THE PONY EXPRESS
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However, in a little while all interest was taken up in stretching our necks and watching for the “pony rider” – the fleet messenger who sped across the continent from St. Joe to Sacramento, carrying letters nineteen hundred miles in eight days! Think of that for perishable horse and human flesh and blood to do! The pony rider was usually a little bit of a man, brim full of spirit and endurance. No matter what time of night his watch came on, and no matter whether it was Winter or Summer, raining, snowing, hailing or sleet, or whether his “beat” was a level, straight road or a crazy trail over mountain crags and precipices, or whether it led through peaceful regions, or regions that swarmed with hostile Indians, he must be ready to leap into the saddle and be off like the wind.

There was no idling for a pony rider on duty. He rode forty miles without stopping, by daylight, moonlight, starlight, or through the blackness of darkness, just as it happened. He rode a splendid horse, that was born for a racer, and fed and lodged like a gentleman, kept him at his utmost speed for ten miles, and then, as he came crashing up to a station, where stood two men holding a fresh, impatient steed, the transfer of rider and mail bag was made in the twinkling of an eye, and away flew the eager pair, and were out of sight before the spectator could get hardly the ghost of a look. Both rider and horse went “flying light.”

The rider’s dress was thin and fitted close; he wore a “round about” and “skull cap,” and tucked his pantaloons into his boot-tops, like a race rider. He carried no arms – he carried nothing that was not absolutely necessary, for even his postage on his literary freight was worth $2 an ounce. He got but little frivolous correspondence to carry; his bag had business letters in it mostly. His horse was stripped of all unnecessary weight too. He wore light shoes, or none at all. The little flat mail pockets strapped under the rider’s thighs, would hold about the bulk of a child’s primer.

They held many and many an important business chapter and newspaper letter, but these were written on paper as airy thin as gold-leaf nearly, and thus bulk and weight were economized. The stage coach traveled about a hundred to a hundred and twenty-five miles a day (twenty-four hours); the pony rider two hundred and fifty. There were about eighty pony riders in the saddle all the time, night and day, stretching in a long scattering procession from Missouri to California – forty flying eastward and forty toward the west, and among them making four hundred gallant riders earn a stirring livelihood, and see a great deal of scenery every single day in the year.

We had a consuming desire from the beginning to see a pony rider, but somehow or other, all that passed us, and all that met us, managed to streak by in the night, and so we heard only a whiz and a hail, and the swift phantom of the desert was gone before we could get our heads out of the windows. But now we were expecting one along every moment, and would see him in broad daylight. Presently the driver exclaims;

“Here he comes!”
Every neck is strained further, and every eye wider. Away across the endless dead level of the prairie, a black speck appears against the sky, and it is plain that it moves. Well, I should think so! In a second or so it becomes a horse and rider, rising and falling – sweeping towards us nearer and nearer – growing more and more distinct, more and more sharply defined – nearer and nearer, and the flutter of the hoofs comes faintly to the ear – another instant, a whoop and a hurrah from our upper deck, a wave of the rider’s hand, but no reply, and man and horse burst past our excited faces, and go winging away like a belated fragment of a storm.

So sudden is it all, and so like a flash of unreal fancy, that but for the flake of white foam left quivering and perishing on a mail sack, after the vision had flashed by and disappeared, we might have doubted whether we had seen any actual horse and man at all, may be.

MARK TWAIN.