoll’s patience was exhausted. He was a fairly humane man, toward slaves and other animals; he was an exceedingly humane man toward the erring of his own race. Theft he could not abide, and plainly there was a thief in his house. Necessarily the thief must be one of his negroes. Sharp measures must be taken. He called his servants before him. There were three of these, besides Roxy: a man, a woman, and a boy twelve years old. They were not related. Mr. Driscoll said:

“You have all been warned before. It has done no good. This time I will teach you a lesson. I will sell the thief! Which of you is the guilty one?”

They all shuddered at the threat, for here they had a good home, and a new one was likely to be a change for the worse. The denial was general. None had
stolen anything—not money, anyway—a little sugar, or cake, or honey, or something like that, that “Marse Percy wouldn’t mind or miss,” but not money—never a cent of money. They were eloquent in their protestations, but Mr. Driscoll was not moved by them. He answered each in turn with a stern “Name the thief!”

The truth was, all were guilty but Roxana; she suspected that the others were guilty, but she did not know them to be so. She was horrified to think how near she had come to being guilty herself; she was saved in the nick of time by a revival in the colored Methodist church a fortnight before, at which time and place she “got religion.” The very next day after that gracious experience, while her change of style was fresh upon her and she was vain of her purified condition, her master left a couple of dollars lying unprotected on his desk, and she happened upon that temptation when she was polishing around with a dust-rag. She looked at the money a while with a steadily rising resentment, then she burst out with—

“Dad blame dat revival, I wisht it had a ben put off till tomorrow!”

Then she covered the tempter with a book, and another member of the kitchen cabinet got it. She made this sacrifice as a matter of religious etiquette; as a thing necessary just now, but by no means to be wrested into a precedent; no, a week or two would limber up her piety, then she would be rational again, and the next two dollars that got left out in the cold would find a comforter—and she could name the comforter.

Was she bad? Was she worse than the general run of her race? No. They had an unfair show in the battle of life, and they held it no sin to take military advantage of the enemy—in a small way; in a small way, but not in a large one. They would smouch provisions from the pantry whenever they got a chance; or a brass thimble, or a cake of wax, or an emery-bag, or a paper of needles, or a silver spoon, or a dollar bill, or small articles of clothing, or any other property of light value; and so far were they from considering such reprisals sinful, that they would go to church and shout and pray their loudest and sincerest with their plunder in their pockets. A farm smoke-house had to be kept heavily padlocked, for even the colored deacon himself could not resist a ham when Providence showed him in a dream, or otherwise, where such a thing hung lonesome and longed for some one to love. But with a hundred hanging before him the deacon would not take two—that is, on the same night. On frosty nights the humane negro prowler would warm the end of a plank and put it up under the cold claws of chickens roosting in a tree; a drowsy hen would step onto the comfortable board, softly clucking her