

Autobiography of Mark Twain

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condition and the ghastly expression of those people.

WHEN I sat down it was with a heart which had long ceased to beat. I shall never be as dead again as I was then. I shall never be as miserable again as I was then. I speak now as one who doesn't know what the condition of things may be in the next world; but in this one I shall never be as wretched again as I was then. Howells, who was near me, tried to say a comforting word, but couldn't get beyond a gasp. There was no use,—he understood the whole size of the disaster. He had good intentions; but the words froze before they could get out. It was an atmosphere that would freeze anything. If Benvenuto Cellini's salamander had been in that place, he would not have survived to be put into Cellini's autobiography. There was a frightful pause. There was an awful silence, a desolating silence.

Then the next man on the list had to get up—there was no help for it. That was Bishop Blank. Bishop had just burst handsomely upon the world with a most acceptable novel, which had appeared in "The Atlantic Monthly," a place which would make any novel respectable and any author noteworthy. In this case the novel itself was recognized as being, without extraneous help, respectable. Bishop was away up in the public favor, and he was an object of high interest; consequently there was a sort of national expectancy in the air. We may say our American millions were standing, from Maine to Texas and from Alaska to Florida, holding their breath, their lips parted, their hands ready to applaud when Bishop should get up on that occasion, and for the first time in his life speak in public.

It was under these damaging conditions that he got up to "make good," as the vulgar say. I had spoken several times before, and that is the reason why I was able to go on without dying in my tracks, as I ought to have done; but Bishop had had no experience. He was up facing those awful deities,—facing those other people, those strangers; facing human beings for the first time in his life, with a speech to utter. No doubt it was well packed away in his memory, no doubt it was fresh and usable, until I had been heard from. I suppose that after that, and under the smothering pall of that dreary silence, it began to waste away and disappear out of his head like the rags breaking from the edge of a fog, and presently there wasn't any fog left. He didn't go on—he didn't last long. It was not many sentences after his first before he began to hesitate, and break, and lose his grip, and totter, and wobble, and at last he slumped down in a limp and mushy pile.

Well, the program for the occasion was

probably not more than one-third finished; but it ended there. Nobody rose. The next man hadn't strength enough to get up, and everybody looked so dazed, so stupefied, paralyzed, it was impossible for anybody to do anything, or even try. Nothing could go on in that strange atmosphere. Howells mournfully, and without words, hitched himself to Bishop and me and supported us out of the room. It was very kind,—he was most generous. He towed us tottering away into some room in that building, and we sat down there. I don't know what my remark was now; but I know the nature of it. It was the kind of remark you make when you know that nothing in the world can help your case. But Howells was honest,—he had to say the heartbreaking things he did say.

That there was no help for this calamity, this shipwreck, this cataclysm; that this was the most disastrous thing that had ever happened in anybody's history; and then he added, "That is, for you. And consider what you have done for Bishop! It is bad enough in your case; you deserve to suffer. You have committed this crime, and you deserve to have all you are going to get. But here is an innocent man. Bishop had never done you any harm, and see what you have done to him. He can never hold his head up again. The world can never look upon Bishop as being a live person. He is a corpse!"

That is the history of that episode of twenty-eight years ago which pretty nearly killed me with shame during that first year or two whenever it forced its way into my mind.

NOW, then, I take that speech up and examine it. As I said, it arrived this morning from Boston. I have read it twice, and unless I am an idiot, it hasn't a single defect in it from the first word to the last. It is just as good as good can be. It is smart; it is saturated with humor. There isn't a suggestion of coarseness or vulgarity in it anywhere. What could have been the matter with that house? It is amazing, it is incredible, that they didn't shout with laughter, and those deities the loudest of them all. Could the fault have been with me? Did I lose courage when I saw those great men up there whom I was going to describe in such a strange fashion? If that happened, if I showed doubt, that can account for it; for you can't be successfully funny if you show that you are afraid of it. Well, I can't account for it; but if I had those beloved and revered old literary immortals back here now on the platform at Carnegie Hall, I would take that same old speech,—deliver it, word for word,—and melt them till they'd run all over that stage. Oh, the fault must have been with me; it is not in the speech at all!

THE END

The Lorsson Elopement

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fond of candy," Valeska said to herself. "A note thrown from the window would be too dangerous and too hard to find. It's ridiculously simple! I think I'm growing fond of that girl."

NEXT day Astro appeared at the studio with the information that the young man's name was indeed Chester; that he was an artist or illustrator for magazines; and that he lived on the south side of Washington Square.

"He's getting into a terrible state," said Valeska. "Did you read his advertisement this morning? It was under 'Lawyers' this time."

"I haven't had time to look over 'The Star.' What is it?"

Valeska read from her list the last addition: "For thou hast made him most blessed for ever; thou hast made him exceeding glad with thy countenance. (Ps. 21:6.)"

"Thou hast given him his heart's desire, and hast not withdrawn the request of his lips. Selah. (Ps. 21:2.)"

"Yea, they opened their mouth wide against me, and said, Aha, aha, our eye hath seen it. (Ps. 35:21.)"

"I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long. (Ps. 38:6.)"

"Poor devil!" Astro grew serious. "I did see a paragraph in 'Town Gossip' this morning about a 53d-st. belle who it was reported was about to make a brilliant match. It was thinly disguised, and evidently referred to Ruth Lorsson."

"He evidently believes she is engaged," said Valeska; "but I don't. No girl would give up such a romantic lover."

"Now," said Astro, "the question is, How are we going to get hold of her side of the correspondence? I'm getting as interested in this affair as if I was paid for it. The fact that there is a misunderstanding does alter the matter too, and I don't see but that we'll have to straighten it out if we can. I've thought of a way to get hold of to-night's message by a trick. It may work, and it may not. Of course it's rather low of us to interfere with their private postoffice; but we may be able to make that up to them later. Anyway, it will make it exciting for them. I'm going to bait a box myself," he went on, "and place it on the sidewalk at a quarter of eight. Chester will arrive and think that for some reason she had already thrown it out, and he'll take it and make off. Then, when she throws her own box out, we'll grab it."

The temptation was too great for Valeska's

curiosity, and she gave a hesitating consent, on the agreement that it should be tried only once. "But you'll have to put a message on the box, or he'll know there's something wrong," she said.

"Turn to Psalms 102. I think that will not compromise her too much," Astro said.

"My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread. (Ps. 102:4.)"

"Because of thine indignation and thy wrath; for thou hast lifted me up, and cast me down. (Ps. 102:10.)"

THE ruse succeeded. Shortly after eight o'clock, Chester came walking down the street, spied the box which Astro had placed conspicuously on the sidewalk, examined it quickly, and walked hurriedly away. Fifteen minutes later, Ruth's box dropped from the window. Astro secured it and took it to a nearby lamp post, looked at the figures, and then consulted a small Bible which he drew from his pocket.

"This is too bad," he said to Valeska, who had accompanied him. "I didn't think she'd be so strong. It won't do for him to miss this message, poor chap! Here, read it!"

"Deliver me not over unto the will of mine enemies; for false witnesses are risen up against me, and such as breathe out cruelty. (Ps. 27:12.)"

"I have not sat with vain persons, neither will I go in with dissemblers. (Ps. 26:4.)"

"But as for me, I will walk in mine integrity; redeem me, and be merciful unto me. (Ps. 26:11.)"

"I'll tell you what'll do: we'll send this down to his house by a messenger boy. He won't know what to make of it; but he won't be able to ask her how it was delivered till it's all over."

The message was sent at once; then, as Astro walked with Valeska to her home, he said:

"We can't do this again; it will make too much trouble. You'll have to see if you can't get into his studio somehow and find out what messages he is receiving. You can go and offer yourself as a model. That will give you plenty of time to look about in, and you may manage to find the bottoms of the boxes every day. If I know the Young Man in Love, he won't destroy them."

Valeska consented to attempt the adventure, and accordingly set out the next morning after entering on her list the following message deciphered from Chester's advertisement in "The Star":

"Let the lying lips be put to silence; which

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