

New York Evening Mail
November 1, 1917

Mark Twain's Americanism

When Mark Twain died, in 1910, one of the magnificos who paid public tribute to him was William H. Taft, then President of the United States. "Mark Twain," said Dr. Taft, "gave real intellectual enjoyment to millions, and his works will continue to give such pleasure to millions yet to come. He never wrote a line that a father could not read to a daughter."

The usual polite flubdub and not to be exposed, perhaps, to critical analysis. But it was, in a sense, typical of the general view at that time, and so it deserves to be remembered for the fatuous inaccuracy of the judgment in it. For Mark Twain dead is beginning to show far different and more brilliant colors than those he seemed to wear during life, and the one thing no sane critic would say of him today is that he was the harmless fireside jester, the mellow chautauquan, the amiable old grandpa of letters that he was once so widely thought to be.

The truth is that Mark was almost exactly the reverse. Instead of being a mere entertainer of the mob, he was in fact a literary artist of the very highest skill and sophistication, and, in all save his superficial aspect, quite unintelligible to Dr. Taft's millions. And instead of being a sort of Dr. Frank Crane in cap and bells, laboriously devoted to the obvious and the uplifting, he was a destructive satirist of the utmost pungency and relentlessness, and the most bitter critic of American platitude and delusion, whether social, political or religious, that ever lived.

Bit by bit, as his posthumous books appear, the true man emerges, and it needs but half an eye to see how little he resembles the Mark of national legend. Those books were written carefully and deliberately; Mark wrote them at the height of his fame; he put into them, without concealment, the fundamental ideas of his personal philosophy—the ideas which colored his whole view of the world. Then he laid the manuscripts away, safe in the knowledge that they would not see the light until he was under six feet of earth. We know, by his own confession, why he hesitated to print them while he lived; he knew that fame was sweet and he feared that they might blast it. But beneath that timorousness there was an intellectual honesty that forced him to set down the truth. It was really comfort he wanted, not fame. He hesitated, a lazy man, to disturb his remaining days with combat and acrimony. But in the long run he wanted to set himself straight.

Two of these books, *The Mysterious Stranger* and *What Is Man?* are now published, and more may be expected to follow at intervals. The latter, in fact, was put into type during Mark's lifetime and privately printed in a very limited edition. But it was never given to the public, and copies of the limited edition bring \$40 or \$50 at book auctions today. Even a pirated English edition brings a high premium. Now, however, the book is issued publicly by the Harpers, though without the preface in which Mark explained his reasons for so long withholding it.

The ideas in it are very simple, and reduced to elementals, two in number. The first is that man, save for a trace of volition that grows smaller and smaller the more it is analyzed, is a living machine—that nine-tenths of his acts are purely reflex, and that moral responsibility,

and with it religion, are thus mere delusions. The second is that the only genuine human motive, like the only genuine dog motive or fish motive or protoplasm motive is self interest—that altruism, for all its seeming potency in human concerns, is no more than a specious appearance—that the one unbroken effort of the organism is to promote its own comfort, welfare and survival.

Starting from this double basis, Mark undertakes an elaborate and extraordinarily penetrating examination of all the fine ideals and virtues that man boasts of, and reduces them, one after the other, to untenability and absurdity. There is no mere smartness in the thing. It is done, to be sure, with a sly and disarming humor, but at bottom it is done quite seriously and with the highest sort of argumentative skill. The parlor entertainer of Dr. Taft's eulogy completely disappears; in his place there arises a satirist with something of Rabelais's vast resourcefulness and dexterity in him, and all of Dean Swift's devastating ferocity. It is not only the most honest book that Mark ever did; it is, in some respects, the most artful and persuasive as a work of art. No wonder the pious critic of *The New York Times*, horrified by its doctrine, was forced to take refuge behind the theory that Mark intended it as a joke.

In *The Mysterious Stranger* there is a step further. *What Is Man?* analyzes the concept of man; *The Mysterious Stranger* boldly analyzes the concept of God. What, after all, is the actual character of this Being we are asked to reverence and obey? How is His mind revealed by His admitted acts? How does His observed conduct toward man square with those ideals of human conduct that He is said to prescribe, and whose violation He is said to punish with such appalling penalties?

These are the questions that Mark sets for himself. His answers are, in brief, a complete rejection of the whole Christian theory—a rejection based upon a wholesale *reductio ad absurdum*. The thing is not mere mocking; it is not even irreverent; but the force of it is stupendous. I know of no agnostic document that shows a keener sense of essentials or a more deft hand for making use of the indubitable. A gigantic irony is in it. It glows with a profound conviction, almost a kind of passion. And the grotesque form of it—a child's story—only adds to the sardonic implacability of it.

As I say, there are more to come. Mark in his idle moments was forever at work upon some such riddling of the conventional philosophy, as he was forever railing at the conventional ethic in his private conversation. One of these pieces, highly characteristic, is described in Albert Bigelow Paine's biography. It is an elaborate history of the microbes inhabiting a man's veins. They divine a religion with the man as God; they perfect a dogma setting forth his desires as to their conduct; they engaged in a worship based upon the notion that he is immediately aware of their every act and jealous of their regard and enormously concerned about their welfare. In brief, a staggering satire upon the anthropocentric religion of man—a typical return to the favorite theme of man's egoism and imbecility.

All this sort of thing, to be sure, has its dangers for Mark's fame. Let his executors print a few more of his unpublished works—say, the microbe story and his sketch of life at the court of Elizabeth—and Dr. Taft, I dare say, will withdraw his pronunciamento that “he never wrote a line that a father could not read to his daughter.” Already, indeed, the lady reviewers of the newspapers sound an alarm against him, and the old lavish praise of him begins to die down to whispers. In the end, perhaps, the Carnegie libraries will put him to the torture, and *The Innocents Abroad* will be sacrificed with *What Is Man?*

But that effort to dispose of him is nothing now. Nor will it succeed. While he lived he was several times labeled and relabeled, and always inaccurately and vainly. At the start the national guardians of letters sought to dismiss him loftily as a hollow buffoon, a brother to Josh Billings and Petroleum V. Nasby. This enterprise failing, they made him a comic moralist, a sort of chautauquan in motley, a William Jennings Bryan armed with a slapstick. Foiled again, they promoted him to the rank of Thomas Bailey Aldrich and William Dean

Howells, and issued an impertinent amnesty for the sins of his youth. Thus he passed from these scenes—ratified at last, but somewhat heavily patronized.

Now the professors must overhaul him again, and this time, I suppose, they will undertake to pull him down a peg. They will succeed as little as they succeeded when they tried to read him out of meeting in the early '80s. The more they tackle him, in fact, the more it will become evident that he was a literary artist of the very first rank, and incomparably the greatest ever hatched in these states.

One reads with something akin to astonishment of his superstitious reverence for Emerson—of how he stood silent and bare-headed before the great transcendentalist's house at Concord. One hears of him, with amazement, courting Whittier, Longfellow and Holmes. One is staggered by the news, reported by Traubel, that Walt Whitman thought "he mainly misses fire." The simple fact is that *Huckleberry Finn* is worth the whole work of Emerson with two-thirds of the work of Whitman thrown in for make-weight, and that one chapter of it is worth the whole work of Whittier, Longfellow and Holmes.

Mark was not only a great artist; he was pre-eminently a great American artist. No other writer that we have produced has ever been more extravagantly national. Whitman dreamed of an America that never was and never will be; Poe was a foreigner in every line he wrote; even Emerson was no more than an American spigot for European, and especially German, ideas. But Mark was wholly of the soil. His humor was American. His incurable Philistinism was American. His very English was American. Above all, he was an American in his curious mixture of sentimentality and cynicism, his mingling of romanticist and iconoclast.

English Traits might have been written by any one of half a dozen Germans. The tales of Poe, printed as translations from the French, would have deceived even Frenchmen. And *Leaves of Grass* might have been written in London quite as well as in Brooklyn. But in *Huckleberry Finn*, in *A Connecticut Yankee* and in most of the short sketches there is a quality that is unmistakably and overwhelmingly national. They belong to our country and our time quite as obviously as the skyscraper or the quick lunch counter. They are as magnificently American as the Brooklyn Bridge or Tammany Hall.

Mark goes down the professorial gullet painfully. He has stuck more than once. He now seems fated to stick again. But these gaggings will not hurt him, nor even appreciably delay him. Soon or late the national mind will awake to the fact that a great man was among us—that in the midst of all our puerile rages for dubious foreigners we produced an artist who was head and shoulders above all of them.