

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

Ushering in Susy as Biographer

WHEN Susy was thirteen, and was a slender little maid with plaited tails of copper tinged brown hair down her back, and was perhaps the busiest bee in the household hive, by reason of the manifold studies, health exercises, and recreations she had to attend to, she secretly, and of her own motion, and out of love, added another task to her labors: the writing of a biography of me. She did this work in her bed room at night, and kept her record hidden. After a little the mother discovered it and filched it, and let me see it; then told Susy what she had done, and how pleased I was, and how proud.

I remember that time with a deep pleasure. I had had compliments before, but none that touched me like this, none that could approach it for value in my eyes. It has kept that place always since. I have had no compliment, no praise, no tribute from any source, that was so precious to me as this one was and still is. As I read it now, after all these many years, it is still a king's message to me, and brings me the same dear surprise it brought me then—with the pathos added, of the thought that the eager and hasty hand that sketched it and scrawled it will not touch mine again,—and I feel as the humble and unexpected must feel when their eyes fall upon the edict that raises them to the ranks of the noble.

Yesterday while I was rummaging in a pile of ancient notebooks which I had not seen for years, I came across a reference to that biography. It is quite evident that several times, at breakfast and dinner, in those long past days, I was posing for the biography. In fact, I clearly remember that I was doing that; and I also remember that Susy detected it. I remember saying a very smart thing, with a good deal of an air, at the breakfast table one morning, and that Susy observed to her mother privately a little later, that papa was doing that for the biography.

I cannot bring myself to change any line or word in Susy's sketch of me; but will introduce passages from it now and then just as they came in their quaint simplicity out of her honest heart, which was the beautiful heart of a child. What comes from that source has a charm and grace of its own which may transgress all the recognized laws of literature, if it choose, and yet be literature still, and worthy of hospitality. I shall print the whole of this little biography, before I have done with it—every word, every sentence.

The spelling is frequently desperate; but it was Susy's, and I shall stand. I love it, and cannot profane it. To me it is gold. To correct it would alloy it, not refine it. It would spoil it. It would take from it its freedom and flexibility, and make it stiff and formal. Even when it is most extravagant I am not shocked. It is Susy's spelling, and she was doing the best she could—and nothing could better it for me.

Beginning the Momentous Work

SUSY began the biography in 1885, when I was in the fiftieth year of my age, and she just entering the fourteenth of hers. She begins in this way:

We are a very happy family. We consist of Papa, Mama, Jean, Clara and me. It is papa I am writing about, and I shall have no trouble in not knowing what to say about him, as he is a very striking character.

But wait a minute—I will return to Susy presently. In the matter of slavish imitation, man is the monkey's superior all the time. The average man is destitute of independence of opinion. He is not interested in contriving an opinion of his own, by study and reflection, but is only anxious to find out what his neighbor's opinion is and slavishly adopt it. A generation ago I found out that the latest review of a book was pretty sure to be just a reflection of the earliest review of it; that whatever the first reviewer found to praise or censure in the book would be repeated in the latest reviewer's report, with nothing fresh added. Therefore, more than once I took the precaution of sending my book in manuscript to Mr. Howells, when he was editor of "The Atlantic Monthly," so that he could prepare a review of it at leisure. I knew he would say the truth about the book; I also knew that he would find more merit than demerit in it, because I already knew that that was the condition of the book. I allowed no copy of it to go out to the press until after Mr. Howells's notice of it had appeared. That book was always safe. There wasn't a man behind a pen in all America that had the courage to find anything in the book which Mr. Howells had not found; there wasn't a man behind a pen in America that had spirit enough to say a brave



Drawing by F. Luis Mora

and original thing about the book on his own responsibility.

I believe that the trade of critic, in literature, music, and the drama, is the most degraded of all trades, and that it has no real value—certainly no large value. When Charles Dudley Warner and I were about to bring out "The Gilded Age," the editor of "The Daily Graphic" persuaded me to let him have an advance copy, he giving me his word of honor that no notice of it would appear in his paper until after "The Atlantic Monthly" notice should have appeared. The reptile published a review of the book within three days afterward. I could not really complain, because he had only given me his word of honor as security; I ought to have required of him something substantial.

I believe his notice did not deal mainly with the merit of the book, or the lack of it, but with my moral attitude toward the public. It was charged that I had used my reputation to play a swindle upon the public; that Mr. Warner had written as much as half of the book; and that I had used my name to float it and give it currency.—a currency, so the critic averred, which it could not have acquired without my name,—and that this conduct of mine was a grave fraud upon the people. "The Graphic" was not an authority upon any subject whatever. It had a sort of distinction, in that it was the first and only illustrated daily newspaper that the world had seen; but it was without character; it was poorly and cheaply edited; its opinion of a book or of any other work of art was of no consequence. Everybody knew this, yet all the critics in America one after the other copied "The Graphic's" criticism, merely changing the phraseology, and left me under that charge of dishonest conduct. Even the great "Chicago Tribune," the most important journal in the Middle West, was not able to invent anything fresh, but adopted the view of the humble "Daily Graphic," dishonestly charge and all.

However, let it go. It is the will of God that we must have critics, and missionaries, and Congressmen, and humorists, and we must bear the burden. Meantime, I seem to have been drifting into criticism myself. But that is nothing. At the worst, criticism is nothing more than a crime, and I am not unused to that.

Perpetuating a Description

WHAT I have been traveling toward all this time is this: The first critic that ever had occasion to describe my personal appearance littered his description with foolish and inexcusable errors whose aggregate furnished the result that I was distinctly and distressingly unhandsome. That description

floated around the country in the papers, and was in constant use and wear for a quarter of a century. It seems strange to me that apparently no critic in the country could be found who could look at me and have the courage to take up his pen and destroy that lie. That he began his course on the Pacific coast in 1864, and it likened me in personal appearance to Petroleum V. Nasby, who had been out there lecturing.

For twenty-five years afterward no critic could furnish a description of me without fetching in Nasby to help out my portrait. I knew Nasby well, and he was a good fellow; but in my life I have not felt malignant enough about any more than three persons to charge those persons with resembling Nasby. It hurts me to the heart. I was always handsome. Anybody but a critic could have seen it. And it had long been a distress to my family, including Susy, that the critics should go on making this wearisome mistake, year after year, when there was no foundation for it. Even when a critic wanted to be particularly friendly and complimentary to me, he didn't dare to go beyond my clothes. He never ventured beyond that old safe frontier. When he had finished with my clothes he had said all the kind things, the pleasant things, the complimentary things, he could risk. Then he dropped back on Nasby.

Yesterday I found this clipping in the pocket of one of those ancient memorandum books of mine. It is of the date of thirty-nine years ago, and both the paper and the ink are yellow with the bitterness that I felt in that old day when I clipped it out to preserve it, and brood over it, and grieve about it. I will copy it here, to wit:

A correspondent of "The Philadelphia Press," writing of one of Schuyler Colfax's receptions, says of our Washington correspondent: "Mark Twain, the delicate humorist, was present,—quite a lion, as he deserves to be. Mark is a bachelor, faultless in taste, whose snowy vest is suggestive of endless quarrels with Washington washerwomen; but the heroism of Mark is settled for all time, for such purity and smoothness were never seen before. His lavender gloves might have been stolen from some Turkish harem, so delicate were they in size, but more likely—anything else were more likely than that. In form and feature he bears some resemblance to the immortal Nasby; but whilst Petroleum is brunette to the core, Twain is golden, amber hued, melting, blond."

Let us return to Susy's biography now, and get the opinion of one who is unbiased.

FROM SUSY'S BIOGRAPHY

Papa's appearance has been described many times, but very incorrectly. He has beautiful gray hair, not any too thick or any too long, but just right. A Roman nose,