

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

Notes on "The Innocents Abroad"



Addressing a Crowd on the Wharf
When Leaving England in 1907.

(DICTATED IN
FLORENCE, ITALY,
APRIL, 1904.)

I WILL begin with a note upon the dedication. I wrote the book in the months of March and April, 1868, in San Francisco. It was published in August, 1869.

Three years afterward Mr. Goodman of Virginia City, Nevada, on whose newspaper I had served ten years before, came East, and we were walking down Broadway

one day, when he said, "How did you come to steal Oliver Wendell Holmes's dedication and put it in your book?"

I made a careless and inconsequential answer; for I supposed he was joking. But he assured me that he was in earnest. He said:

"I'm not discussing the question of whether you stole it or didn't,—for that is a question that can be settled in the first book store we come to,—I am only asking you how you came to steal it, for that is where my curiosity is focalized."

I couldn't accommodate him with this information, as I hadn't it in stock. I could have made oath that I had not stolen anything; therefore my vanity was not hurt nor my spirit troubled. At bottom I supposed that he had mistaken another book for mine, and was now getting himself into an untenable place and preparing sorrow for himself and triumph for me. We entered a bookstore, and he asked for "The Innocents Abroad" and for the dainty little blue and gold edition of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes's poems. He opened the books, exposed their dedications, and said:

"Read them. It is plain that the author of the second one stole the first one, isn't it?"

I was very much ashamed, and unspeakably astonished. We continued our walk; but I was not able to throw any gleam of light upon that original question of his. I could not remember ever having seen Dr. Holmes's dedication. I knew the poems; but the dedication was new to me.

I DID not get hold of the key to that secret until months afterward. Then it came in a curious way, and yet it was a natural way; for the natural way provided by nature and the construction of the human mind for the discovery of a forgotten event is to employ another forgotten event for its resurrection.

I received a letter from the Rev. Dr. Rising, who had been rector of the Episcopal church in Virginia City in my time, in which letter Dr. Rising made reference to certain things which had happened to us in the Sandwich Islands six years before. Among things he made casual mention of the Honolulu hotel's poverty in the matter of literature. At first I did not see the bearing of the remark; it called nothing to my mind. But presently it did—with a flash!

There was but one book in Mr. Kirchhof's hotel, and that was the first volume of Dr. Holmes's blue and gold series. I had had a fortnight's chance to get well acquainted with its contents; for I had ridden around the big island (Hawaii) on horseback, and had brought back so many saddle boils that if there had been a duty on them it would have bankrupted me to pay it. They kept me in my room, unclipped and in persistent pain, for two weeks, with no company but cigars and the little volume of poems. Of course I read them almost constantly; I read them from beginning to end, then read them backwards, then began in the middle and read them both ways, then read them wrong end first and upside down. In a word, I read the book to rags, and was infinitely grateful to the hand that wrote it.

Here we have an exhibition of what repetition can do, when persisted in daily and hourly over a considerable stretch of time, where one is merely reading for entertainment, without thought or intention of preserving in one's memory that which is read. It is a process which in the course of years dries all the juice out of a familiar verse of Scripture, leaving nothing but a sapless husk behind. In that case you at least know the origin of the husk; but in the

case in point I apparently preserved the husk but presently forgot whence it came. It lay lost in some dim corner of my memory a year or two, then came forward when I needed a dedication, and was promptly mistaken by me as a child of my own happy fancy.

I was new, I was ignorant, the mysteries of the human mind were a sealed book to me as yet, and I stupidly looked upon myself as a tough and unforgivable criminal. I wrote to Dr. Holmes and told him the whole disgraceful affair, implored him in impassioned language to believe that I had never intended to commit this crime, and was unaware that I had committed it until I was confronted with the awful evidence.

I have lost his answer. I could better have afforded to lose an uncle. Of these I had a surplus, many of them of no real value to me; but that letter was beyond price, beyond uncledom, and unsparable. In it Dr. Holmes laughed the kindest and healingest laugh over the whole matter, and at considerable length and in happy phrase assured me that there was no crime in unconscious plagiarism; that I committed it every day; that he committed it every day, that every man alive on the earth who writes or speaks commits it every day, and not merely once or twice but every time he opens his mouth; that all our phrasings are spiritualized shadows cast multitudinously from our readings; that no happy phrase of ours is ever quite original with us, there is nothing of our own in it except some slight change born of our temperament, character, environment, teachings, and associations; that this slight change differentiates it from another man's manner of saying it, stamps it with our special style, and makes it our own for the time being; all the rest of it being old, moldy, antique, and smelling of the breath of a thousand generations of them that have passed it over their teeth before.

In the thirty-odd years which have come and gone since then, I have satisfied myself that what Dr. Holmes said was true.

I WISH to make a note upon the preface of "The Innocents." In the last paragraph of that brief preface, I speak of the proprietors of "The Daily Alta California" having "waived their rights" in certain letters which I wrote for that journal while absent on the Quaker City trip. I was young then, I am white headed now; but the insult of that word rankles yet, now that I am reading that paragraph for the first time in many years,—reading it for the first time since it was written, perhaps. There were rights, it is true,—such rights as the strong are able to acquire over the weak and the absent.

Early in '66 George Barnes invited me to resign my reportership on his paper, "The San Francisco Morning Call," and for some months thereafter I was without money or work; then I had a pleasant turn of fortune. The proprietors of "The Sacramento Union," a great and influential daily journal, sent me to the Sandwich Islands to write four letters a month at twenty dollars apiece. I was there four or five months, and returned to find myself about the best known honest man on the Pacific Coast. Thomas McGuire, proprietor of several theaters, said that now was the time to make my fortune,—strike while the iron was hot,—break into the lecture field!

I did it. I announced a lecture on the Sandwich Islands, closing the advertisement with the remark, "Admission one dollar, doors open at half-past seven, the trouble begins at eight." A true prophecy! The trouble certainly did begin at eight, when I found myself in front of the only audience I had ever faced; for the fright which pervaded me from head to foot was paralyzing. It lasted two minutes, and was as bitter as death. The memory of it is indestructible; but it had its compensations, for it made me immune from timidity before audiences for all time to come. I lectured in all the principal Californian towns and in Nevada, then lectured once or twice more in San Francisco, then retired from the field rich,—for me,—and laid out a plan to sail westward from San Francisco, and go around the world. The proprietors of "The Alta" engaged me to write an account of the trip for that paper,—fifty letters of a column and a half each, which would be about two thousand

words per letter, and the pay to be twenty dollars per letter.

I went to East St. Louis to say good by to my mother; and then I was bitten by the prospectus of Captain Duncan of the Quaker City excursion, and ended by joining it. During the trip I wrote and sent the fifty letters. Six of them miscarried, and I wrote six new ones to complete my contract. Then I put together a lecture on the trip and delivered it in San Francisco at great and satisfactory pecuniary profit. Then I branched out into the country—and was aghast at the result: I had been entirely forgotten, I never had people enough in my houses to sit as a jury of inquest on my lost reputation! I inquired into this curious condition of things, and found that the thrifty owners of that prodigiously rich "Alta" newspaper had copyrighted all those poor little twenty-dollar letters, and had threatened with prosecution any journal which should venture to copy a paragraph from them!

AND there I was! I had contracted to furnish a large book, concerning the excursion, to the American Publishing Company of Hartford, and I supposed I should need all those letters to fill it out with. I was in an uncomfortable situation; that is, if the proprietors of this stealthily acquired copyright should refuse to let me use the letters. That is just what they did. Mr. Mac—something—I have forgotten the rest of his name—said his firm were going to make a book out of the letters in order to get back the thousand dollars which they had paid for them.



The Trouble Began When I Found
Myself in Front of My First Audience.

I said that if they had acted fairly and honorably, and had allowed the country press to use the letters or portions of them, my lecture skirmish on the coast would have paid me ten thousand dollars, whereas the attitude of "The Alta" had lost me that amount.

Then he offered a compromise: he would publish the book and allow me ten per cent. royalty on it. The compromise did not appeal to me, and I said so. I was now quite unknown outside of San Francisco, the book's sale would be confined to that city, and