

New York Sunday Mercury
March 17, 1867

A Curtain Lecture Concerning Skating

“O, go to sleep, you old fool!”

“Mr. Twain, I am surprised and grieved to—”

“Don’t interrupt me, woman! I tell you it’s absurd—you learn to skate! You’ll be wanting to play fairy in the ‘Black Crook’ next. I tell you skating is an accomplishment suited only to youth, and grace, and comeliness of face, and symmetry of figure. Nothing is so charming as to see a beautiful girl, in the coquettish costume of the rinks, with cheeks rosy with exertion, and eyes beaming with excitement, skimming the ice like a bird—and swooping down upon a group of gentlemen, and pretending she can’t stop herself, and landing in the arms of the very young man her father don’t allow her to know—and darting away again and falling on her head and exposing herself—exposing herself to remarks about her carelessness, Madam—hold your tongue! -- and always taking care to fall when that young man is close by to pick her up. It is charming! They look pretty and interesting, too, when they are just learning—when they stand still a long time in one place, and then start one foot out gingerly, and it makes a break for the other side of the pond and leaves the balance of the girl sprawling on this side. But you! You look fat, and awkward, and dismal enough, any time; but when you are on skates you waddle off as stuffy and stupid and ungainly as a buzzard that’s had half a horse for dinner. I won’t have it, Madam! And you get under a little precarious headway and then put your feet together and drift along, stooping your head and shoulders and holding your arms out like you expected a church was going to fall on you; it aggravates the life out of me! And Tuesday, when I was ass enough to get on skates myself, and kicked the Irish Giant’s eye out the first dash, and lit on my head and cracked the ice so that it looked like the sun with all its rays had dropped where I struck, and they fined me ninety-two dollars for ruining the man’s pond, I was terrified with the conviction that I had gone through to the inside of the world, because I saw the parallels of latitude glimmering all around me; and what was it but you, in your awkwardness, fetching up over me with your confounded ‘tilters’ on? You’ve got to discard those things. I can’t stand the pew-rent, and I won’t.”

“Mr. Twain, I am surp--”

“Hold your clatter! I tell you you shan’t bring odium upon the family by your disgraceful attempts to skate; sprawling around with your big feet like a cow plowing her way down-hill in slippery weather. Maybe you wouldn’t be so handy about displaying those feet of yours if you knew what occurred when I took your shoes down to get mended.”

“What was it? Tell me what it was; tell me what it was this minute! I just know it’s one of your lies!”

“Oh, don’t mind; it ain’t of any consequence; go to sleep.”

“But it is of consequence! You’ve got to tell me; you shan’t aggravate me this way; I won’t go to sleep till I know what it was.”

“Oh, it wasn’t anything.”

“Mr. Twain, I know better! You’re just doing this to try to drive me to dis-trac-tion! What did that shoemaker say about my shoe? What did he do? Quick!”

“Well, if you must know, he—he—however, it’s of no consequence.”

“Mr. Twain.”

“Well, he—he took it and gazed upon it a long time in silence, and put his handkerchief to his eyes and burst into tears.”

“Why, you born fool! Twain, are you going stark, staring crazy?”

“He just stood there and wept as if his heart would break, poor devil! There, now let’s go to sleep.”

“Sleep, you lunatic, I’ll never close my eyes till I know what that idiot was crying about—and you won’t, either, I can tell you that. Come!”

“O, it don’t matter.”

“Mr. Twain, if you say that again, I lay I’ll make you sorry for it; what was that numskull crying about?”

“Well, he—he—”

“W-e-l-l, -- poor fellow! he said he doted on his grandmother—fairly doted on her. She had nursed him, you know, because his mother was always feeble, and so—. Well he came to this country fifteen years ago, and first he set up in the vegetable-line, and got along pretty well, and was about to send to England for the old lady, when hard times came and he got broke. He went into fruit then, and after that into milk—into all sorts of things, you know, but he got disappointed every time till this present business fetched him out at last, all right, and he sent right off for the old woman. She landed here four weeks ago, but died the very same night. It was hard, very hard, after all his waiting and toiling for fifteen years, to get her over here at last and have her die on his hands. He—he—well, he was disgusted. However, he laid her out, and he and his friends sat up with her, and by-and-by the memory of her virtues softened his bitterness and turned it to tender grief—a settled melancholy that hung about his spirits like a pall for many days. However, by patiently striving to keep sad thoughts out of his mind, he was finally beginning to regain some little of his old-time cheerfulness when your shoe reminded him so painfully of his poor sainted grandmother’s coffin—”

“Take that, you brute! and if you dare to come back here I’ll kick you out again! You degraded old ruffian!”

(Source: Twainquotes.org, <http://www.twainquotes.com/mercury/CurtainLectureSkating.html>)