

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN



In 1873.

The Question of Veracity in Prophetic Dreams

(Dictated Jan. 12, 1905.)

BUT I am used to having my statements discounted. My mother began it before I was seven years old. Yet all through my life my facts have had a substratum of truth, and therefore they were not

without preciousness. Any person who is familiar with me knows how to strike my average, and therefore knows how to get at the jewel of an fact of mine and dig it out of its blue clay matrix. My mother knew that art. When I was seven, or eight, or ten, or twelve years old,—along there,—a neighbor said to her:

"Do you ever believe anything that that boy says?"

My mother said, "He is the wellspring of truth; but you can't bring up the whole well with one bucket," and she added, "I know his average, therefore he never deceives me. I discount him thirty per cent for embroidery, and what is left is perfect and priceless truth, without a flaw in it anywhere."

NOW, to make a jump of forty years, without breaking the connection: that word "embroidery" was used again in my presence and concerning me, when I was fifty years old, one night at Rev. Frank Goodwin's house in Hartford, at a meeting of the Monday Evening Club. The Monday Evening Club still exists. It was founded about forty-five years ago by that theological giant, Rev. Dr. Bushnell, and some comrades of his, men of large intellectual caliber and more or less distinction, local or national. I was admitted to membership in it in the fall of 1871, and was an active member thenceforth until I left Hartford in the summer of 1891.

The membership was restricted in those days to eighteen, possibly twenty. The meetings began about the first of October, and were held in the private houses of the members every fortnight thereafter throughout the cold months until the first of May. Usually there were a dozen members present, sometimes as many as fifteen. There was an essay and a discussion. The essayists followed each other in alphabetical order through the season. The essayist could choose his own subject and talk twenty minutes on it, from MS. or orally, according to his preference. Then the discussion followed, and each member present was allowed ten minutes in which to express his views. The wives of these people were always present. It was their privilege. It was also their privilege to keep still; they were not allowed to throw any light upon the discussion. After the discussion there was a supper, and talk, and cigars.

This supper began at ten o'clock promptly, and the company broke up and went away at midnight. At least they did except upon one occasion. In my recent birthday speech I remarked upon the fact that I have always bought cheap cigars, and that is true. I have never bought costly ones.

WELL, that night at the club meeting, as I was saying, George, our colored butler, came to me when the supper was nearly over, and I noticed that he was pale. Normally his complexion was a clear black, and very handsome; but now it had modified to old amber. He said:

"Mr. Clemens, what are we going to do? There is not a cigar in the house but those old Wheeling long nines. Can't nobody smoke them but you. They kill at thirty yards. It is too late to telephone; we couldn't get any cigars out from town. What can we do? Ain't it best to say nothing, and let on that we didn't think?"

"No," I said, "that would not be honest. Fetch out the long nines," which he did.

I had just come across those long nines a few days or a week before. I hadn't seen a long nine for years. When I was a cub pilot on the Mississippi in the late '50's, I had had a great affection for them, because they were not only, to my mind, perfect, but you could get a basketful of them for a cent—or a dime; they didn't use cents out there in those days. So when I saw them advertised in Hartford I sent for a thousand at once. They came out to me in badly battered and disreputable looking old square pasteboard boxes, two hundred in a box. George brought a box, which was caved in on all sides, looking the most it could, and began to pass them around. The conversation had been brilliantly animated up to that moment; but now a frost fell upon the company. That is to say, not all of a sudden, but the frost fell upon each man as he took up a cigar and

held it poised in the air—and there, in the middle, his sentence broke off. That kind of thing went on all around the table, until when George had completed his crime the whole place was full of a thick solemnity and silence.

Those men began to light the cigars. Rev. Dr. Parker was the first man to light. He took three or four heroic whiffs, then gave it up. He got up with the remark that he had to go to the bedside of a sick parishioner. He started out. Rev. Dr. Burton was the next man. He took only one whiff, and followed Parker. He furnished a pretext, and you could see by the sound of his voice that he didn't think much of the pretext, and was vexed with Parker for getting in ahead with a fictitious ailing client. Rev. Mr. Twichell followed, and said he had to go now, because he must take the midnight train for Boston. Boston was the first place that occurred to him, I suppose.

It was only a quarter to eleven when they began to distribute pretexts. At ten minutes to eleven all those people were out of the house. When nobody was left but George and me, I was cheerful—I had no compunctions of conscience, no griefs of any kind. But George was beyond speech, because he held the honor and credit of the family above his own, and he was ashamed that this smirch had been put upon it. I told him to go to bed and try to sleep it off. I went to bed myself. At breakfast in the morning when George was passing a cup of coffee, I saw it tremble in his hand. I knew by that sign that there was something on his mind. He brought the cup to me and asked impressively:

"Mr. Clemens, how far is it from the front door to the upper gate?"

I said, "It is a hundred and twenty-five steps."

He said, "Mr. Clemens, you can start at the front door and you can go plumb to the upper gate—and tread on one of them cigars every time."

It wasn't true in detail, but in essentials it was.

THE subject under discussion on the night in question was Dreams. The talk passed from mouth to mouth in the usual serene way. I do not now remember what form my views con-

now I was telling it again, here in the club.

In 1858 I was a steersman on board the swift and popular New Orleans and St. Louis packet Pennsylvania, Captain Kleinfelder. I had been lent to Mr. Brown, one of the pilots of the Pennsylvania, by my owner, Mr. Horace E. Bixby, and had been steering for Brown about eighteen months, I think. Then, in the early days of May, 1858, came a tragic trip,—the last trip of that fleet and famous steamboat. I have told all about it in one of my books called "Old Times on the Mississippi." But it is not likely that I told the dream in that book. It is impossible that I can ever have published it, I think, because I never wanted my mother to know about the dream, and she lived several years after I published that volume.

I HAD found a place on the Pennsylvania for my brother Henry, who was two years my junior. It was not a place of profit; it was only a place of promise. He was "mud" clerk. Mud clerks received no salary; but they were in the line of promotion. They could become, presently, third clerk and second clerk; then chief clerk,—that is to say, purser. The dream begins when Henry had been mud clerk about three months. We were lying in port at St. Louis. Pilots and steersmen had nothing to do during the three days that the boat lay in port in St. Louis and New Orleans; but the mud clerk had to begin his labors at dawn and continue them into the night, by the light of pineknot torches. Henry and I, moneyless and unsalaried, had billeted ourselves upon our brother in law, Mr. Moffet, as night lodgers while in port. We took our meals on board the boat. No, I mean I lodged at the house, not Henry. He spent the evenings at the house, from nine until eleven, then went to the boat to be ready for his early duties.

On the night of the dream he started away at eleven, shaking hands with the family, and said good by according to custom. I may mention that handshaking as a good by was not merely the custom of that family, but the custom of the region—the custom of Missouri, I may say. In all my life, up to that time, I had never seen one member of the Clemens

family kiss another one—except once. When my father lay dying in our home in Hannibal, the twenty-fourth of March, 1847, he put his arm around my sister's neck and drew her down and kissed her, saying, "Let me die." I remember that, and I remember the death rattle which swiftly followed those words, which were his last. These good bys of Henry's were always executed in the family sitting room on the second floor, and Henry went from that room and down stairs without further ceremony.

But this time my mother went with him to the head of the stairs and said good by again. As I remember it, she was moved to this by something in Henry's manner, and she remained at the head of the stairs while he descended. When he

reached the door he hesitated, and climbed the stairs and shook hands good by once more.

IN the morning when I awoke I had been dreaming, and the dream was so vivid, so like reality, that it deceived me, and I thought it was real. In the dream I had seen Henry a corpse. He lay in a metallic burial case. He was dressed in a suit of my clothing, and on his breast lay a great bouquet of flowers, mainly white roses, with a red rose in the center. The casket stood upon a couple of chairs. I dressed, and moved toward that door, thinking I would go in there and look at it; but I changed my mind. I thought I could not yet bear to meet my mother. I thought I would wait awhile and make some preparation for that ordeal. The house



I Had Never Seen a Member of the Family Kiss Another—Except Once.

cerning dreams took at the time. I don't remember now what my notion about dreams was then; but I do remember telling a dream by way of illustrating some detail of my speech, and also remember that when I had finished it Rev. Dr. Burton made that doubting remark which contained that word I have already spoken of as having been uttered by my mother, in some such connection, forty or fifty years before. I was probably engaged in trying to make those people believe that now and then, by some accident, or otherwise, a dream which was prophetic turned up in the dreamer's mind.

The date of my memorable dream was about the beginning of May, 1858. It was a remarkable dream, and I had been telling it several times every year for more than fifteen years; and