

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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*I like a good story well told. That is the reason  
I am sometimes forced to tell them myself.*

--Mark Twain

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## THE FIRST WRITING-MACHINES

Some days ago a correspondent sent in an old typewritten sheet, faded by age, containing the following letter over the signature of Mark Twain:

"Hartford, March 10, 1875.

"Please do not use my name in any way. Please do not even divulge the fact that I own a machine. I have entirely stopped using the typewriter, for the reason that I never could write a letter with it to anybody without receiving a request by return mail that I would not only describe the machine, but state what progress I had made in the use of it, etc., etc. I don't like to write letters, and so I don't want people to know I own this curiosity-breeding little joker."

A note was sent to Mr. Clemens asking him if the letter was genuine and whether he really had a typewriter as long ago as that. Mr. Clemens replied that his best answer is the following chapter from his unpublished autobiography:

1904. VILLA QUARTO, FLORENCE, JANUARY.

Dictating autobiography to a typewriter is a new experience for me, but it goes very well, and is going to save time and "language"--the kind of language that soothes vexation.

I have dictated to a typewriter before--but not autobiography. Between that experience and the present one there lies a mighty gap--more than thirty years! It is a sort of lifetime. In that wide interval much has happened--to the type-machine as well as to the rest of us. At the beginning of that interval a type-machine was a curiosity. The person who owned one was a curiosity, too. But now it is the other way about: the person who

DOESN'T own one is a curiosity. I saw a type-machine for the first time in--what year? I suppose it was 1873--because Nasby was with me at the time, and it was in Boston. We must have been lecturing, or we could not have been in Boston, I take it. I quitted the platform that season.

But never mind about that, it is no matter. Nasby and I saw the machine through a window, and went in to look at it. The salesman explained it to us, showed us samples of its work, and said it could do fifty-seven words a minute--a statement which we frankly confessed that we did not believe. So he put his type-girl to work, and we timed her by the watch. She actually did the fifty-seven in sixty seconds. We were partly convinced, but said it probably couldn't happen again. But it did. We timed the girl over and over again--with the same result always: she won out. She did her work on narrow slips of paper, and we pocketed them as fast as she turned them out, to show as curiosities. The price of the machine was one hundred and twenty-five dollars. I bought one, and we went away very much excited.

At the hotel we got out our slips and were a little disappointed to find that they contained the same words. The girl had economized time and labor by using a formula which she knew by heart. However, we argued--safely enough--that the FIRST type-girl must naturally take rank with the first billiard-player: neither of them could be expected to get out of the game any more than a third or a half of what was in it. If the machine survived--IF it survived-- experts would

come to the front, by and by, who would double the girl's output without a doubt. They would do one hundred words a minute--my talking speed on the platform. That score has long ago been beaten.

At home I played with the toy, repeating and repeating and repeating "The Boy stood on the Burning Deck," until I could turn that boy's adventure out at the rate of twelve words a minute; then I resumed the pen, for business, and only worked the machine to astonish inquiring visitors. They carried off many reams of the boy and his burning deck.



By and by I hired a young woman, and did my first dictating (letters, merely), and my last until now. The machine did not do both capitals and lower

case (as now), but only capitals. Gothic capitals they were, and sufficiently ugly. I remember the first letter I dictated. It was to Edward Bok, who was a boy then. I was not acquainted with him at that time. His present enterprising spirit is not new--he had it in that early day. He was accumulating autographs, and was not content with mere signatures, he wanted a whole autograph LETTER. I furnished it--in type-written capitals, SIGNATURE AND ALL. It was long; it was a sermon; it contained advice; also reproaches. I said writing was my TRADE, my bread-and-butter; I said it was not fair to ask a man to give away samples of his trade; would he ask the blacksmith for a horseshoe? would he ask the doctor for a corpse?

Now I come to an important matter--as I regard it. In the year '74 the young woman copied a considerable part of a book of mine ON THE MACHINE. In a previous chapter of this Autobiography I have claimed that I was the first person in the world that ever had a telephone in the house for practical purposes; I will now claim--until dispossessed--that I was the first person in the world to APPLY THE TYPE-MACHINE TO LITERATURE. That book must have been THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER. I wrote the first half of it in '72, the rest of it in '74. My machinist type-copied a book for me in '74, so I concluded it was that one.

That early machine was full of caprices, full of defects--devilish ones. It had as many immoralities as the machine of today has virtues. After a



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## THE DANGER OF LYING IN BED

The man in the ticket-office said:

"Have an accident insurance ticket, also?"

"No," I said, after studying the matter over a little. "No, I believe not; I am going to be traveling by rail all day today. However, tomorrow I don't travel. Give me one for tomorrow."

The man looked puzzled. He said:

"But it is for accident insurance, and if you are going to travel by rail--"

"If I am going to travel by rail I sha'n't need it. Lying at home in bed is the thing I am afraid of."



I had been looking into this matter. Last year I traveled twenty thousand miles, almost entirely by rail; the year before, I traveled over twenty-five thousand miles, half by sea and half by rail; and the year before that I traveled in the neighborhood of ten thousand miles, exclusively by rail. I suppose if I put in all the little odd journeys here and there, I may say I have traveled sixty thousand miles during the three years I have mentioned. AND NEVER AN ACCIDENT.

For a good while I said to myself every morning: "Now I have escaped thus far, and so the chances are just that much increased that I shall catch it this time. I will be shrewd, and buy an accident ticket." And to a dead moral certainty I drew a blank, and went to bed that night without a joint started or a bone splintered. I got tired of that sort of daily bother, and fell to buying accident tickets that were good for a month. I said to myself, "A man CAN'T buy thirty blanks in one bundle."

But I was mistaken. There was never a prize in the lot. I could read of railway accidents every day--the newspaper atmosphere was foggy with them; but somehow they never came my way. I found I had spent a good deal of money in the accident business, and had nothing to show for it. My suspicions were aroused, and I began to hunt around for somebody that had won in this lottery. I found plenty of people who had invested, but not an individual that had ever had an accident or made a cent. I stopped buying accident tickets and went to ciphering. The result was astounding.



## THE PERIL LAY NOT IN TRAVELING, BUT IN STAYING AT HOME.

I hunted up statistics, and was amazed to find that after all the glaring newspaper headlines concerning railroad disasters, less than THREE HUNDRED people had really lost their lives by those disasters in the preceding twelve months. The Erie road was set down as the most murderous in the list. It had killed forty-six--or twenty-six, I do not exactly remember which, but I know the number was double that of any other road. But the fact straightway suggested itself that the Erie was an immensely long road, and did more business than any other line in the country; so the double number of killed ceased to be a matter for surprise.

By further figuring, it appeared that between New York and Rochester the Erie ran eight passenger-trains each way every day--16 altogether; and carried a daily average of 6,000 persons. That is about a million in six months--the population of New York City. Well, the Erie kills from 13 to 23 persons of ITS million in six months; and in the same time 13,000 of New York's million die in their beds! My flesh crept, my hair stood on end. "This is appalling!" I said. "The danger isn't in traveling by rail, but in trusting to those deadly beds. I will never sleep in a bed again."

I had figured on considerably less than one-half the length of the Erie road. It was plain that the entire road must transport at least eleven or twelve thousand people every day. There are

many short roads running out of Boston that do fully half as much; a great many such roads. There are many roads scattered about the Union that do a prodigious passenger business. Therefore it was fair to presume that an average of 2,500 passengers a day for each road in the country would be almost correct. There are 846 railway lines in our country, and 846 times 2,500 are 2,115,000. So the railways of America move more than two millions of people every day; six hundred and fifty millions of people a year, without counting the Sundays. They do that, too--there is no question about it; though where they get the raw material is clear beyond the jurisdiction of my arithmetic; for I have hunted the census through and through, and I find that there are not that many people in the United States, by a matter of six hundred and ten millions at the very least. They must use some of the same people over again, likely.

San Francisco is one-eighth as populous as New York; there are 60 deaths a week in the former and 500 a week in the latter--if they have luck. That is 3,120 deaths a year in San Francisco, and eight times as many in New York--say about 25,000 or 26,000. The health of the two places is the same. So we will let it stand as a fair presumption that this will hold good all over the country, and that consequently 25,000 out of every million of people we have must die every year. That amounts to one-fortieth of our total population. One million of us, then, die annually. Out of this million ten or twelve thousand are stabbed, shot, drowned, hanged, poisoned, or

meet a similarly violent death in some other popular way, such as perishing by kerosene-lamp and hoop-skirt conflagrations, getting buried in coal-mines, falling off house-tops, breaking through church, or lecture-room floors, taking patent medicines, or committing suicide in other forms. The Erie railroad kills 23 to 46; the other 845 railroads kill an average of one-third of a man each; and the rest of that million, amounting in the aggregate to that appalling figure of 987,631 corpses, die naturally in their beds!

You will excuse me from taking any more chances on those beds. The railroads are good enough for me.

And my advice to all people is, Don't stay at home any more than you can help; but when you have GOT to stay at home a while, buy a package of those insurance tickets and sit up nights. You cannot be too cautious.

(One can see now why I answered that ticket-agent in the manner recorded at the top of this sketch.)

The moral of this composition is, that thoughtless people grumble more than is fair about railroad management in the United States. When we consider that every day and night of the year full fourteen thousand railway-trains of various kinds, freighted with life and armed with death, go thundering over the land, the marvel is, NOT that they kill three hundred human beings in a

twelvemonth, but that they do not kill three  
hundred times three hundred!



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