

MARK TWAIN: MAN IN WHITE

→→ The Grand Adventure of His Final Years ←←



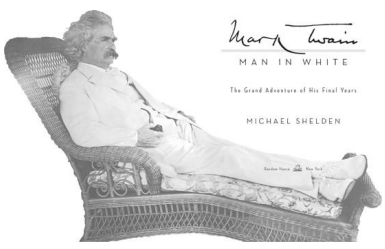
MICHAEL SHELDEN

Also by Michael Shelden

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Mark Twain
MAN IN WHITE

The Grand Adventure of His Final Years

MICHAEL SHELDEN



Don't part with your illusions.
When they are gone you may still exist,
but you have ceased to live.

MARK TWAIN

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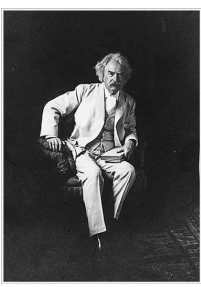
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*Clothes make the man.
Naked people have little or no influence in
society.*
MARK TWAIN¹
...

How the Man in Black
Became the Man in White

CITIZEN TWAIN

ON A BLUSTERY Friday afternoon in December 1906, Mark Twain arrived for a special appearance at the Library of Congress, trailing smoke from his usual brand of cheap cigar. The temperature hovered at freezing and the skies were gloomy, but he was dressed warmly in a long dark overcoat and a derby from which thick curls of white hair protruded on either side. At the main doors, facing the Capitol, he entered the Great Hall of the Library and made his way down a long marble corridor to the Senate Reading Room, where a hearing was in progress on copyright legislation. The Librarian of Congress—a dapper middle-aged man named Herbert Putnam—was expecting him and emerged from the hearing to escort Twain inside.

All heads turned as the famous guest strode to the front of the chamber, which was full of lobbyists, lawyers, authors, and publishers. Normally used as a private study for senators, the high-ceilinged room had the look and feel of an elegant club, with oak paneling, mahogany desks, black leather chairs, and a big marble fireplace. At a long conference table facing the gathering were the dozen or so members of the Joint Congressional Committee on Patents, chaired by a jowly Republican lawyer from South Dakota, Senator Alfred Beard Kittredge.

A representative of the player piano industry, a Mr. Low, was droning on about copyright protection for perforated music rolls—"May I suggest an addition to clause (b) of section 1"—when Twain reached his seat and paused to remove his overcoat. By this simple gesture he caused—as one observer later put it—"a perceptible stir." That was an understatement. Against the fading light of the afternoon Twain emerged as a figure clothed all in white. His outfit perfectly matched his hair, from his white collar and cravat—held in place by a "creamy moonstone"—to his white shoes. Among so many soberly dressed fellows in black and gray, he stood out as a gleaming apparition, impossible to ignore.⁴

"Mark Twain Bids Winter Defiance," said the headline in the *New York Herald* the next day. "Resplendent in a White Flannel Suit, Author Creates a Sensation." The *New York World* called his costume "the most remarkable suit" of the season, and another paper said he was a "vision from the equator" who warmed the hearts of his audience while "the wintry wind whistled around the dome of the Capitol." The best comment came from the *Boston Herald*: "Oh, that all lobbyists could enter the congressional corridors in raiment as spotless as Mark Twain's."⁵

All day long, Senator Kittredge and his colleagues had been listening to various experts explain the fine points of the nation's copyright laws, and much of the discussion had been dry and tedious. The committee

members had grown restless and bored as they listened to yet another lobbyist argue his case with statistics and legal precedents. But the moment Twain removed his overcoat, the room came to life, and the legislators stared wide-eyed at the man in white as he waited his turn to speak.

Twain's good friend and fellow novelist William Dean Howells, who was sitting nearby, was so taken aback by this unconventional outfit that the first words from his mouth were "What in the world did he wear that white suit for?" Appearing in such clothing at a formal gathering was a shocking breach of etiquette. In summer months, Washington was full of people in white suits, but in December nobody dared to dress that way.¹

Twain's suit is now so famous that modern depictions of the author rarely show him in any other garb. The common assumption is that it was his signature look for much of his career. In fact, Senator Kittredge's otherwise dull committee hearing marked not only the public debut of Twain's uniform, but the beginning of an extraordinary period in which the author—who had just turned seventy-one—fashioned much of the image by which he is still known a century afterward.

He planned this debut carefully, and knew how the world would react. As a man who had spent years bedazzling audiences at lectures and banquets, he had a keen appreciation for the power of theatrical effects, and was sure that no one would forget the way he looked in white. Only two months earlier he had confessed privately, "I hope to get together courage enough to wear white clothes all through the winter. . . . It will be a great satisfaction to me to show off in this way." He wasn't ashamed to seek attention, explaining, "The desire for fame is only the desire to be continuously conspicuous and attract attention and be talked about." Indeed, his debut in white provoked comment on front pages everywhere. For several days it was all anyone could talk about.²

It wasn't by chance that he chose to reveal his new look in one of the most conspicuous places in America—the nation's greatest library. Though the building was only ten years old, it was already regarded as a monument for the ages. Built in the style of the Paris Opera House, it had the kind of splendor usually associated with great landmarks of the Old World—with soaring columns, grand arches, and a massive dome. Admirers boasted that it was "the largest, the costliest, and the safest" library in the world. For a literary man wanting to stage a sensational event, there wasn't a better backdrop.³

Though the extensive press coverage pleased him, Twain wasn't merely showing off. He had serious business to conduct at the hearing, where he wanted to urge legislators to change the system of copyright law, which he considered archaic and unjust. It was a subject close to his heart. For years he had been fighting to improve the system, but now he regarded the problem with a greater sense of urgency. His long career was nearing its end, and the future of his life's work was at stake.

When he stood up to speak, he knew that he would command complete attention. Like a good showman, he understood that his words would seem all the more

impressive coming after so many lackluster speeches by ordinary men in conventional attire. For almost half an hour, he held the floor, addressing the room directly instead of speaking only to the legislators. Though he had composed a few rough notes earlier in the afternoon, he didn't bother to refer to them. He preferred to speak from the heart, and did so without hesitation, employing sound reasoning and amusing anecdotes, and making an occasional sardonic swipe at the glacial pace of reform. His real audience was not the men in the room, but the larger American public who would read of his appearance in their newspapers the next day.

Many writers, unaccustomed to addressing such a gathering, would have felt intimidated. But not Twain, whose confidence in his own rhetorical powers was as high as his opinion of most congressmen was low. He once said that America had "no native criminal class except Congress." Two weeks before coming to the hearing he had remarked privately, "All Congresses and Parliaments have a kindly feeling for idiots, and a compassion for them, on account of personal experience and heredity." For the benefit of his case, however, he treated the committee as though they were a group of thoroughly upright and thoughtful men and spoke to them as politely as possible.⁷

At the time, copyrighted works enjoyed protection for a period of forty-two years following the date of publication. Senator Kittredge was sponsoring a bill with a new limit—one that began with the death of the author and continued for fifty years. He considered this provision more than generous, and Twain was willing to accept it. But what America's most famous writer really wanted was something that most authors were too modest to suggest—copyright in perpetuity for all literary works.

Why should the rights of someone possessing literary property, he asked, be any different from those of a landowner? "I am quite unable to guess why there should be a limit at all to the possession of the product of a man's labor. There is no limit to real estate. ... You might just as well, after you had discovered a coal mine and worked it for forty-two years, have the government step in and take it away."

What was worse, he went on, the current system didn't benefit anyone except publishers. "It merely takes the author's property, merely takes from his children the bread and profit of that book, and gives the publisher *double* profit. ... And they continue the enjoyment of these ill-gotten gains generation after generation, for they never die. They live forever, publishers do."⁸

He was the last speaker of the day, and there was a general feeling among the audience "that they were being rewarded for the long waiting." Their faces softened, and they leaned forward to catch every word. As one reporter noted, "He made a speech the serious parts of which created a strong impression, and the humorous parts set the Senators and Representatives in roars of laughter."⁹

Though he was one of the oldest men in the room, he didn't act it. His mind was as sharp as ever, his eyes full of life, his figure straight and trim. His long speech was—in the words of the *New York Times*—"a star performance," and the response couldn't have

been better. "When the last sentence was spoken," an eyewitness wrote, "the applause came like an explosion."¹⁰

As much as his audience enjoyed the speech, it was what he wore that made the strongest impression. There were a few dissenting voices. The *Washington Post* made fun of him for "wearing a linen duster in the middle of winter," and a Chicago paper joked that he was parading through the capital in "last summer's yachting clothes." But the author was oblivious to such criticism, and—as he expected—his new look as the Man in White quickly became fixed in the popular imagination. William Dean Howells revised his initial opinion that the outfit was inappropriate and admitted that his friend's appearance at the hearing was "a magnificent coup." (He would later joke that he always felt underdressed when Twain wore white, "as if I had come in my nighty.")¹¹

As soon as the news of his appearance at the Library of Congress became widely known, everyone wanted to see the new costume, and he obliged by wearing it often, and by posing in it for photographers again and again. He asked his tailor to produce a set of six identical suits in both serge and flannel with matching shirts, ties, and waistcoats. More were added later, while a few gray suits were reserved for travel and ordinary wear.

In the twilight of his career Twain was making visual what his friends had long accepted as factual—that he was one of a kind, an American original who would be talked about long after he was gone, and whose works would surely last as long as the Library of Congress itself. He could dress in white and get away with it because he was Mark Twain, and that was the only excuse he needed. As he had explained to a New York audience earlier in the year, "I was born modest, but it didn't last."¹²

A GREAT EXAGGERATION

I have achieved my seventy years in the usual way: by sticking strictly to a scheme of life which would kill anybody else.¹³

...

It is easy to understand why Mark Twain's new look made such a powerful and enduring impression on the world. There isn't much agreement, however, on why he suddenly wanted to wear white for the rest of his life. Some have said that he was obsessed in old age with cleanliness. It's true that he once told an audience he could wear one of his suits "for three days without a blemish." But as an old man who tended to scatter cigar ash wherever he went, he didn't mean for his boast of immaculate grooming to be taken any more seriously than his occasional claim that he didn't like "to attract too much attention" when he wore white.¹⁴

He was having fun with reporters when he informed them that his suit was "the uniform of the American Association of Purity and Perfection, of which I am president, secretary, and treasurer, and the only man in the United States eligible to membership." In his bright new clothes there was a mock suggestion of the virginal, which appealed to his sense of the absurd

while at the same time suggesting a real spirit of innocence and freshness that reinforced his reputation for boyish high jinks and recalled his youth in the Mississippi Valley, where—in Huck Finn's words—successful men often appeared in "linen so white it hurt your eyes to look at it."¹⁵

There was also a hint of rebellion against adult conformity by one who had never wanted to grow old. As Howells once said of him, "He was a youth to the end of his days, the heart of a boy with the head of a sage; the heart of a good boy, or a bad boy, but always a willful boy." Sounding like an overgrown Huck Finn among fancy Easterners, Twain once referred to his white outfit as "my dontcareadam suit." To a reporter for the *New York Tribune*, he declared, "When you are seventy-one years old you may at least be pardoned for dressing as you please. ... When I look around at the men in their black evening clothes I am disagreeably impressed with the fact that they are no more cheerful and no more pleasant to look at than a lot of crows."¹⁶

Though he was inclined to say amusing things about his new look whenever he spoke of it to the press, the uniform signaled more than a simple defiance of writer's gloom and the tyranny of fashion. There was something more significant behind his choice of such an unconventional outfit. Wearing white at his age was a kind of joke on death—a playful way of pretending that it had little power over him, and that he wouldn't submit to it until he was good and ready. Determined not to waste his last years in a dreary shuffle toward extinction, he wanted to go out in the grand fashion of a man who had made a deep impression on the world, and who was convinced that nothing about him—including the manner of his passing—would be forgotten.

In a candid discussion with his friend and authorized biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine—who later published the details of their talk—Twain confessed that in his old age he wanted to set himself free from gloomy reminders of past sorrows, final partings, and—invariably—from his own approaching end.

"I can't bear to put on black clothes again," he told Paine. "If we are going to be gay in spirit, why be clad in funeral garments? ... When I put on black it reminds me of my funerals. I could be satisfied with white all the year round."

A little while later he came back to his biographer and announced, "I have made up my mind not to wear black any more, but white, and let the critics say what they will."¹⁷

After returning from his first outing in "snow-white"—to use his description—he made much of the fact that everyone else had looked "funereal" as they stood around in ordinary dark suits. "Like delegates to an undertaker's convention," he scoffed. "As for black clothes," he said, "my aversion for them is incurable."¹⁸

Black clothing brought to mind some of the most painful moments from his intimate life as a father and husband. Three deaths haunted him: first, the sudden passing of his infant son, Langdon, more than thirty years earlier; then, in the 1850s, the death of his favorite daughter—Susy—after a brief illness ended her life at twenty-four; and, finally, the loss of his beloved wife, Olivia—or "Livy," as he called her—who

slowly succumbed to heart disease. Her death took place only two and a half years before he made his grand debut in white. The timing—as always with Twain—was crucial.

In the aftermath of his wife's death, he and his two surviving children—Clara and her younger sister, Jean, both adults—dressed in black for an extended period, as was the custom. But Clara took her mourning to an extreme, retiring from the world for several months and wearing not only black dresses, but also heavy black veils. A striking photograph from the period captures her grief-stricken figure swathed in black, looking as lifeless as a statue positioned beside her solemn father. The picture was taken during the return voyage from Italy, where Livy's effort to regain her health had failed after a stay of eight months. She died on June 5, 1904.

For a time, this grim atmosphere was all-pervasive, and Twain came to feel that it was suffocating him. Shortly after losing his wife, he lamented, "The world is black today, & I think it will never lighten again." A few days later he wrote, "In my life there have been 68 Junes—but how vague and colorless 67 of them are contrasted with the deep blackness of this one."¹³

As the weeks of mourning turned to months, the dark cloud slowly lifted, and he tried to shun any oppressive thoughts of death. He began to take an active part in society again, seeing old friends, going to small parties, and giving talks in New York. By the end of 1906, he was ready to make a dramatic break from the past. Going to the opposite extreme of Clara's behavior, he decided to wear only white from head to toe as often as possible. It was a sign of affirmation, a show of faith in what remained of his life.

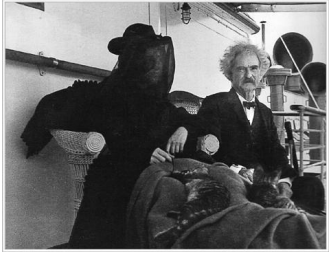


Mark Twain's older surviving daughter, Clara, was so fond of wearing black that her piano teacher in Vienna, Theodor Leschetzky, nicknamed her "Night."

As it happened, he didn't have much time left—only three and a half years. But he would turn this period into one of the most eventful of his life. He would make new friends, create a few enemies, pursue some old

dreams, develop fresh ambitions, and stir up trouble by testing the limits of what he could say and do.

And there would be no lack of drama. In this short period he built a mansion in Redding, Connecticut, survived a burglary by a couple of gun-toting thieves, enjoyed flirtatious friendships with some of the prettiest actresses on Broadway, debated female sexuality with the woman who coined the phrase "the it girl," helped a group of slum children start a theater, entertained a Texas Ranger, stayed out until four in the morning partying with showgirls and dancing dogs, explored Bermuda, pretended that he had been lost at sea, joked with the king and queen of England on the grounds of Windsor Castle, recited Romantic poetry to society ladies at the Waldorf-Astoria, used his influence to avoid being called for jury duty in the ragtime era's "Trial of the Century," taught little girls how to play billiards and cards, published books on heaven and Shakespeare, and almost allowed himself to be swindled out of everything he had.



On the return voyage from Italy after her mother's death, Clara was inconsolable and covered herself from head to toe in black. She remained in mourning for many months. Two years later Twain remarked, "When I put on black it reminds me of my funerals. I could be satisfied with white all the year round."

And while all these things were happening, he held fast to his stated policy and took every opportunity to make himself conspicuous in white.²⁴

Among the rich and powerful, he regarded himself as the equal of anyone and often made that clear in this last stage of his life. He picked fights with King Leopold of Belgium and Mary Baker Eddy of the Christian Science church, upstaged Theodore Roosevelt at an international exhibition, talked politics with Winston Churchill at the House of Commons, drank whiskey with Andrew Carnegie, played golf with Woodrow Wilson, and appeared in a film made by Thomas Edison's company. In the literary world, he gave encouragement to a wide range of writers, sharing ghost stories with the author of *Dracula*, finding promise in the talents of the young Willa Cather, and forming a bond of mutual admiration with George Bernard Shaw.

Just before turning seventy-one, he looked ahead

and acknowledged the usual worries about what he once called "troubled and foreboding Age." But he also found reasons to be optimistic, agreeing with a friend's claim that "the best of life begins at seventy." He wanted to enjoy his money and fame before it was too late, and he relished the idea of doing exactly as he pleased for the rest of his life. "You have earned your holiday," he told himself. Instead of fretting over how much time he had left, he decided that he wouldn't be ruled by the calendar and would concentrate on having fun.⁴¹

He had a long history of dismissing the question of his death with artful, and memorably comic, statements. He was a relatively robust sixty-one when a journalist—Frank Marshall White—asked for his response to a rumor that he was dying. White sent a cable to his New York editor with Twain's famous comment: "The report of my death was an exaggeration." Other press accounts altered this to read, "The reports of my death are grossly exaggerated," and "grossly" was soon replaced by "greatly" in the more popular version. "Of course I'm dying," Twain told White, "but I'm not dying any faster than anybody else." He was amused at how often his initial comment was reprinted and embellished, wryly observing, "It keeps turning up ... in the newspapers when people have occasion to discount exaggeration."⁴²

He liked to joke about the possibility of preparing his own obituary. It was an idea that he may have taken from the greatest showman of the age, P. T. Barnum, whose dying wish was to see his own obituary printed. To oblige Barnum, the *New York Evening Sun* famously arranged to publish a "premature" report: "Great and Only Barnum," the headline said two weeks before he died in 1891. "He Wanted to Read His Obituary, Here It Is."

Several years later, Mark Twain went to the trouble of writing a mock letter to the press, politely asking for "access to my standing obituaries, with the privilege—if this is not asking too much—of editing, not their Facts, but their Verdicts." As an incentive for compliance to his request, he suggested a reward of no small value: "For the best Obituary—one suitable for me to read in public, and calculated to inspire regret—I desire to offer a Prize, consisting of a Portrait of me done entirely in pen and ink without previous instruction." A few papers responded by printing tongue-in-cheek tributes to the "dead" author. The *New York World* trumpeted its eulogy with a nice pun on the false assertion in the headline, "Here Lies Mark Twain."⁴³

A subversive at heart, Twain loved undercutting easy assumptions—even his own. Which is one reason why he was so fond of exaggeration. It undercuts itself. He jested so often about death that many of his contemporaries stopped taking him seriously on the subject and wondered whether he might outlive most of his generation and die in his late eighties—as his mother had done—or even survive into his nineties and beyond. His admirers couldn't imagine a world without him. And sometimes he felt that way himself, toying with the notion that his ghostly appearance in white clothes created the impression that he was already beyond death's reach. "Time is pushing me inexorably along," he said at the turn of the twentieth

century. "I am approaching the threshold of age; in 1977 I shall be 142."²⁴

As long as he planned on being around for a while, it made sense in an odd way to choose a hearing on copyright legislation as the place to reveal his new look. There was an extra incentive for extending his life if he could also extend the life of his books by keeping them under copyright. If Congress agreed to pass a new law guaranteeing protection for at least fifty years after the author's death, then the longer Twain lived, the longer his work would survive for the benefit of his heirs.

For years he had been piling up manuscripts to be published only after he was gone. He wanted to entertain posterity by leaving to his heirs the job of issuing new works every decade or so. These were meant to go off like time bombs, each intended to cause a periodic ruckus, keeping his name in the news and his fame alive. Such would prove to be the case when some of the more sensational autobiographical pieces began appearing in the 1930s and 1940s—especially those collected in a volume called, appropriately, *Mark Twain in Erupcion*. These works were enthusiastically received in just the manner the author intended—as defiant protests from the grave. "He said things after his death," a surprised Theodore Dreiser declared of Twain in 1935, "that he never dared say in his life."²⁵

While diligently dictating his autobiography in old age, Twain often paused to consider the amazement with which his manuscripts would be greeted by posterity. Never one to think small, he had no doubt that his vast literary output would continue attracting readers into the next century, and that the demand would always exist for fresh revelations from his manuscript hoard. Speculating in 1906 on what future audiences would say of his unpublished comments on religious bigotry and social hypocrisy, he took a long view. "The edition of A.D. 2006 will make a stir when it comes out," he wrote confidently, "I shall be hovering around taking notice, along with other dead pals." (He managed to continue hovering through the summer of 2008, he would have seen his face adorning the cover of *Time*, which called him "Our Original Superstar.")²⁶

As an author who was used to seeing his works lavishly illustrated, and who appreciated the importance of images, he was aware that his new look made an unforgettable illustration of his own star appeal. The Man in White was not only an entertaining sight, but one that seemed to require comment. He was a cigar-store angel come to life, with a mischievous eye on this world, and a curious one on the next. Such a figure furnished a spectacle that was both comic and tragic, a spirited celebration of life's rewards and a clown's lament of his own mortality.

The full effect may have been lost on contemporaries who thought he was simply trying to amuse them, but he made it clear from the beginning that his decision to adopt a new image was inextricably linked to his unavoidable encounter with death. "I have reached the age where dark clothes have a depressing effect on me," he told the press in 1906. "Light-colored clothing is more pleasing to the eye and enlivens the spirit. Now, of course, I cannot compel everyone to wear such clothing just for my

special benefit, so I do the next best thing and wear it myself."²¹

Though his literary career was largely at an end, he wanted to use all the creative force remaining in him to put the finishing touches on a life as complex and dazzling as anything in his fiction. As Howells remarked of the final years, "His literature grew less and less and his life more and more." In many ways Twain was never more alive—and never more perceptive—than in this eventful period that lasted a mere forty months. He turned it into an epic progress, beginning with his appearance in Washington at the end of 1906 and concluding with the world's parting glimpse of him in April 1910, when the many mourners at his funeral in New York looked down at his open casket and saw Mark Twain still splendidly arrayed in white.²²

STRAINED RELATIONS

All of us contain Music & Truth, but most of us can't get it out.²³

...

Though Twain's old age was much sadder than many of his contemporaries would have guessed—especially at the very end—it was also funnier and a lot happier than later generations of critics and biographers have been willing to admit. But the temptation to see the writer's old age as blighted in one way or another is considerable.

It is true that much of his writing in his last years is full of rage against the frailties of human nature, the cruelties of life, and the chaos of the universe. Surely, the reasoning goes, the bitter, scathing antagonist of the "damned human race" felt overwhelmed by the darkness of the world, and suffered accordingly. The septuagenarian Twain who is so often portrayed as nothing but an acerbic old cynic is supposed to sound like this: "Isn't human nature the most consummate sham & lie that was ever invented? Isn't man a creature to be ashamed of in pretty much all his aspects? Is he really fit for anything but to be stood up on the street corner as a convenience for dogs? Man, 'know thyself—& then thou wilt despise thyself,' to a dead moral certainty."

These would seem to be the words of an American Lear, gnashing his teeth and pulling out his white hair in an old man's rant. But, no, these are Mark Twain's words in a letter written to a friend in 1884, when he was still in his forties—at the peak of his powers, in the bloom of health, and surrounded by adoring friends and a loving family in one of the finest houses in the fair city of Hartford, Connecticut.²⁴

In fact, he was always fond of savagely attacking the moral failings of his fellow humans and of exposing their distorted views of themselves and their world. He didn't need to wait until old age to discover that humanity wasn't all it pretended to be. The main thing that changed between middle age and old age was that he became less guarded about sharing his unvarnished opinions, putting them in formal literary pieces intended for eventual publication rather than merely venting his feelings to sympathetic friends in

letters or conversations.

With close companions such as Howells and Joseph Twichell—his Hartford neighbor and family minister—he was accustomed to launching vitriolic outbursts against all kinds of injustice, knowing they would understand that his fierce tirades didn't represent the sum of his views nor the full measure of his character. At the end of an especially angry letter to Reverend Twichell on the subject of political hypocrisy, he declared, "I have written you to-day, not to do you a service, but to do myself one. There was bile in me. I had to empty it. ... I have used you as an equilibrium-restorer more than once in my time, & shall continue, I guess."³¹

Twain's moods changed frequently, and it is unrealistic to saddle him with one dominant emotion during his final years, when he was as likely to assume the part of the joker as that of the angry prophet. As Clara once observed of her father, he was always a man of many emotions, a "cyclonic warrior one moment—lily-of-the-valley the next." He could easily shift from merry to morose in the blink of an eye, attacking human folly one minute and penning Valentine's Day verses to little girls the next. Writing in 1906 to the wife of a close friend, he was in typical form when he shrugged off the fact that he was feeling low and worn out emotionally after a hard night. He explained that it was only a short bout of "a disease I am not much subject to—depression of spirits," and added, "I am all right, this morning, in all ways."³²

He was fearless in his ability to delve deep into the shadows of life and to confront the painful truths lurking there. But what sets him apart from so many other writers with a talent for staring into the abyss is his ability to face the worst and still find reason to laugh. Sometimes his laughter was derisive, mocking, or weary, but often it was simply an expression of his inexhaustible love of the comic and the absurd. He was never so glum that he couldn't find some reason to lighten his anger with a joke.

In our modern eagerness to highlight his darker side, we do him a disservice by pretending that his matchless sense of humor suddenly failed him in his last years. At his best, he was never merely funny. Or merely serious. Rather, he delighted in slyly mixing the two, and loved nothing better than creating confusion between them. When a pious lady approached him and gushed, "How God must love you!" he solemnly replied, "I hope so," but out of her hearing added in a perfect deadpan, "I guess she hasn't heard of our strained relations."³³

If he had been an ordinary man, he might have been crushed by the various disappointments he suffered in a tumultuous life that began in the steam age and ended almost seventy-five years later at the dawn of the aviation age. But modern critics who so easily imagine him crippled by misfortune and blind anger forget how difficult his life had been from the beginning. He survived into his seventies for a reason. He was made of strong stuff, having learned early to cope with adversity in a frontier environment that was demanding and unforgiving.³⁴

He grew up with two thousand miles of wilderness at his back and the continent's mightiest river at his feet. As a young steamboat pilot he learned to follow the

twists and turns of that river for hundreds of miles, in daylight and in darkness, upstream and down. And he also learned how to take the measure of the many men and women who flocked to the river from all parts of the world. Some came to revel in the freedom of frontier life, some to undermine and corrupt it.

He saw the worst and best in humanity, from the generous residents of Memphis who cared for the brother he lost in an explosion on the river, to the slavers who plied their awful trade in human beings from Missouri to Louisiana. Though he spent half his life in comfort among genteel Easterners, his character was forged in the West among people of exceptional toughness and resourcefulness. They provided him with a view of the world that mixed hard realism with a boisterous love of life.

He lived at a time when everyone took it for granted that existence was short, and that a good run of luck could end at any moment, wiping out fortunes and destroying whole families. No private empire was safe, no happy family secure. Stupendous success was often merely a prelude to stupendous failure. Swindlers and speculators ruined innocent lives, banks failed, and financial panics put old established firms out of business overnight. Young brides and their infants were swept into early graves by the perils of childbirth. Even in the best towns, epidemics of cholera and typhus and deadly influenza were constant threats.

In 1876, when his own happiness seemed untreatened, Twain was well aware that his world could collapse at any moment: "What a curious thing life is. We delve away, through years of hardship, wasting toil, despondency, then comes a little butterfly season of wealth, ease, & clustering honors.—Presto! the wife dies, a daughter marries a spendthrift villain, the heir & hope of the house commits suicide, the laurels fade & fall away. Grand result of a hard-fought, successful career & a blameless life. Piles of money, tottering age, & a broken heart."²⁵

He would come to know the pain of such misfortunes, and would complain bitterly of them. Some of his worst fears did, in fact, come true—a fortune lost, a wife and a beloved daughter in their graves, and another child plagued by chronic disease. But to think that these tragedies—hard as they were to bear—were enough to break Mark Twain's spirit is to misjudge his character completely. Resilient and restless in the best tradition of the West, he did not merely endure old age, but repeatedly demonstrated an ability to rise above its limitations and tragedies, and to seek out pleasures to offset its pains.

One of his admirers during his last decade—Willa Cather—was flabbergasted when she later encountered Van Wyck Brooks's argument in *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (1920) that the old humorist was a "storm-beaten human drift, a derelict, washing about on a forlorn sea." Having known the famous man well enough to be granted an audience while he spent a lazy morning in bed, she believed that if Van Wyck Brooks "had ever seen that old lion in bed telling stories, he never could have written his book." Cather was right. Twain had the spirit of a lion as well as the roar.²⁶

THE UNIVERSE OF MARK

It "graves" me, to this day, to put my will in the weak shape of a request, instead of launching it in the crisp language of an order.³¹

...

At the height of his glory Mark Twain was a literary giant in a gilded age filled with legendary movers and shakers of all kinds—Carnegie, Edison, Rockefeller, Theodore Roosevelt. But none of these titans enjoyed the kind of affection that greeted Twain wherever he went. It isn't an exaggeration to say that, in the first decade of the twentieth century, he was the most famous, and the most beloved, person in America. His image was so familiar that it was regularly featured in advertising for everything from cigars to kitchen stoves. The press eagerly reported even the slightest events in his life. Dockhands cheered him at foreign ports; policemen stopped traffic to let him cross the road; customs agents allowed him to travel without inspection; and postal authorities tracked him down to deliver letters addressed to him by name only. When he entered a restaurant or theater, people would stand up to applaud.

Long before he left this world, his status as an immortal figure in popular culture seemed assured. His books were classics, and occupied a place of honor in many American homes. His spectacular rise from humble beginnings to national hero was almost as familiar as Abraham Lincoln's similar story. In fact, after his death, he was praised as the "Lincoln of our literature."³²

Throughout his last decade he received the deferential treatment worthy of a legend. When he visited the Capitol on his mission to lobby for copyright legislation, he took over the Speaker's private chamber as his temporary office. The next day he ambled over to the White House, and was promptly taken to see Theodore Roosevelt after casually telling the doorkeeper, "I want the usual thing—I want to see the President." When he came out a few minutes later, he announced confidently, "The President is one with us on the copyright matter."³³

In New York, where he kept a leased house on Fifth Avenue, he liked to go out on Sundays when the sidewalks were full of crowds leaving church and stroll along in a cloud of cigar smoke, pausing occasionally to nod regally when someone said hello. If the press accused him of being too proud, he was always ready with a mock response of contrite humility. Told that he had been too familiar in a conversation with King Edward VII, he replied that he had done nothing of the kind: "I was reared in the most exclusive circles of Missouri and I know how to behave."³⁴

He enjoyed a pampered existence, lounging in bed for a good part of the day, "propped against snowy pillows" and looking like an emperor in "a handsome silk dressing gown of rich Persian pattern." It was a family joke that he spent so much time in bed his hair had "assumed the color of his pillow." His unruly mane prompted one irreverent critic to speculate that Twain's "principal recreation is not parting his hair." At whatever hour he chose to get up, he would be disappointed if he found the house empty and would seek out companions. Depending on his mood, he

liked the company of cats, impressionable young men, innocent girls, well-bred ladies of various ages, or a few elderly gentlemen whose renown was great, but not nearly as great as his own. If he could find anyone willing to join him in a game of billiards, he was happy to continue playing until midnight and beyond.⁴¹

In an age when many people lived on less than two dollars a day, his income rose to as much as a hundred thousand dollars a year. He was the highest paid writer in America, and it was widely reported that his magazine contributions could earn a dollar a word. In fact, his last contract with Harper & Brothers guaranteed him only a third of that, but it was still a better deal than anyone else could have expected, and he always insisted on a strict word count from his editors, even going so far as to demand that hyphenated words be counted as two. Legend has it that when an admirer enclosed a dollar with a request for his autograph, he replied not with his signature but with the single word "Thanks," in accordance with his rumored rate.⁴²

After he was described in the *African Monthly* as "Mark Twain, originally of Missouri, but then of Hartford, and now ultimately of the solar system, not to say the universe," he took pleasure in thinking of his name floating somewhere among distant planets. "If we can prove that my fame has reached to Neptune and Uranus, and possibly to some systems a little beyond there, why, that would satisfy me." When an English journalist asked his opinion of a Russian plan for disarmament, he saw no reason why his powers should not extend to the establishment of world peace. "The Tsar is ready to disarm. I am ready to disarm. Collect the others; it should not be much of a task now."⁴³

Until his final months, he looked hearty enough to most observers. (Just shy of five foot nine, he weighed a trim 158 pounds.) "You couldn't never think of him as old," said a family servant. "Why he used to run upstairs three steps at a time." As Clara recalled, "He was fundamentally young to the day of his death. ... His movements were quick and decided. His laugh was spontaneous and hearty." Twain himself frequently declared that he always felt young inside. "I am only able to perceive I am old by a mental process," he said at seventy. "I am altogether unable to feel old in spirit."⁴⁴

He liked to boast that, after having survived a sickly period in his youth, his health improved so much that it had remained exceptionally good ever since. In his forties he wrote, "During the first seven years of my life I had no health—I may almost say that I lived on allopathic medicine, but since that period I have hardly known what sickness is." The improvement was so remarkable that even an early addiction to tobacco didn't cause a relapse. "I began to smoke immoderately when I was eight years old," he claimed. Smoking cigars, he believed, had proven "to be the best of all inspirations for the pen, and, in my particular case, no sort of detriment to the health." When his pen was moving at top speed, he could go through twenty or more cigars a day. At such times, he added, "I smoke with all my might, and allow no intervals."⁴⁵

A FIRST-CLASS LIFE

I know if I was going to be hanged I could get up and
make a good showing, and I intend to.⁵⁸

...

The thick haze of his favorite cigar may have left Twain confused about the exact age at which his love affair with tobacco began. But he was right about the sudden break from his early years of sickness. In a matter of months, young Samuel Langhorne Clemens of Hannibal, Missouri, had gone from being "a pale, sickly boy who did a great deal more thinking than was good for him" to a constant companion of the most adventurous boys in his little hometown on the Mississippi. No one was more shocked by this change than his mother, Jane Clemens, who doubted from the start that he would survive childhood. Recalling the day of his birth—November 30, 1835—she said, "When I first saw him, I could see no promise in him. ... He was a poor looking object to raise."⁵⁷

She knew from hard experience how quickly death could strike in frontier villages where disease spread easily. She lost her husband—John Clemens, a dignified but impecunious country lawyer and storekeeper—to an attack of pneumonia when he was only forty-eight. Three of her seven children fell victim to illness early in life. She never forgot the morning when Margaret, the younger of her two daughters, left for school reciting lines from the day's lesson—"God is a spirit & they that worship him must worship him in spirit & in truth"—for these were the last words she remembered her daughter saying before sickness overcame the girl. When Margaret arrived home at the end of the day, she was in the grip of a high fever and was put to bed. She lingered for nearly a week, becoming increasingly incoherent and lapsing into a coma from which she never awoke.⁵⁸

Such a painful loss might have been a devastating blow to a weaker woman, but Jane was remarkably strong and held the family together through many hardships and tragedies. As young Sam—the sixth of her seven children—observed of her, she was not one to dwell on misfortune, but kept "a sunny disposition" until the end of her days. Quick-witted and playful, she was able to banter with her famous son even in old age. When she used to spin tales about his childhood illnesses, he would tease her by raising an eyebrow and inquiring earnestly, "Afraid I wouldn't live?" And she would tease him back: "No—afraid you would."⁵⁹

Though her memory often failed her in later years, she remained a spirited, engaging character until her death at eighty-seven. Her son admired the way she never let her troubles—not even the pains of age—diminish her love of life. And, no doubt, the pride he felt in her frontier resiliency was also partly a reflection of the pride he felt in his own. "To the very day of her death," he wrote a month after the event, "she felt a strong interest in the whole world and everything and everybody in it. In all her life she never knew such a thing as a half-hearted interest in affairs and people. ... I am certain it was this feature of my mother's makeup that carried her so far toward ninety."⁶⁰

Only a few years before Twain's own death, a reporter was sufficiently impressed by his lively

manner to declare confidently, "One must see this big, boisterous man, with the red-veined cheeks of health and the little gray-blue eyes sparkling with the light of laughter, half hidden under the drooping bristles of his eyebrows, to appreciate why he can afford to joke even with death. He is 72, and any insurance company, one would hazard, would take him to-day as a 'first-class life,' and be glad of the opportunity."⁵¹

But the rosy surface was deceptive, and Twain couldn't ignore it. The ill effects of having lived so self-indulgently for so long were unavoidable, though it wasn't until very late in life that he was forced to face them. His smoking habit left him with a chronic cough, occasional bouts of bronchitis, and a "tobacco heart," as he called his angina after it began to trouble him. Giving up his cigars—which were so strong most of his friends wouldn't touch them—was out of the question. "I stopped smoking, about a fortnight," he wrote in the last year of his life, "because the doctor said smoking would kill me. But I thought it over & resumed. I don't care for death, & I do care for smoking." He cared for it so much that he knew he wouldn't last long if he gave it up. "When I get smoked out—well, it will be a sign!" He was remarkably successful at not allowing his ailments to slow him down. Up until the last few weeks of his life, he remained active.⁵²

Clara worried that he was living so freely in old age that he might do something dangerous or disgraceful. She feared that after her mother's death he wouldn't feel obliged to follow anyone's opinion but his own. "He frightens me almost to death sometimes," she confessed. But he wasn't concerned. As he explained to a fellow septuagenarian, "Before seventy we are merely respected ... and have to behave all the time. ... After seventy we are respected, esteemed, admired, revered, and don't have to behave unless we want to."⁵³

What follows is the story of Mark Twain's last great adventure—his bold effort to make "a good showing" in his long farewell to a public that adored him, and to a world whose charms he treasured, but whose failings he never could forgive. With great imagination and verve, he crafted an image that would endure for many decades, and burnished a reputation that would survive the ups and downs of fashion. Rather than a time of bitterness and retreat, as many writers have suggested, his slow exit from a "first-class life" was full of energy and hope, and deserves a close look because it allows us to see Twain in all his unvarnished splendor, living larger than anyone else, and proud of it. "Everybody lives," he wrote in 1907, "but only Genius lives richly, sumptuously, imperially."⁵⁴

I have chosen to focus on this final period of three and a half years because it seems to capture the essence of the man, giving us a deeper understanding of his extraordinarily complex character and a better appreciation of his genius. His flame burned brightly at the end, and he was intensely conscious of the spectacle, relishing the pleasures of the moment while also eagerly speculating on the afterglow of his legacy. My book is the story of how this consummate showman staged his parting scenes, what he did to perpetuate his fame, and how he made it pay long after he was gone.

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