

# THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

## The Famous Speech at the Whittier Dinner



Sketch Made  
in London.  
1900.

JANUARY 11, 1900.  
**A**NSWER to a letter received this morning:

DEAR MRS. H.—I am forever your debtor for reminding me of that curious passage in my life. During the first year or two after it happened, I could not bear to think of it. My pain and shame were so intense, and my sense of having been an imbecile so settled, established, and confirmed, that I drove the episode entirely from my mind. And so all these twenty-eight

or twenty-nine years I have lived in the conviction that my performance of that time was coarse, vulgar, and destitute of humor. But your suggestion that you and your family found humor in it twenty-eight years ago moved me to look into the matter. So I commissioned a Boston typewriter to delve among the Boston papers of that bygone time and send me a copy of it.

It came this morning, and if there is any vulgarity about it I am not able to discover it. If it isn't innocently and ridiculously funny, I am no judge. I will see to it that you get a copy.

Address of Samuel L. Clemens ("Mark Twain")  
From a Report of the Dinner Given by the Publishers  
of the Atlantic Monthly in Honor of the  
Seventieth Anniversary of the  
Birth of John Greenleaf Whittier, at the Hotel Brun-  
swick, Boston, December 17, 1877.  
as Published in the  
Boston Evening Transcript,  
December 18, 1877.

MR. CHAIRMAN.—This is an occasion peculiarly meet for the digging up of pleasant reminiscences concerning literary folk; therefore I will drop lightly into history myself. Standing here on the shore of the Atlantic, and contemplating certain of its largest literary billows, I am reminded of a thing which happened to me thirteen years ago, when I had just succeeded in stirring up a little Nevada literary puddle myself, whose spume flakes were beginning to blow thinly Californiawards. I started an inspection tramp through the southern mines of California. I was callow and conceited, and I resolved to try the virtue of my *nom de guerre*.

I very soon had an opportunity. I knocked at a miner's lonely log cabin in the foothills of the Sierras just at nightfall. It was snowing at the time. A jaded, melancholy man of fifty, barefooted, opened the door to me. When he heard my *nom de guerre*, he looked more dejected than before. He let me in,—pretty reluctantly, I thought,—and after the customary bacon and beans, black coffee and hot whisky, I took a pipe. This sorrowful man had not said three words up to this time. Now he spoke up and said, in the voice of one who is secretly suffering, "You're the fourth! I'm going to move!"

"The fourth what?" said I.  
"The fourth literary man that has been here in twenty-four hours. I'm going to move."  
"You don't tell me!" said I. "Who were the others?"  
"Mr. Longfellow, Mr. Emerson, and Mr. Oliver Wendell Holmes—confound the lot!"

You can easily believe I was interested. I supplicated,—three hot whiskies did the rest,—and finally the melancholy miner began. Said he:

"They came here just at dark yesterday evening, and I let them in of course. Said they were going to the Yosemite. They were a rough lot; but that's nothing,—everybody looks rough that travels afoot. Mr. Emerson was a seedy little bit of a chap, red headed. Mr. Holmes was as fat as a balloon; he weighed as much as three hundred, and had double chins all the way down to his stomach. Mr. Longfellow was built like a prize fighter. His head was cropped and bristly, like as if he had a wig made of hair brushes. His nose lay straight down his face, like a finger with the end joint tilted up. They had been drinking. I could see that. And what queer talk they used! Mr. Holmes inspected this cabin, then he took me by the buttonhole, and says he:

"Through the deep caves of thought  
I hear a voice that sings,  
Build thee more stately mansions,  
O my soul!"

"Says I, 'I can't afford it, Mr. Holmes, and moreover I don't want to.' Blamed if I liked it pretty well, either, coming from a stranger, that way! However, I started to get out my bacon and beans, when Mr. Emerson came and looked on awhile, and then he takes me aside by the buttonhole and says:

"Give me agates for my meat;  
Give me cantharids to eat;  
From air and ocean bring me foods,  
From all zones and altitudes."

"Says I, 'Mr. Emerson, if you'll excuse me, this ain't no hotel.' You see it sort of riled me—I wasn't used to the ways of literary swells. But I went on a-sweating over

my work, and next comes Mr. Longfellow, and button-holes me, and interrupts me. Says he:

"Honor be to Mudjekeewis!  
You shall hear how Pau-Puk-Keewis—"

"But I broke in, and says I, 'Beg your pardon, Mr. Longfellow, if you'll be so kind as to hold your yawp for about five minutes and let me get this grub ready, you'll do me proud.' Well, sir, after they'd filled up I set out the jug. Mr. Holmes looks at it, and then he fires up all of a sudden and yells:

"Flash out a stream of blood red wine!  
For I would drink to other days."

"By George! I was getting kind of worked up. I don't deny it. I was getting kind of worked up. I turns to Mr. Holmes, and says I, 'Looky here, my fat friend, I'm a-running this shanty, and if the court knows herself, you'll take whisky straight or you'll go dry!' Them's the very words I said to him. Now I don't want to sass such famous literary people; but you see they kind of forced me. There ain't nothing unreasonable 'bout me; I don't mind a passel of guests a-treadin' on my tail three or four times; but when it comes to standing on it it's different. 'And if the court knows herself,' I says, 'you'll take whisky straight or you'll go dry!' Well, between drinks they'd swell around the cabin and strike attitudes and spout; and pretty soon they got out a greasy old deck and went to playing euchre at ten cents a corner—on trust. I began to notice some pretty suspicious things. Mr. Emerson dealt, looked at his hand, shook his head, says,—

"I am the doubter and the doubt!"

and ca'mly bunched the hands and went to shuffling for a new layout. Says he:

"They reckon ill who leave me out;  
They know not well the subtle ways I keep,  
I pass and deal again!"

Hang'd if he didn't go ahead and do it, too! Oh, he was a cool one! Well, in about a minute things were running pretty tight; but all of a sudden I see by Mr. Emerson's eye he judged he had 'em. He had already corraled two tricks, and each of the others one. So now he kind of hits a little in his chair and says,—

"I tire of globes and axes!  
Too long the game is played!"

—and down he fetched a right bower. Mr. Longfellow smiles as sweet as pie and says,—

"Thanks, thanks to thee, my worthy friend,  
For the lesson thou hast taught,"—

and blamed if he didn't down with another right bower! Emerson claps his hand on his bowie. Longfellow claps his on his revolver, and I went under a bunk. There was going to be trouble; but that monstrous Holmes rose up, wabbling his double chins, and says he, 'Order, gentlemen! The first man that draws, I'll lay down on him and smother him!' All quiet on the Potomac, you bet!

"They were pretty how-come-you-so, by now, and they begun to blow. Emerson says, 'The nobbiest thing I ever wrote was Barbara Frietche.' Says Longfellow, 'It don't begin with my Biglow Papers.' Says Holmes, 'My Thanatopsis lays over 'em both.' They mighty near ended in a fight. Then they wished they had some more company; and Mr. Emerson pointed to me and says:

"Is yonder squalid peasant all  
That this proud nursery could breed?"

He was a whetting his bowie on his boot; so I let it pass. Well, sir, next they took it into their heads that they would like some music; so they made me stand up and sing, 'When Johnny Comes Marching Home' till I dropped—at thirteen minutes past four this morning. That's what I've been through, my friend. When I woke at seven, they were leaving, thank goodness! and Mr. Longfellow had my only boots on, and his'n under his arm. Says I, 'Hold on, there, Evangeline, what are you going to do with them?' He says, 'Going to make tracks with 'em; because,—

"Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime;  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time."

"As I said, Mr. Twain, you are the fourth in twenty-four hours; and I'm going to move. I ain't suited to a literary atmosphere."

I said to the miner, "Why, my dear sir, these were not the gracious singers to whom we and the world pay loving reverence and homage; these were impostors."

The miner investigated me with a calm eye for awhile; then said he, "Ah, impostors, were they? Are you?"  
I did not pursue the subject, and since then I have not traveled on my *nom de guerre* enough to hurt. Such was the reminiscence I was moved to contribute, Mr. Chairman. In my enthusiasm I may have exaggerated the details a little; but you will easily forgive me that fault, since I believe it is the first time I have ever

deflected from perpendicular fact on an occasion like this.

WHAT I have said to Mrs. H. is true. I did suffer during a year or two from the deep humiliations of that episode. But at last, in 1888, in Venice, my wife and I came across Mr. and Mrs. A. P. C., of Concord, Massachusetts, and a friendship began then of the sort which nothing but death terminates. The C.'s were very bright people, and in every way charming and companionable. We were together a month or two in Venice and several months in Rome, afterwards, and one day that lamented break of mine was mentioned. And when I was on the point of lathering those people for bringing it to my mind when I had gotten the memory of it almost squelched, I perceived with joy that the C.'s were indignant about the way that my performance had been received in Boston. They poured out their opinions most freely and frankly about the frosty attitude of the people who were present at that performance, and about the Boston newspapers for the position they had taken in regard to the matter. That position was that I had been irreverent beyond belief, beyond imagination.

Very well, I had accepted that as a fact for a year or two, and had been thoroughly miserable about it whenever I thought of it,—which was not frequently, if I could help it. Whenever I thought of it I wondered how I ever could have been inspired to do so unholy a thing. Well, the C.'s comforted me; but they did not persuade me to continue to think about the unhappy episode. I resisted that. I tried to get it out of my mind, and let it die, and I succeeded. Until Mrs. H.'s letter came, it had been a good twenty-five years since I had thought of that matter; and when she said that the thing was funny I wondered if possibly she might be right. At any rate, my curiosity was aroused, and I wrote to Boston and got the whole thing copied, as set forth.

I VAGUELY remember some of the details of that gathering. Dimly I can see a hundred people,—no, perhaps fifty,—shadowy figures sitting at tables feeding, ghosts now to me, and nameless forever more. I don't know who they were; but I can very distinctly see, seated at the grand table and facing the rest of us, Mr. Emerson, supernaturally grave, unsmiling; Mr. Whittier, grave, lovely, his beautiful spirit shining out of his face; Mr. Longfellow, with his silken white hair and his benignant face; Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, flashing smiles and affection and all good fellowship everywhere like a rose diamond whose facets are being turned toward the light first one way and then another,—a charming man, and always fascinating, whether he was sitting still (what he would call still, but what would be more or less motion to other people). I can see those figures with entire distinctness across this abyss of time.

One other feature is clear,—Willie Winter (for these past thousand years dramatic editor of "The New York Tribune," and still occupying that high post in his old age) was there. He was much younger then than he is now, and he showed it. It was always a pleasure to me to see Willie Winter at a banquet. During a matter of twenty years I was seldom at a banquet where Willie Winter was not also present, and where he did not read a charming poem written for the occasion. He did it this time, and it was up to standard; dainty, happy, choicely phrased, and as good to listen to as music, and sounding exactly as if it was pouring unprepared out of heart and brain.

NOW at that point ends all that was pleasurable about that notable celebration of Mr. Whittier's seventieth birthday,—because I got up at that point and followed Winter, with what I have no doubt I supposed would be the gem of the evening,—the gay oration above quoted from the Boston paper. I had written it all out the day before, and had perfectly memorized it, and I stood up there at my genial and happy and self-satisfied ease, and began to deliver it. Those majestic



William Winter in 1877.



W. D. Howells in 1877.