

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN



In 1873.

Simplified Spelling, Ducks, and Other Things

[DICTATED NOV. 10, 1906.]

EVER since papa and mamma were married, papa has written his books and then taken them to mamma in manuscript and she has expurgated them. Papa read "Huckleberry Finn" to us in manuscript just before it came out, and then he would leave parts of it with mamma to expurgate, while he went off up to the study to work, and sometimes Clara and I would be sitting with mamma while she was looking the manu-

script over, and I remember so well, with what pangs of regret we used to see her turn down the leaves of the pages, which meant that some delightfully dreadful part must be scratched out. And I remember one part particularly which was perfectly fascinating it was dreadful, that Clara and I used to delight in, and oh with what despair we saw mamma turn down the leaf on which it was written, we thought the book would be almost ruined without it. But we gradually came to feel as mamma did.

[DICTATED MONDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 1906.]

Jean and Papa were walking out past the barn the other day when Jean saw some little newly born baby ducks, she exclaimed as she perceived them "I dont see why God gives us so much ducks when Patrick kills them so."

SUSY is mistaken as to the origin of the ducks.

They were not a gift; I bought them. I am not finding fault with her; for that would be most unfair. She is remarkably accurate in her statements as a historian, as a rule, and it would not be just to make much of this small slip of hers; besides, I think it was a quite natural slip, for by heredity and habit ours was a religious household, and it was a common thing with us whenever anybody did a handsome thing, to give the credit of it to Providence, without examining into the matter. This may be called automatic religion,—in fact, that is what it is; it is so used to its work that it can do it without your help or even your privy; out of all the facts and statistics that may be placed before it, it will always get the one result, since it has never been taught to seek any other.

It is thus the unreflecting cause of much injustice. As we have seen, it betrayed Susy into an injustice toward me. It had to be automatic; for she would have been far from doing me an injustice when in her right mind. It was a dear little biographer, and she meant menoharm, and I am not censuring her now; but am only desirous of correcting in advance an erroneous impression

bottom I disrespect our orthography most heartily, and as heartily disrespect everything that has been said by anybody in defense of it. Nothing professing to be a defense of our ludicrous spellings has had any basis, so far as my observation goes, except sentimentality. In these "arguments" the term venerable is used instead of moldy, and hallowed instead of devilish; whereas there is nothing properly venerable or antique about a language which is not yet four hundred years old, and about a jumble of imbecile spellings which were grotesque in the beginning, and which grow more and more grotesque with the flight of the years.

morning he drove them from the stable down to the river, and the children were always there to see and admire the waddling white procession. They were there again at sunset to see Patrick conduct the procession back to its lodgings in the stable. But this was not always a gay and happy holiday show, with joy in it for the witnesses; no, too frequently there was a tragedy connected with it, and then there were tears and pain for the children. There was a stranded log or two in the river, and on these certain families of snapping turtles used to congregate and drowse in the sun and give thanks, in their dumb way, to Providence for benevolence extended to them. It was but another instance of misplaced credit: it was the young ducks that those pious reptiles were so thankful for—whereas they were my ducks. I bought the ducks.

When a crop of young ducks, not yet quite old enough for the table, but approaching that age, began to join the procession, and paddle around in the sluggish water, and give thanks—not to me—for that privilege, the snapping turtles would suspend their songs of praise and slide off the logs and paddle along under the water and chew the feet of the young ducks. Presently Patrick would notice that two or three of those little creatures were not moving about, but were apparently at anchor, and were not looking as thankful as they had been looking a short time before. He early found out what that sign meant,—a submerged snapping turtle was taking his breakfast, and silently singing his gratitude. Every day or two Patrick would rescue and fetch up a little duck with incomplete legs to stand upon,—nothing left of their extremities but gnawed and bleeding stumps. Then the children said pitying things and wept—and at dinner we finished the tragedy which the turtles had begun. Thus, as will be seen,—out of season, at least,—it was really the turtles that gave us so much ducks—at my expense.

Papa has written a new version of "There is a happy land" it is—

"There is a boarding house
Far, far away,
Where they have ham and eggs,
Three times a day,
Oh dont those boarders yell
When they hear the dinner-bell,
They give that land-lord rats
Three times a day."

AGAIN Susy has made a small error. It was not I that wrote the song. I heard Billy Rice sing it in the negro minstrel show, and I brought it home and sang it—with great spirit—for the elevation of the household. The children admired it to the limit, and made me sing it with burdensome frequency. To their minds it was superior to the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

How many years ago that was! Where now is Billy Rice? He was a joy to me, and so were the other stars of the nigger show,—Billy Birch, David Wambold, Backus, and a delightful dozen of their brethren, who made life a pleasure to me forty years ago, and later, Birch, Wambold, and Backus are gone years ago; and with them departed to return no more forever, I suppose, the real nigger show, the genuine nigger show, the extravagant nigger show, the show which to me

"I Dont See Why God
Gives Us so Much Ducks"



had no peer and whose peer has not yet arrived, in my experience. We have the grand opera; and I have witnessed, and greatly enjoyed, the first act of everything which Wagner created; but the effect on me has always been so powerful that one act was quite sufficient. Whenever I have witnessed two acts I have gone away physically exhausted, and whenever I have ventured an entire opera the result has been the

which her words would be sure to convey to a reader's mind. No elaboration of this matter is necessary; it is sufficient to say I provided the ducks.

It was in Hartford. The greensward sloped down hill from the house to the sluggish little river that flowed through the grounds, and Patrick, who was fertile in good ideas, had early conceived the idea of having homemade ducks for our table. Every

I would be a pity to replace the vivacity and quaintness and felicity of Susy's innocent free spelling with the dull and petrified uniformities of the spelling book. Nearly all the grimness is taken out of the "expurgating" of my books by the subtle mollification accidentally infused into the word by Susy's modification of the spelling of it.

I remember the special case mentioned by Susy, and can see the group yet,—two-thirds of it pleading for the life of the culprit sentence that was so fascinatingly dreadful, and the other third of it patiently explaining why the court could not grant the prayer of the pleaders; but I do not remember what the condemned phrase was. It had much company, and they all went to the gallows; but it is possible that that specially dreadful one which gave those little people so much delight was cunningly devised and put into the book for just that function, and not with any hope or expectation that it would get by the "expurgator" alive. It is possible; for I had that custom.

Susy's quaint and effective spelling falls quite opportunely into to-day's atmosphere, which is heavy with the rumblings and grumbings and mutterings of the Simplified Spelling Reform. Andrew Carnegie started this storm, a couple of years ago, by moving a simplifying of English orthography, and establishing a fund for the prosecution and maintenance of the crusade. He began gently. He addressed a circular to some hundreds of his friends, asking them to simplify the spelling of a dozen of our badly spelt words—I think they were only words which end with the superfluous *ugh*. He asked that these friends use the suggested spellings in their private correspondence.

By this, one perceives that the beginning was sufficiently quiet and unaggressive.

Next stage: A small committee was appointed, with Brander Matthews for managing director and spokesman. It issued a list of three hundred words, of average silliness as to spelling, and proposed new and sane spellings for these words. The President of the United States, unsolicited, adopted these simplified three hundred officially, and ordered that they be used in the official documents of the Government. It was now remarked by all the educated and the thoughtful except the clergy that Sheol was to pay. This was most justly and comprehensively descriptive. The indignant British lion rose, with a roar that was heard across the Atlantic, and stood there on his little isle, gazing, red eyed, out over the glooming seas, snow flecked with driving spindrift, and lashing his tail,—a most scary spectacle to see.

The lion was outraged because we, a nation of children, without any grown up people among us, with no property in the language, but using it merely by courtesy of its owner the English nation, were trying to defile the sacredness of it by removing from it peculiarities which had been its ornament and which had made it holy and beautiful for ages.

In truth there is a certain sardonic propriety in preserving our orthography, since ours is a mongrel language which started with a child's vocabulary of three hundred words, and now consists of two hundred and twenty-five thousand; the whole lot, with the exception of the original and legitimate three hundred, borrowed, stolen, smouched, from every unwatched language under the sun, the spelling of each individual word of the lot locating the source of the theft and preserving the memory of the revered crime.

Why is it that I have intruded into this turmoil and manifested a desire to get our orthography purged of its asinities? Indeed, I do not know why I should manifest any interest in the matter; for at