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*Mark Twain*  
(1835-1910)

It might surprise most people to learn that English professors can be unanimous in agreement about *anything* regarding literature. It might surprise people even more to learn that these professors will say that Mark Twain is the greatest writer who ever picked up a pen in the history of the United States of America. As Americans we're always interested in who's number one in the field of sports. Well, in the field of American literature, Mark Twain has always been considered our greatest writer and probably always will be.

Now this might strike most people as rather peculiar. In his entire career Twain only produced one book that is regarded today as absolutely first-class world literature, the relatively short novel *Huckleberry Finn*. Yes, *Tom Sawyer* is equally famous, but both public and critics agree that it is a lesser work of fiction with a disagreeable hero. So how can a man who, in a rather long life, produced only one work of stupendous literary merit be called the greatest writer in the history of our country?

Mark Twain is our premier author because during his distinguished and colorful career he gave American literature two priceless gifts. What are these two gifts? Well, if I told you right now, this glimpse of Mark Twain would soon be

over. You're going to have to be patient for a bit while I give you first what I consider fascinating and invaluable background information.

The first thing to tell you about Mark Twain is something you probably already know: his date of birth and the state he was born in. (And I don't mean the state of infancy . . .) Most people know where he is from because he sets his most famous works of fiction there: Missouri. And because he is so associated with Missouri, most people probably think that he had a nostalgic fondness for his home state. He did *not*. He detested his home state. Twain gives us two clues as to his true regard of Missouri. First, he left Missouri when he was eighteen and he never, never went back—unless he was paid handsomely to do so. The other clue is what he once wrote: "There are three proper ways to pronounce my home state. If you are born in my state, you pronounce it 'Misourah'; if you are not born in my state you pronounce it 'Misouree'; but if you are born in my state, and you have to live your entire life in my state, you pronounce it 'Misery.'" Subtle, yes? Actually this antipathy was not Missouri's fault. Twain's dislike of his home state had nothing to do with his state but everything to do with his home.

Twain came from a family we probably wouldn't want to be part of, either. As a depressed old man, Twain once wrote to a high school friend: "I hate to admit this, but I knew from my earliest memories that my father did not really love my mother. Fortunately, my mother did not really love my father either, and since they had this in common, the marriage went on forever." This lovelessness was sad enough, but an even worse burden, as far as Twain was concerned, was that his father never could make a decent living.

Then, when Twain was only twelve, his father dropped dead, literally, in front of him, and so at this young age Twain had to put himself to work to put food on his mother's table. The four other siblings were all called upon to support the large fatherless family by finding odd jobs. According to Twain, he got the oddest and worst job in the state of Missouri: assistant editor of the Hannibal, Missouri, newspaper. He had grown up in the dusty little town of Hannibal, which is right on the Mississippi River, and there at age twelve he is already an assistant editor. You might think, "Well, rather impressive for a twelve-year-old!" It was not—it was a nightmare. What exactly did the assistant editor of the Hannibal, Missouri, daily newspaper do in 1847? Twain had to get up at four-thirty every morning, to be at the newspaper office at five. He had to chop wood outside the office door, bring it in, throw it in the fireplace, and heat up the entire newspaper office by five-thirty.

Why did the senior editor want it warm by five-thirty? Because the editor lived in a fancy apartment attached to the newspaper office, and when the editor put his feet on the ground first thing in the morning, he wanted it warm. Not only did Twain have to heat up the newspaper office by five-thirty, he then had to go into the editor's bedroom, get the editor up, help the editor dress, cook the editor's breakfast, serve it, clean up after, mop out the entire newspaper office, and meticulously clean every nook and cranny of the editor's private apartment with a feather duster. This took him until almost eight. He had worked almost three hours as nothing more than a houseboy, and his real job hadn't even started yet. His real job was to print the paper. The newspaper editor wrote it, but had no intention of getting his fingers dirty with ink by printing it. Twain had to print the paper.

How big was the Hannibal daily newspaper? Not very big, only six pages long. How hard would it be to print a six-page newspaper? Twain said it was almost impossible because they had no automated printing presses back then in Hannibal. So, how *do* you print a newspaper if you don't have a printing press? Twain said he had to stand in front of fifty-two cases. Each case was a little wooden box, narrow and deep, and each of these cases had thousands of tiny little tin letters in them—tintype. There was a case each of A's, B's, C's, D's, all the way down to X's, Y's, and Z's. There were fifty-two cases and not just twenty-six because the bottom row of cases had the small letters and the upper row of cases had the capital letters. (And that's why, even on a computer today, we still call capital letters "upper case," because in Twain's day, you had to reach up into the case and pull them down.)

To print the newspaper Twain had to pull out every letter of every word of every sentence of every paragraph of every page of the newspaper. There were only six pages, but there were about twenty-one hundred words per page. The task would have taken forever even under good circumstances. Twain's circumstances, however, were daunting, because he couldn't just pull out a letter, put it in the press, and print it. On the contrary, he never knew if the letter he wanted to pull out would actually be there, because the newspaper worker who had put the letters back in the cases the night before was always dead drunk. The job didn't pay enough for a sober person, Twain said, so they hired a drunk off the streets who would come in late at night, throw up the letters in the cases, throw up his dinner onto the floor, and leave. Every morning Twain would have to come in and clean up

this stinking mess before he could even stand in front of the cases. Twain never knew when he pulled out a letter if it would be the right one; he had to look at each letter before it went to print. And if you've ever seen a letter on a piece of type, you understand his problem. On a piece of type the letter is backward, the mirror image of the actual letter. It does not become right-side-to until it is printed, and by then if there is an error, it is too late to correct it.

With most of the letters Twain had no problem because most letters in our alphabet look the same forward or backward, but two letters in the English language are actually backward mirror images of each other, and that drove him crazy. Which letters? A small *q* is the same letter as a backward small *p*, and of course, a small *p* is the same letter as a backward *q*. So when Twain reached in to get a *q*, he had to remember, if it looks like a *q*, put it back, it's wrong, it's backward, it's actually a *p*. But if it looks like a *p*, it's actually a *q* because it's backward, it's correct, put it in the press and print it. Twain once wrote in an essay: "I hated the printing business, because no matter how careful I tried to be I could never mind my 'p's' and 'q's.'" That is where the famous expression comes from. Some critics say that the expression can be traced back to the late 1700s but all agree that it was Twain who made it famous.

(I think one of the great joys of being an English professor today is that when I teach a Twain novel at the university, I always tell my students this story, and I always say, "And that's where the famous expression comes from." And they always look at me and say, "What famous expression?" Not only are young people not minding their p's and q's today, they never even heard the expression.)

Twain had to stay at this dreadful job until he was eighteen, when an opportunity to escape seemed to offer itself. Living next door to him was a friend he had had from childhood, Michael. Michael ventured to South America to make his fortune. Upon his return he knocked on Mark Twain's door and said, "Sam"—because as you surely know, Mark Twain is a pen name; Twain's real name, of course, is Samuel Clemens—he knocked on Twain's door and said, "Sam, I'm back from South America, and I have a way we can each make about a million dollars if you'll quit the printing business and join up with me." Well, of course Twain wanted desperately to get out of the printing business, and who wouldn't wish to make a million dollars? Twain said, "This sounds hopeful, what is it?" Michael said, "Well, you know what is happening in Massachusetts, don't you?" Everyone knew that the whole state of Massachusetts was then virtually on strike. During this time of industrial revolution, manufacturers had brought brand-new machinery into Massachusetts, but had not trained the workers how to use it. Laborers were victimized by serious accidents caused by the powerful new machinery, and the entire state was in chaos and on strike.

Michael said, "I've brought back something from South America. We will sell it to the workers of Massachusetts, and not only will they go back to work, but they will become the most productive workers on earth!" Twain said, "This sounds too good to be true; what have you brought back?" And Michael said, "When I was in South America, I spent five days on a plantation in Chile, and I noticed something very strange there. I noticed that the servants on this plantation worked eighteen hours every day, without a rest. They had

one small break for water, one small break for food. Otherwise, they worked eighteen hours in a row, went to sleep, woke up refreshed, and worked another eighteen hours. Can you just imagine how much work they would accomplish each day?

"On the last day I went up to the plantation manager and I asked him, 'How do you get these servants to work eighteen hours every day?' And the manager said, 'Oh, that is no secret here in South America.' The manager walked over, picked up a big leather pouch, opened it up, and had me look inside. All I could see was a fine, white, powdery substance that looked like snow.

"The plantation manager said, 'Every morning when our servants are awakened, we take the tiniest pinch of this magic white powder and we put it up the right nostril of the servant. We take another little pinch, put it up the left nostril, and ask our servants to breathe it in. They then work eighteen hours in a row, big smiles on their faces—never get hungry, never get tired, never complain.' I asked him, what is this magic powder that puts everyone in such a good productive mood? And the plantation manager said, 'It grows wild here on a plant called *coca*.'"

Obviously what Michael had stumbled upon was pristine, unadulterated South American cocaine. Remember, the time is 1853. You can be sure no one in backwater Hannibal, Missouri, had any clue as to what this substance was. At that time cocaine was not known as a dangerous drug; it wasn't known at all. Michael certainly seemed to be onto something, since thirty years later, in 1886, this same coca was used as a key ingredient in Coca-Cola—look how well that little business has done. So it is no surprise that Mark Twain,

in his naïveté said, "You mean we acquire this magic white powder, bring it up to Massachusetts, sell it to the workers, they return to work, and we become heroes? It sounds like a fine idea, but I have one question. What is my role in all of this?"

And his friend Michael said, "Oh, that's easy. I was able to buy half a ton of this white powder, although I did have to pay ninety-five dollars for it. Because I was rushed in leaving, it is still on the docks in Chile. I want you to take a riverboat to New Orleans, sail down to South America, rent a freighter, load the powder on it, and take it up to Massachusetts. Then we go into business." Twain thought that this was such a promising idea that almost immediately he boarded a riverboat to New Orleans, from where he expected to travel to South America and bring the magic powder up to Massachusetts. Had he done that, he would probably never have become an author.

What happened to alter American literature forever? Twain embarked on the riverboat and it took him down to New Orleans, but as fate would have it, the riverboat he boarded was captained by Horace Bixby, one of the finest riverboat captains on the waterways. So legendary and impressive was Bixby that when the riverboat arrived in New Orleans, Twain abandoned his entrepreneurial journey to South America. Instead he begged Horace Bixby to teach him how to be a riverboat captain as well. Why the change of plan? Why would Twain toss away the idea of a million-dollar scheme? He did it simply because Horace Bixby happened to mention that a riverboat captain earned \$250 a month. Of course, today \$250 a month is not an extravagantly large sum of money. But in Twain's day that \$250 a

month would equal over \$150,000 a year today. In Twain's day, a riverboat captain was the third-highest-paying job in America.

Why would anyone pay someone that much money just to be a riverboat captain? It appeared that all one did was go up and down the Mississippi all day, docking and delivering goods. But a riverboat captain earned every penny, because he had to make at least half of his deliveries at night, in the dark. This was how the middle part of the country was supplied with trade goods; a riverboat couldn't just stop when the sun went down. And what was so difficult about making deliveries at night on the Mississippi River? There could be no light on the boat at night, because the only kind of portable light was a big metal lantern. Lanterns, of course, have flames. If just two sparks, Twain tells us, would leap out of that lantern and land on the deck of a boat, the boat had a sure chance of catching fire. Riverboats were made out of extremely dry timber and were highly flammable. To avoid the danger of fire on the river, the order was, "You can have *no* light on your boat at night."

Well, if you had no light on your riverboat, exactly how far ahead of you could you see on the Mississippi at night? Twain tells us: "Five inches." Unless it was foggy—then it was two-inch visibility. That meant at night you could put your hand right up in front of your face and it would disappear. "You were not legally blind," Twain said, "you were completely blind," as if someone put a blindfold around your eyes.

If, then, you cannot see anything on the river at night and you are required to make ten or twelve deliveries to obscure, tiny riverside docks, how could you possibly do it? There was

only one way. As a prerequisite to becoming a riverboat captain and being paid the third-highest salary in America, all you had to do was memorize the Mississippi River. The entire river. Every bend, landmark, sandbar. How big is the Mississippi River? It is 2,357 miles long. Mark Twain had to know, precisely, that at mile 830, yard two on the east bank, there was a sandbar. Had Twain not memorized where that sandbar was exactly, he would strike upon it in the black of night and maroon his riverboat. His cargo, which was always perishable, would rot and he would be out of business.

So did Twain have to memorize 2,357 miles of Mississippi riverbank yard by yard before he could become a captain? No. As Twain said, "That would have been a picnic." What was the catch? The Mississippi has an east bank, and, obviously, a west bank. And that west bank doesn't look a thing like the east bank. Not only did Twain have to memorize 2,357 miles of Mississippi River going up in the east, he then had to memorize a different 2,357 miles going down in the west: 4,714 miles of Mississippi River to memorize yard by yard, to pass the test. It took him two years, studying every night, Christmas, New Year's, weekends; he did nothing but study and memorize the river. He didn't mind this laborious task because after two years of agony, he would have the third-highest-paying job in America. He was so bright and diligent that he passed the riverboat test on the first try, and he emerged a qualified pilot, on his way to being a richly rewarded captain.

But he never earned that exalted salary. According to Twain, he never earned anything. And why not? His maiden voyage on the Mississippi began April 10, 1861. Only a few days later the Civil War erupted. Because the Mississippi

River runs north and south, one of the first acts passed by the Yankees said, "All traffic on the Mississippi River may continue to go north. No traffic may now head south." A few hours later, the Confederates passed an injunction that said, "All traffic on the Mississippi River may continue to go south, no traffic may head north." With the river thus off-limits, Twain was out of a job before he even started it. As he wrote in his journal: "I have spent two years memorizing every yard of the Mississippi River only to discover that unless you are going to be a riverboat captain this information will *not* come in handy in any other profession."

By the way, he is not being completely honest here. He would put this knowledge to great use in *Life on the Mississippi*. And Twain might have mentioned that the river did give him his pen name, Mark Twain, which he was using by 1870 with his earliest essays. He claimed that those two words were the most beautiful sounds ever heard on a riverboat, and that was because of the constant measuring of the water's depth on board. The crew member in charge of measuring would throw overboard a rope that was calibrated in fathoms. A fathom equaled six feet. If the rope went down only six feet, the crew member would yell to the navigator, "Mark one"—meaning mark down one fathom deep. All on board would groan when they heard this because one fathom of water was too shallow for them to dock the boat.

But if the rope went down twelve feet—two fathoms—the man would yell, "Mark twain"—*twain* being the measurement term for "two." Now everyone would cheer. Twelve feet would be deep enough to dock the boat, which meant those on board could now leave the boat, visit their "girl-friends," get drunk, shoot up the town, or engage in other

delightful shore pastimes. Because the words *mark twain* were synonymous with "good times ahead," Twain adopted them and thus immortalized them.

In 1861, Twain thus found himself in limbo. The only occupation he had a knack for was reporting, though he hated newspaper work. He was finally given a job on a paper in far Virginia City, Nevada; soon he was so effective at his work that it seemed inevitable that he should land a position with the finest newspaper in the West, the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Twain headed for San Francisco and applied for a job. Unfortunately, the only job available was that of society page editor. Equally unfortunately no one *loathed* society more than Mark Twain. He detested the wealthy and abhorred those who graced the social pages. Because he was reared poor, in an out-of-the-way place, he thought if you were very social, you had to prove to him you weren't stupid as well. But as this was the only job open, he applied for and got it.

As soon as Twain signed his contract, the *Chronicle* editor informed him that the editor's wife was the president of the Women's Club of San Francisco, and she would be giving Mark Twain most of his stories. This was not an auspicious sign. Every day the editor's wife gave him one fluffy, inane story after another, all about social teas and charity balls, until soon Twain considered quitting. Then one day the editor's wife brought Twain what she eagerly announced was a monumentally big story. What's more important, her husband, the editor, had told her that if Twain wrote the story up, it would be the headline not only on the society page but also on the front page of the paper. Twain was intrigued. He got out pencil and writing pad and waited for the editor's

wife's grand news. She said, "Last night the Women's Club of San Francisco held a charity ball, and we raised one hundred dollars"—which was a fortune back then—"all of which we are sending back east to decorate the graves of the Union and Confederate soldiers." This was 1864 and the war was still on. Twain said, "I see. Now what's the interesting story?" "That's it!" she said. "Write it up. It's going to be the headline on the front page tomorrow."

So Twain wrote up the story just as she told him on regulation reporter paper for the next day's *Chronicle*. But to vent his disgust at such inanity he took another piece of regulation reporter paper, and on this one he wrote a parody of the Women's Club fete. The first paragraph was the same: "Women's Club of San Francisco raises \$100 at a charity ball and *says* they are sending it back east to decorate the graves of soldiers." But the second paragraph went, "The *Chronicle*, however, has a scoop. We have learned that they are not actually sending the money back east, to decorate soldiers' graves. Instead they are secretly sending it to a large plantation in the state of Alabama where black women and white men are bred together to produce a superior slave to work in all the homes of the wealthy throughout the South!"

This was in the absolutely worst possible taste. Twain didn't care because he'd written it up as a joke for a fellow cub reporter. The reporter would read it, enjoy a cheap laugh, and throw the parody away. As you might expect, events did not work out that way. Twain did put the bona fide article right on his desk where it was supposed to be collected for the next day's paper. And he placed the joke article in the cub reporter's cubicle, assuming that when he came in, he would read it and discard it. But the



cub reporter didn't come in that day because he had the Asian flu. Late that night the copyboy, who was illiterate, went around collecting the articles to be printed in the newspaper. Had he seen the joke article in the cubicle, and the real article on Twain's desk, that would have confused him. He would have taken it to the night editor, who of course could read, and the confusion would have been solved. Unfortunately for Twain, the joke article remained where it was in the cubicle (since the reporter didn't come in), but what about the real article? Twain had indeed put it on his desk, but he had neglected to put a paperweight on it. He had also left his window open, there had been a windstorm, and the real article had blown behind the door. Nobody saw it.

Imagine San Francisco's shock when the city awoke the next morning to read, as the *Chronicle's* headline on the front page, that the Women's Club was supporting a breeding farm of black women and white men in the state of Alabama! The Women's Club, as you may imagine, was not amused. Not only did the women insist Twain be fired, but Twain claimed they kicked him clean out of San Francisco and added, "Had those women had just a little more power, they would have banished me from the United States entirely."

This was the greatest humiliation of Twain's professional career; he could hardly expect to get a job as a reporter anywhere after such a fiasco. The only thing he could think of to do was to head for the Sierra Nevadas, not far from San Francisco, where gold had been discovered six months previously. Twain took miner's supplies and his high hopes, and off he went to the mining camp known as Angel Camp.

There was no gold—only mud; he found nothing except hard luck. He had virtually no money, and he was so depressed that he said later that it was the only time he actually tried to commit suicide. He would become possessed by depression again as an older man, and many times more he would think about suicide, but this was the only time he made the attempt. One night in the mining camp, he took a loaded gun, put it in his mouth, and pulled the trigger. As Twain said, had he been just a little more accurate a shot, he could probably have hurt himself. We have to assume that this impossible though hilarious episode falls under his category of "whoppers."

He survived, obviously, but remained deeply depressed. His brother sent him just enough money to have one shot of whiskey a week to try to drink himself into oblivion. One night, Twain was in the saloon of Angel Camp when a stranger came in at the stroke of midnight. Twain was the only person in the bar. The stranger looked at Twain and said, "It's late, I'm bored, and you're the only person in the saloon. I'll buy you a shot of liquor if you'll sit there and listen to a rather long story I just heard." Well, Twain wants the drink, so he says okay. The man buys him the shot of liquor and then starts to tell the story.

We don't know exactly what the man said to Twain, but we do know that Twain had in his pocket—because he had been a reporter—the stub of a pencil and a dirty scrap of paper. And as the man tells the story, Twain writes down seven famous words: "Frog, Bet, Jump, No Jump, Lose Bet." Why do I call these "famous words"? Because after the man told him the story, Twain goes back to his hut—he lived in a hovel at this mining camp—and half-drunk he writes up the

story in his own unique style. The name of this story is "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." He called it Calaveras County because that's the county in California that the mining camp was in.

If you don't know this story by Twain, you're not missing much. It's about a frog who jumps farther than any other frog in the world, so the owner of this jumping frog gets filthy rich, because he bets his frog against all other frogs in jumping contests and always wins. But then one day a clever stranger comes to town, and when the owner of the famous jumping frog is out of the room, the stranger opens up the jumping frog's mouth and pours in buckshot. Then when the owner comes back, the stranger says, "Let's have a bet. I'll bet my jumping frog against yours and we'll put all our money on it." The stranger's frog only jumps half an inch. But the famous jumping frog just sits there and belches out black pellets because it's full of lead. The stranger wins the bet. Now that's the entire story. You would not confuse it with *Romeo and Juliet* or *Moby-Dick*. And yet, in some ways, it is the most important story ever written in American literature. How come? Because, as you may suspect, it has in it the two gifts that Twain gave American literature that are so important that they have made him our number one author.

First, believe it or not, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" is the first story written in America that allows its characters to talk like Americans. What does that mean? It means it is the first story with American dialect. Before Twain wrote this story, earlier great American authors made their characters sound as if they were out of a drawing room in a Charles Dickens novel. Because England was the center of world culture during this period, every American

author before Twain modeled his characters' speech on English characters so that they all sounded as if they were British. But Twain said this was ridiculous. We in America don't sound like the English in real life, so why should we sound like them in our stories? Twain said, "My rule is, make your characters sound exactly like where they are from. For example, if you have a character from Maine in your story, give him a Yankee accent. If you have a character from Alabama, give him a Southern accent. If you have a character from Oregon, give him a Western accent. If you have a character who is a member of Congress, make him sound like an idiot." Some things don't change in a hundred years. He always made his characters speak *American*—that's his first gift.

But to be honest, that's not why he is our greatest author. It is the second gift in this story that makes him immortal. Believe it or not, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" is the first story written in America that was written *to have a sense of humor*. It is our first *funny* piece of literature. And you need to get something straight. When did Twain write this story? In 1870. When did we start writing in America? In 1620. We had been writing 250 years and had never produced a great funny story. I'm not saying we didn't have great literature before Twain. Goodness knows, *The Scarlet Letter* was written before Twain. There are many good things you can say about *The Scarlet Letter*, but you can't say that it's funny. Before Twain, "great" generally meant "serious." Twain gives us an American sense of humor. As everyone knows, the Puritans founded this country. They had a somber outlook. They thought that levity was the work of the devil. And for almost two hundred years, this mentality

was the American mentality. But in 1870, writing a funny story, Twain drags us kicking and screaming into the sunshine of American humor. Giving us our sense of humor in literature will probably always keep Mark Twain our greatest writer.

However, this story didn't actually do much for Twain's reputation. Every newspaper in America seemed to pick it up, but unfortunately, once people read it, everybody remembered the frog but nobody remembered Twain. Sometimes the newspapers didn't even put his name in the byline. He is depressed to realize that he now knows he can be funny, and he knows what brings out his greatest humor, but he's unknown to the reading public. So he moves to the East Coast and decides he needs to write something that will not only be funny but definitely associated with *him*.

He also knows that his greatest humor is evoked by society. He was always—as I told you—against good society. Wealthy people made the perfect butt for his satire, but he can't think of a topic to write about—until he sees a little advertisement in a newspaper in Massachusetts. It states that an Episcopal minister is taking a group from his congregation to the Holy Land—just as they do today—for a tour. Twain looks at that and thinks, "Gosh, what could be more wealthy or more stuffy than a group of Episcopalians going to the Holy Land." Twain thought, "If only I could get on that tour, disguise myself as a stuffy Episcopalian, and write up nasty satiric letters." He knew of some newspapers in New York, particularly in Brooklyn, that would even pay him to write such letters because the New York people couldn't stand Massachusetts, particularly wealthy Massachusetts Episcopalians. So, with the secret backing of

the newspapers, he goes on this trip with the Episcopalians to the Holy Land and discovers, to his delight, that they are far wealthier and far more stuffy than he could ever have hoped for. He writes back the most hilarious, satiric letters against them to the New York papers. I won't overwhelm you with many examples, but I can give you the best one.

The highlight of this trip—and it was advertised in the papers—was an outing the participants were going to take across the Sea of Galilee. The day of the outing dawned sunny. The stagecoach let them off at the very edge of the Sea of Galilee, where they saw an Arab who had this little boat. The Arab came up to them and in broken English said, "And now it's time for your twenty-minute trip across the Sea of Galilee. That will be eight dollars per person." Well, \$8 per person in Twain's day is about \$230 per person in our money, and Twain thought, "Not even these wealthy Episcopalians are going to shell out what is the equivalent of over two hundred dollars for a twenty-minute trip. But the father got out his wallet: eight dollars for him, eight dollars for the wife, eight dollars for the kid. Nobody complained." However, that's not how Twain wrote up this incident. He was much more succinct. All he said for the newspaper was "The Arab boatman was charging \$8 a person for the trip across the Sea of Galilee. Is it any wonder that Jesus walked?"

Now today, that's pretty funny, but back in Twain's day it was utter sacrilege—and the New Yorkers ate it up! They thought it was hilarious. Twain gets back, sees that he's a culture hero in New York for these hilarious letters, and Twain—who was always physically lazy—thought, "Why should I work myself to death trying to come up with a

funny book? Why not take these letters I wrote back from the trip, kind of throw them up in the air, have them come down in a different order, and make this my book?" He did. Called *Innocents Abroad*, this novel in Twain's day made him famous as a humorist, though it's not much read today because most of the humor has not held up all that well.

As you know, what makes him immortal today is the novel *Huckleberry Finn*. Yet when that novel was first published in 1885, it was a dud. Nobody bought *Huckleberry Finn* when it first came out. How come? Because word of mouth had let people know that its main character was not only the son of an alcoholic, but the son of such a severe alcoholic that the father had attempted to kill his own child. And people from good society thought, "Why would I waste money buying a book about the son of an alcoholic? This is so low-life. It has nothing to do with my good society." Then they found out that the second major character in *Huckleberry Finn* was a black slave named Jim. And again they thought, "Why would I waste money on a book that's about the son of an alcoholic and a black person? They have nothing to do with good society. I'm not going to read it." And the book would have died, except one woman single-handedly rescued it. It's a stirring story. You know this woman, I assume. You should. Her name? Louisa May Alcott, of Massachusetts.

Louisa May Alcott had become world famous for her book *Little Women*. She found out that Huck Finn was a "little man," figured this was her area, she'd give it a read. But she only reads half of *Huckleberry Finn*, put it down, and wrote Twain the following letter: "Dear Mr. Twain, I have tried to read your latest novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry*

*Finn*, but I find the characters and incidents in this book so low, so common, so vulgar and so dirty that I say to you, Mr. Twain, if you can't write a better book for our young people than *Huckleberry Finn* I suggest you don't write anything in the future." She sent it to Mark Twain. Was he upset? You bet he was. Because Louisa May Alcott had power. If she loved a book, it sold. If she hated a book, it died.

But poor Louisa May didn't know when to quit, and of course she had already been upset by Twain's less-than-flattering portrayal of the Massachusetts Episcopalians in *Innocents Abroad*. She hated *Huckleberry Finn* so much, because it was so low and dirty, that she went to the library board of her state of Massachusetts and got a law passed that banned the sale of *Huckleberry Finn* or its rental in libraries because of all its dirty incidents. Twain found out that his book was banned in Massachusetts. Was he upset? No. He simply took out huge ads the following week in magazines and newspapers throughout the country. They all said the same thing: "My latest book, *Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain, has been banned in the state of Massachusetts," and then in great big letters, "FOR ALL OF ITS DIRTY INCIDENTS." Sales shot up 300 percent—and that's an accurate figure—the next month. Everybody ran out to buy *Huckleberry Finn* hoping they'd get into a good dirty incident. Don't forget, this is the Victorian period. They weren't finding anything in their lives in that way, so they figured that maybe they'd find some relief in the novel. They read *Huckleberry Finn*—no dirty incidents.

What they did find was a very touching story about this little boy, Huck Finn, who had such an incredibly good conscience, though he was low in most ways, that he was risking

going to hell to save his black friend, the slave, Jim. People finished the book. They liked it. But we do have letters that they wrote Mark Twain that said, "Dear Mr. Twain, I enjoyed *Huck Finn*, but you did make one big mistake. You must not have realized that you made as the hero of this book—the most kind, giving, loving, decent person in the novel—the black slave, Jim." They said, "You can't make a black person the hero of a novel. Blacks have nothing to do with good society." Twain always gave the same answer: "The reason I made the black slave, Jim, the greatest character in *Huckleberry Finn* is because since blacks are *never* taken into good society, they are currently the only people in this country who have not been warped and totally ruined by the good society of which they are not a part." He added: "Because blacks aren't taken into good society, they are foolish enough to have to live by the dictates of Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. Because blacks aren't taken into good society, they foolishly think that the last shall one day be first, and because blacks are so ill-treated by white society today, not only must they survive any way they can, but they survive today with a dignity that most white people cannot even imagine."

Well, you know, even black people weren't saying this about blacks back then. So it was incredible that it came from a white Southerner—because, don't forget, Samuel Clemens, our Mark Twain, had blood that was half-Kentucky, half-Virginia. He was thoroughly Southern in his background. English professors will tell you that even today the greatest hero in American literature is Jim, the black slave. It should not shock us that our greatest hero in our literature is black. It should *amaze* us that he was invented by a white Southerner, in the 1880s, named Mark Twain.

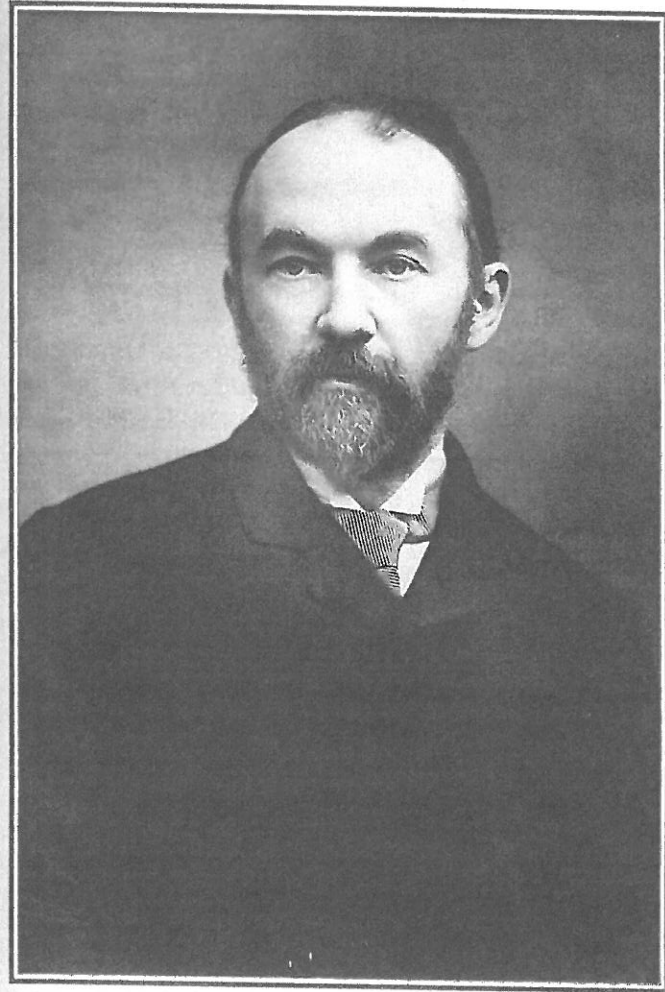
This novel made Twain so famous that he was a celebrity for the rest of his life. And when he was an old man, a reporter once said to him, "Of all your accomplishments, Mr. Twain, what is the one thing you are most proud of?" Twain thought about it and said, "Of all my accomplishments the one feat I am most proud of was to have been born on November 30." A rather odd thing to say. Why would Twain single out being born on November 30 as his greatest accomplishment? Here's why. Had you been alive on the night Mark Twain was born—he was born at 11:10 P.M., November 30, 1835—had you walked out of your log cabin that night and looked up into the sky, you would have seen a streak of white light go by that we call Halley's comet.

If you know anything about that comet, you know it can only be seen from earth once every seventy-five years or so. You can look up and see the comet, then it's gone for about seventy-five years, and then it comes back. Mark Twain, when he was ten, heard his mother say that on the night he was born, Halley's comet was in the sky. This so impressed Twain that for the rest of his life he told almost everybody he met—it became a bit boring after a while—"I came into the world with Halley's comet, I'm going out of the world with Halley's comet." In other words, he was saying, "I'm going to die when the comet is back in the sky." A rather dangerous prediction, because not only did it mean he would have to die when he was just about seventy-five, but it would be during the few weeks that you can see Halley's comet from Earth. When did Mark Twain die? April 21, 1910. Did he die during the few weeks when you can see Halley's comet from Earth? He did. Did he put a gun in his mouth and shoot himself to make sure he'd die on schedule?

ELLIOT ENGEL

No. Surprisingly he actually died of natural causes, when the comet was in the sky, just as he'd predicted.

But when you think about it, this is not such a feat. There must have been thousands of people who were born in 1835 when the comet was in the sky, who lived for what was back then a rather long life of seventy-five years, and who died when the comet was back. The only reason I'm wasting your time with this story is this. Had you been alive on the night Twain was born, not only would you have seen the comet in the sky, but if you knew a lot about astronomy, you might have realized that Halley's comet was *exactly* two weeks away in its orbit from the place it would be closest to Earth. Twain dies on April 21, 1910. Shockingly, not only is the comet in the sky, as he said it would be, but on the night Twain died, Halley's comet was *exactly* two weeks away in its orbit from the place it would be closest to Earth. So not only did he accurately predict that he would die when the comet was in the sky, but actually the comet—to the degree—was in the exact same spot for the one and only time in seventy-five years. Now, I think Mark Twain would certainly have wanted you to know that, but given how long I've gone on with this essay, that's probably about the last thing he would have wanted you to know.



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*Thomas Hardy*

(1840–1928)