

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

Getting Acquainted with the Middle Ages



[DICTATED JULY 26
1907]

IN an article entitled "England's Ovation to Mark Twain," Sydney Brooks—But never mind that now.

I was in Oxford by seven o'clock that evening (June 25, 1907), and trying on the scarlet gown which the tailor had been constructing, and found it right,—right and surpassingly becoming. At half-past ten the next morning we assembled at All Souls College and marched thence, gowned, mortar boarded, and in double file, down a long street to the Sheldonian Theater, between solid walls of the populace, very much hurrahed and limitlessly

kodaked. We made a procession of considerable length and distinction and picturesqueness; with the Chancellor Lord Curzon, late Viceroy of India, in his rich robe of black and gold, in the lead, followed by a pair of trim little boy train bearers, and the train bearers followed by the young Prince Arthur of Connaught, who was to be made a D.C.L. The detachment of D.C.L.'s were followed by the Doctors of Science, and these by the Doctors of Literature, and these in turn by the Doctors of Music. Sidney Colvin marched in front of me; I was coupled with Sidney Lee; and Kipling followed us. General Booth, of the Salvation Army, was in the squadron of D.C.L.'s.

Our journey ended, we were halted in a fine old hall, whence we could see, through a corridor of some length, the massed audience in the theater. Here for a little time we moved about and chatted and made acquaintanceships; then the D.C.L.'s were summoned, and they marched through that corridor, and the shouting began in the theater. It would be sometime before the Doctors of Literature and of Science would be called for, because each of those D.C.L.'s had to have a couple of Latin speeches made over him before his promotion would be complete,—one by the regius professor of civil law, the other by the Chancellor.

After awhile I asked Sir William Ramsay if a person might smoke here and not get shot. He said, "Yes"; but that whoever did it and got caught would be fined a guinea, and perhaps hanged later. He said he knew of a place where we could accomplish at least as much as half of a smoke before any informers would be likely to chance upon us, and he was ready to show the way to any who might be willing to risk the guinea and the hanging. By request he led the way, and Kipling, Sir Norman Lockyer, and I followed. We crossed an unpopulated quadrangle and stood under one of its exits, an archway of massive masonry, and there we lit up and began to take comfort. The photographers soon arrived; but they were courteous and friendly and gave us no trouble, and we gave them none. They grouped us in all sorts of ways, and photographed us at their diligent leisure, while we smoked and talked. We were there more than an hour; then we returned to headquarters, happy, content, and greatly refreshed.

Presently we filed into the theater, under a very satisfactory hurrah, and waited in a crimson column, dividing the crowded pit through the middle, until each of us in his turn should be called to stand before the chancellor and hear our merits set forth in sonorous Latin. Meantime, Kipling and I wrote autographs until some good kind soul interfered in our behalf and procured for us a rest.

I WILL now save what is left of my modesty by quoting a paragraph from Sydney Brooks's "Ovation."

Let those stars take the place of it for the present. Sydney Brooks has done it well. It makes me

proud to read it,—as proud as I was in that old day, sixty-two years ago, when I lay dying, the center of attraction, with one eye piously closed upon the fleeting vanities of this life,—an excellent effect,—and the other open a crack to observe the tears, the sorrow, the admiration—all for me—all for me!

Ah, that was the proudest moment of my long life—until Oxford!

MOST Americans have been to Oxford, and will remember what a dream of the Middle Ages it is, with its crooked lanes, its gray and stately piles of ancient architecture, and its meditation breeding air of repose and dignity and unkinship with the noise and fret and hurry and bustle of these modern days. As a dream of the Middle Ages, Oxford was not perfect until pageant day arrived and furnished certain details which had been for generations lacking.

These details began to appear at mid-afternoon on the twenty-seventh. At that time singles, couples, groups, and squadrons of the three thousand five hundred costumed characters who were to take part in the pageant began to ooze and drip and stream through house doors, all over the old town, and wend toward the meadows outside the walls. Soon the lanes were thronged with costumes which Oxford had from time to time seen and been familiar with in bygone centuries,—fashions of dress which marked off centuries as by dates, and miledstoned them back, and back, and back, until history faded into legend and tradition, when Arthur was a fact and the Round Table a reality. In this rich commingling of quaint and strange and brilliantly colored fashions in dress, the dress changes of Oxford for twelve centuries stood livid and realized to the eye. Oxford as a dream of the Middle Ages was complete now as it had never, in our day, before been complete. At last there was no discord,—the moldering old buildings, and the picturesque throngs drifting past them, were in harmony: soon—astonishingly soon!—the only persons that seemed out of place—and grotesquely and offensively and criminally out of place—were such persons as came intruding along, clothed in the ugly and odious fashions of the twentieth century. They were a bitterness to the feelings, an insult to the eye.

THE make-ups of illustrious historic personages seemed perfect, both as to portraiture and costume; one had no trouble in recognizing them. Also, I was apparently quite easily recognizable myself. The first corner I turned brought me suddenly face to face with Henry VIII, a person whom I had been implacably disliking for sixty years; but when

he put out his hand with royal courtliness and grace and said, "Welcome, well beloved stranger, to my century and to the hospitalities of my realm!" my old prejudices vanished away and I forgave him. I think now that Henry the Eighth has been overabused, and that most of us if we had been situated as he was, domestically, would not have been able to get along with as limited a graveyard as he forced himself to put up with. I feel now that he was one of the nicest men in history. Personal contact with a King is more effective in removing baleful prejudices than is any amount of argument drawn from tales and histories. If I had a child, I would name it Henry the Eighth, regardless of sex.

Do you remember Charles the First, and his broad slouch with the plume in it, and his slender, tall figure, and his body clothed in velvet doublet with lace sleeves, and his legs in leather, with long rapier at his side and his spurs on his heels? I encountered him at the next corner, and knew him in a moment,—knew him as perfectly and as vividly as I should know the Grand Chain in the Mississippi if I should see it from the pilot house after all these years. He bent his body and gave his hat a sweep that fetched its plume within an inch of the ground, and gave me a welcome that went to my heart. This King has been much maligned: I shall understand him better hereafter, and shall regret him more than I have been in the habit of doing these fifty or sixty years. He did some things in his time which might better have been left undone, and which cast a shadow upon his name,—we all know that, we all concede it,—but our error has been in regarding them as crimes and in calling them by that name, whereas I perceive now that they were only indiscretions.

AT every few steps I met persons of deathless name whom I had never encountered before outside of pictures and statuary and history, and these were most thrilling and charming encounters. I had handshakes with Henry the Second, who had not been seen in the Oxford streets for nearly eight hundred years; and with the Fair Rosamond, whom I now believe to have been chaste and blameless, although I had thought differently about it before; and with Shakespeare one of the pleasantest foreigners I have ever gotten acquainted with; and with Roger Bacon; and with Queen Elizabeth, who talked five minutes and never swore once,—a fact which gave me a new and good opinion of her and moved me to forgive her for beheading the Scottish Mary, if she really did it, which I now doubt,—and with the quaintly and anciently clad young King Harold Harefoot, of near nine hundred years



Copyright, 1906, by Underwood & Underwood

On the Way to Get His Degree.