

Mark Twain Becomes a Writer

While still in his twenties, between spates of digging for gold and silver in the California and Nevada hills, Samuel Clemens (already better known as Mark Twain) sharpened his skills as a humorous writer. Much of what he published in newspapers like the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise* and the *San Francisco Examiner* has been scattered in various obscure archives, inaccessible to both the general reader and the specialist. Scholars at the University of California, Berkeley, have been working to change this. As part of the Mark Twain Project, they have begun publication of Clemens's complete writings—including unpublished fragments, letters, notebooks, journals, and newspaper articles (in all, 70 volumes are planned). We present here samples of Clemens's early efforts at humor with an introduction by Robert H. Hirst.

by Robert H. Hirst

"I never had but two *powerful* ambitions in my life," Samuel Clemens wrote, in the autumn of 1865. "One was to be a pilot, & the other a preacher of the gospel. I accomplished the one & failed in the other, *because* I could not supply myself with the necessary stock in trade—*i.e.* religion."

In this letter to his older brother Orion, Clemens did not add that, when it came to careers, he was, at age 29, something of an expert—

having earned his livelihood (as he would later recall in *Roughing It*) as grocery clerk, blacksmith's apprentice, drugstore clerk, bookseller's clerk ("the customers bothered me so much I could not read with any comfort," he complained), printer, riverboat pilot, private secretary, silver miner, silver mill worker, and newspaper reporter.

Yet, he told Orion, "I *have* had a 'call' to literature, of a low order—*i.e.* humorous. It is nothing to be

proud of, but it is my strongest suit." He continued: "If I were to listen to that maxim of stern *duty* which says that to do right you *must* multiply the one or the two or the three talents which the Almighty entrusts to your keeping, I would long ago have ceased to meddle with things for which I was by nature unfitted & turned my attention to seriously scribbling to excite the *laughter* of God's creatures."

When Clemens dispatched this letter from San Francisco, he had been publicly known as Mark Twain for almost three years, and had penned thousands of humorous newspaper and magazine pieces.

He was, in Nevada and California, at least, a household name. And his humor had delighted some of the best-known writers of the day. No less a luminary than Artemus Ward had invited Clemens, the previous year, to "leave sage-brush obscurity" and put his skills to work in New York City. Clemens had demurred, preferring, so he said, "not to burst upon the New York public too suddenly & brilliantly." More likely, the young humorist, who had seen fortunes made in the silver mines of Humboldt County, Nevada, and on the stock exchange in San Francisco, was unwilling to entrust his future to literature.

Now, however, in October 1865, Clemens found himself pressured by mounting debts, the result of a reporter's low income and bad luck with stock investments. He was approaching 30, when a man should have begun to settle down. With growing determination, he resolved to take up his vocation as a humorist, to "drop all trifling, & sighing after vain impossibilities, & strive for a fame—unworthy & evanescent though it must of necessity be."



Courtesy of the Mark Twain Project, The Bancroft Library.

Samuel Clemens at age 15. In his hand are blocks of newspaper type that the daguerreotype reversed.

Within weeks, he would publish "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" in the *New York Saturday Press*, and within months he would produce such minor masterpieces as "Captain Montgomery" and "Explanation of a Mysterious Sentence." (See pages 176 and 179.) In a little more than a year, he would finally take Ward's advice, go East, and try his luck with New York publishers. By 1869, he would be basking in national and international acclaim for his first major book, a rambunctious account of Americans traveling in Europe and the Holy Land, *The Innocents Abroad*.

Clemens later liked to pretend that he only gradually perceived his enormous talent as a humorist. The historical record shows that his reluctance to embrace his fate came

not from ignorance of his vocation, but from his low opinion of it.

In 19th-century America, humorists ranked low on the social ladder, about on a par with actors. Clemens craved both affluence and high social status for himself ("I am not married yet, and I never *will* marry until I can afford to have servants enough," he vowed at age 26). Five years after his purposeful letter to brother Orion, in 1870, he had achieved both, thanks to his writing, and had taken a wife besides, Olivia Langdon, the genteel daughter of a wealthy New York State businessman.

Childhood Traumas

Samuel Clemens was born in Florida, Missouri, in 1835, the sixth of seven children. "The Clemenses came from very fine stock, but were very poor," recalled Clemens's first sweetheart. As a child, Clemens was profoundly affected by the declining fortunes of his family, and deeply frightened by the humiliation of debt.

His parents, John Marshall and Jane Lampton Clemens, could trace their ancestry to the earliest settlers of Virginia and Kentucky. (The Lamptons even claimed kinship with the earls of Durham.) The year Sam was born, they owned a slave or two, although they had once owned six.

Judge Clemens was an unsuccessful shopkeeper in Florida and, after 1839, in Hannibal, Missouri. The family placed its hopes for a return to prosperity (never realized) on sev-

eral thousand acres of undeveloped "Tennessee land" that the Judge had bought on the chance that it might sit atop coal or iron reserves (it did not).

"The Curse of It"

Of his family's high expectations, Samuel Clemens later wrote: "It is good to begin life poor; it is good to begin life rich . . . but to begin it poor and *prospectively* rich! The man who has not experienced it cannot imagine the curse of it."

In later life, Clemens himself became a tireless investor in money-making schemes—taking out patents on designs for a suspender and a scrapbook, and sinking his book earnings into products such as an automatic rug weaver, an automatic typesetter, and Plasmon, a protein additive.

Young Sam Clemens's formal education, in Hannibal and Florida, where he spent summers, was cut short by the death of his father when the boy was 11. (Clemens would remain sensitive about his lack of schooling the rest of his life.) He became a printer's devil at the *Hannibal Gazette* and, in 1851, began working for his brother Orion, who had acquired the *Hannibal Western Union*. He went on to set type as a journeyman printer in half a dozen cities, from New York to St. Louis.

"One isn't a printer ten years," he remarked in 1909, "without setting up acres of good and bad literature, and learning—unconsciously at first,

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Clemens recalled that in silver-rich Virginia City, Nevada, "money was as plenty as dust" and "high hope . . . held sway in every heart."

consciously later—to discriminate between the two."

Clemens gleaned much of his early knowledge of the world and of literature from setting newspaper stories and from helping Orion look for re-printable articles in magazines that ranged from the humorous New York *Spirit of the Times* to San Francisco's new, literary *Golden Era*.

In the print shops of Hannibal, he also took a fancy to "scribbling" on his own. His first published work, a brief, humorous account of a fire in the offices of the *Western Union*, appeared when he was 15. When he was 16, he placed two sketches in the Eastern press, a clumsy yarn entitled "The Dandy Frightening the Squatter" in the Boston *Carpet-Bag* and a brief tour of Hannibal in the *American Courier* of Philadelphia.

"Seeing them in print was a joy which rather exceeded anything in that line I have ever experienced since," Clemens remembered much later. But he gave no thought to writing as a route to wealth and prestige.

In April 1857, he set off down the Mississippi for South America, with a scheme to begin trading in coca (the plant source of cocaine, which, Clemens had heard, was a "vegetable product of miraculous powers"). Instead, he became a cub-pilot on the Mississippi River and a fully licensed riverboat pilot in 1859.

The brotherhood of steamboat pilots for a time satisfied Clemens's craving for both money and status. "The Senator," he mused in 1866, "must hob-nob with *canaille* whom he despises, & banker, priest & statesman trim their actions by the breeze of the world's will & the world's opinion. . . . The only real, independent & genuine *gentlemen* in the world go quietly up & down the Mississippi river."

The Civil War forced Clemens off the river in 1861, closing down commercial traffic and turning those willing to pilot Yankee gunboats into easy targets for Confederate snipers. Union forces invaded Missouri, and Clemens and a motley crew of 14 lads

from Hannibal banded together to repel them. As Clemens later described his experiences, he learned "more about retreating than the man that invented retreating."

Fortunately, that year Orion Clemens was appointed by Abraham Lincoln to help organize the new Territory of Nevada. Sam accompanied him as his private secretary. Once in Nevada, he was "smitten with the silver fever" and spent the better part of 1862 in the region around Carson City trying to strike it rich—with no luck.

\$25 a Week

Clemens's failure to make the fortune he envisioned was a bitter experience, but it forced him to accept a position as a \$25-a-week local reporter on the feisty *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*—his first professional job as a writer.

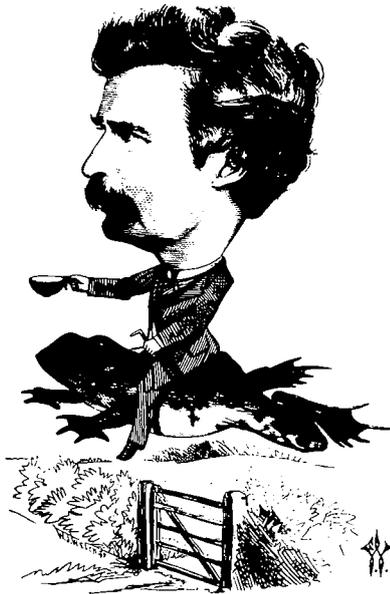
The *Enterprise* was run by Joseph T. Goodman, who, at 24, was two years younger than his newest reporter.

"Original, forcible, confident, mocking and alive with the impulses of an abounding and generous youth, the *Enterprise* was to Goodman a safety valve for his ideas rather than a daily burden of responsibility," according to Arthur McEwen, a newspaper colleague. "There never has been a paper . . . so entirely human, so completely the reflex of a splendid personality and a mining camp's buoyant life."

Clemens had caught Goodman's eye in the spring of 1862, when he started submitting entertaining letters to the *Enterprise* over the pen name "Josh." When the paper's star writer-reporter, Dan De Quille (real name: William Wright), decided to take a trip back East, Goodman tapped Clemens to fill the vacancy.

The paper's local section under De Quille and Twain was, remembered McEwen, "noble" in its "indifference to 'news.'" Clemens put it slightly differently: "Stirring news . . . was what a paper needed, and I felt that I was peculiarly endowed with the ability to furnish it."

Clemens had practiced the art of storytelling all his life. Inheriting his mother's manner of relating an episode "with the perfect air of not knowing it to be humorous," he had a knack for impersonation and a capacity for ridiculing the follies and pretensions of human beings. But the little work that survives from his pre-Nevada years shows how easily he could misjudge the power of his ridicule—for instance, his unpar-



Courtesy of the Mark Twain Project, The Bancroft Library.

This cartoon (circa 1872) shows Clemens riding the "Jumping Frog" to fame and fortune.

donable lampoon of a reporter at a rival Hannibal paper who, jilted by love, had botched his own suicide attempt; and his mimicry of the river reports of a respected Mississippi captain, which was so vicious that the man never ventured to write them again.

There were mean excesses of this kind in Nevada as well: "A Bloody Massacre near Carson" was a hoax that made no one laugh*; a fake report that charity money raised for recuperating Union soldiers was being diverted to a Miscegenation Society back East earned him several challenges to duel and inspired Clemens's purchase of a one-way ticket to California.

For the most part, Clemens stayed away from political issues while writing in Nevada. He especially neglected the topics of slavery and the War, with good reason. Virginia City, during the first half of the '60s, was a hotbed of Irish pro-Unionists, Northern copperheads, and Southerners (as the town's name attests) sitting out the war. For the son of slaveholders from a border state, who had avoided the draft by traveling West with a Lincoln appointee, prudence was in order.

One subject on which he did speak out, however, was the brutality of the police (who were mainly Irish) against the immigrant Chinese, both in Nevada and in San Francisco. After leaving Virginia City, Clemens

had landed a job as a reporter (at \$40 a week) with the *San Francisco Morning Call*. He stayed with the paper for all of four months. Much later, he criticized the *Call's* editors venomously for refusing to print his attacks on anti-Chinese activities.

Between 1851, when he first took up his pen in Hannibal to excite the laughter of God's creatures, and 1865, when he wrote his declaration of literary intent to brother Orion, Clemens wrote much in a comedic vein that would not endure (and rightly not). Often he turned out sketches of varying wit and charm but little point. Sometimes his humor could be strident or heavy handed.

With practice, he refined his satiric art. Through his humorous sketches, he gradually articulated an ethos of tolerance, loyalty to one's friends, freedom from pretension, and Christianity without hell-and-damnation, set against the rigid respectability of the established culture.

Leading to Huck Finn

The hoax, the mock feud, the sly apology that only makes matters worse, the officious report, and the mock biography—these were among the dozens of forms with which he experimented on the *Enterprise*, the *Call*, and other Western publications.

He was also preoccupied with developing a form that was not necessarily satirical—the "humorous story," which, as he said in 1895, "is told gravely" by someone who "does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it." Clemens himself played this individual—who, in his own freedom from pretension, mocks the dignified characters of "high society"—in dozens of sketches, including "The Sanitary

*This "news story" appeared in the *Territorial Enterprise* in October 1863 and was picked up by, among other papers, the *Sacramento Union* and the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*. It related the grisly mass murder of a woman and her seven children by the father of the family. The man had supposedly been ruined by the Spring Valley Water Company's scheme to inflate company dividends. Clemens later explained that he had made up the story to fool the San Francisco newspapers.

Ball" (see page 175). Clemens's discovery of varying comic poses naturally led to his invention of humorous characters distinct from the author himself: Simon Wheeler, who tells the "Jumping Frog" story, and, eventually, Huck Finn, who tells his own story.

But Clemens's most important discovery was still to come: the revelation that one could use the humorous story for a satirical, and basically ethical, purpose. Humorous monologues in which the speaker wanders on in utter pointlessness (with only the cleverness of his invention to justify the performance) gradually gave way, in Clemens's California writings of 1865 and 1866, to monologues that disarm the reader just as effectively, but make a point.

Clemens left San Francisco for the East in the fall of 1866, to pursue the business of writing books that would make people laugh. It was clear to him, following the roaring success of "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog," that there was a chance he could make a lot of money at it. But he was not quite reconciled to what he thought would be the low status and uncertain finances of a professional humorist.

He had not tried to compose anything that approximated the com-

plex shadings of wit and seriousness in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) or *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889). But he had begun to equip himself—both in the techniques of his craft and in the more profound matter of developing humor to illuminate the ethical problems of racial prejudice and social conformity.

It was chiefly in the second endeavor that Clemens most needed to progress if he was to fully resolve his ambivalence about his vocation, because the second of his two "powerful ambitions"—to become a minister—was not a simple joke.

"Humor must not professedly teach and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever," he said in 1906—adding that by "forever" he meant "thirty years." "I have always preached. That is the reason that I have lasted thirty years."

By 1866, at the age of 30, Mark Twain had begun to learn both how and what to preach without appearing to do so. This was perhaps the most important result of his early years of experimentation—his discovery of how to use a powerful wit to high ethical purpose, the first step toward genuine acceptance of his calling.

PETRIFIED MAN

Printed October 4, 1862, this is one of the first sketches Clemens wrote for the Virginia City Territorial Enterprise. "It is an unmitigated lie," he later confessed. "I got it up to worry Sewall," the local coroner. Only those who figure out what the petrified man is doing with his hands will get the joke:

A petrified man was found some time ago in the mountains south of Gravelly Ford. Every limb and feature of

the stony mummy was perfect, not even excepting the left leg, which has evidently been a wooden one during

the lifetime of the owner—which lifetime, by the way, came to a close about a century ago, in the opinion of a savan who has examined the defunct.

The body was in a sitting posture, and leaning against a huge mass of croppings; the attitude was pensive, the right thumb resting against the side of the nose; the left thumb partially supported the chin, the forefinger pressing the inner corner of the left eye and drawing it partly open; the right eye was closed, and the fingers of the right hand spread apart.

This . . . freak of nature created a profound sensation in the vicinity, and our informant states that by request, Justice Sewell or Sowell, of Humboldt City, at once proceeded to the spot and held an inquest on the body. The verdict of the jury was that

“deceased came to his death from protracted exposure,” etc.

The people of the neighborhood volunteered to bury the poor unfortunate, and were even anxious to do so; but it was discovered, when they attempted to remove him, that the water which had dripped upon him for ages from the crag above, had coursed down his back and deposited a limestone sediment under him which had glued him to the bed rock upon which he sat. . . .

Judge S. refused to allow the charitable citizens to blast him from his position. The opinion expressed by his Honor that such a course would be little less than sacrilege, was eminently just and proper.

Everybody goes to see the stone man, as many as three hundred having visited the hardened creature during the past five or six weeks.

THE SANITARY BALL

The United States Sanitary Commission raised money to help wounded Union soldiers. Clemens, in high form, covered its ball, held in January 1863 in Virginia City, as the local reporter for the Enterprise:

The Sanitary Ball at La Plata Hall on Thursday night was a very marked success, and proved beyond the shadow of a doubt, the correctness of our theory, that ladies never fail in undertakings of this kind. If there had been about two dozen more people there, the house would have been crowded—as it was, there was room enough on the floor for the dancers, without trespassing on their neighbors' corns. Several of those long, trailing dresses, even, were under fire in the thickest of the fight for six hours, and came out as free from rips and rents as they were when they went in. Not all of them,

though. . . .

We were feeling comfortable, and we had assumed an attitude—we have a sort of talent for posturing—a pensive attitude, copied from the Colossus of Rhodes—when the ladies were ordered to the centre. Two of them got there, and the other two moved off gallantly, but they failed to make the connection. They suddenly broached to under full headway, and there was a sound of parting canvas. Their dresses were anchored under our boots, you know. It was unfortunate, but it could not be helped. Those two beautiful pink dresses let go amidships, and re-



mained in a ripped and damaged condition to the end of the ball.

We did not apologize, because our presence of mind happened to be absent at the very moment that we had the greatest need of it. But we beg permission to do so now. . . .

We engaged a good many young ladies last Tuesday to go with us,

thinking that out of the lot we should certainly be able to secure one, at the appointed time, but they all seemed to have got a little angry about something—nobody knows what, for the ways of women are past finding out. They told us we had better go and invite a thousand girls to go to the ball. A thousand. Why, it was absurd. We had no use for a thousand girls. A thou—but those girls were as crazy as loons. In every instance, after they had uttered that pointless suggestion, they marched magnificently out of their parlors—and if you will believe us, not one of them ever recollected to come back again. . . . We never enjoyed so much solitude in so many different places, in one evening, before.

But patience has its limits; we finally got tired of that arrangement—and at the risk of offending some of those girls, we stalked off to the Sanitary Ball alone—without a virgin, out of that whole litter. We may have done wrong—we probably did do wrong to disappoint those fellows in that kind of style—but how could we help it? We couldn't stand the temperature of those parlors more than an hour at a time.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERY

Clemens sent this sketch to the Territorial Enterprise in January 1866. Mother Utterback's racy monologue foreshadows the vernacular speeches in Twain's major books, particularly Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. More important, however, is Twain's ethical purpose—his attention to the quaint hospitality of the old crone and the kindnesses of the captain, and his icy silence on the matter of the lady visitors and their manners:

Whenever he commenced helping anybody, Captain Ed. Montgomery never relaxed his good offices as long as help was needed.

As soon as he found that no steam-

boat ever stopped to wood with old Mother Utterback in the bend below Grand Gulf, Mississippi, and that she was poor and needed assistance, he began to stop there every trip and

take her little pile of wood and smile grimly, when the engineers protested that it wouldn't burn any more than so many icicles — and stop there again the very next trip.

He used to go ashore and talk to the old woman, and it flattered her to the last degree to be on such sociable terms with the high chief officer of a splendid passenger steamer. She would welcome him to her shabby little floorless log cabin with a royal flourish, and make her six gawky "gals" fly around and make him comfortable. He used to bring his lady passengers ashore to be entertained with Mother Utterback's quaint conversation.

I do not know that this incident is worth recording, but still, as it may let in the light of instruction to some darkened mind, I will just set down the circumstances of one of Captain Montgomery's visits to Mother Utterback and her daughters. . . .

"Good morning, Captain Montgomery!" said she with many a bustling bow and flourish; "Good morning, Captain Montgomery; good morning, ladies all; how de do, Cap-

tain Montgomery—how de do—how de do? Sakes alive, it 'pears to me it's ben years sense I seed you. Fly around gals, fly around! You Bets, you slut, highst yoself off'n that candle-box and give it to the lady. How *have* you ben, Captain Montgomery? — make yoself at home, ladies all—you 'Liza Jane, stan' out of the way—move yoself! Thar's the jug, help yoself, Captain Montgomery; take that cob out and make yoself free, Captain Montgomery—and ladies all. You Sal, you hussy, git up f'm thar this minit, and take some exercise! for the land's sake, ain't you got no sense at all?—settin' thar on that cold rock and you jes' ben married last night, and your pores all open!"

The ladies wanted to go aboard the boat, they bade the kind, hospitable old woman good by, and went away. But Captain Montgomery staid behind, because he knew how badly the old lady wanted to talk, and he was a good soul and loved to please her. . . .

You can rest assured I am not sorry old Captain Ed. Montgomery is alive and well yet.

THE CHINA TRIAL

Unlike other 19th-century American writers who protested racial prejudice (e.g., Harriet Beecher Stowe), Clemens seldom resorted to sentimentality. In this unsigned item from the Enterprise of February 25, 1864, he pokes fun at Chinese immigrants as freely as he taunts their oppressors:

We were there, yesterday, not because we were obliged to go, but just because we wanted to. The more we see of this aggravated trial, the more profound does our admiration for it become. It has more phases than the moon has in a chapter of the almanac.

It commenced as an assassination;

the assassinated man neglected to die, and they turned it into assault and battery; after this the victim *did* die, whereupon his murderers were arrested and tried yesterday for perjury; they convicted one Chinaman, but when they found out it was the wrong one, they let him go—and why they should have been so almighty

particular is beyond our comprehension; then, in the afternoon, the officers went down and arrested Chinatown again for the same old offense, and put it in jail—but what shape the charge will take this time, no man can foresee; the chances are that it will be about a stand-off between arson and robbing the mail.

Capt. White hopes to get the murderers of the Chinaman hung one of these days, and so do we, for that matter, but we do not expect anything of the kind. You see, these Chinamen are all alike, and they cannot identify each other. They

mean well enough, and they really show a disinterested anxiety to get some of their friends and relatives hung, but the same misfortune overtakes them every time: they make mistakes and get the wrong man, with unvarying accuracy.

With a zeal in behalf of justice which cannot be too highly praised, the whole Chinese population have accused each other of this murder, each in his regular turn. . . .

There is only one way to manage this thing with strict equity: hang the gentle Chinamen promiscuously, until justice is satisfied.

“MANY CITIZENS”

The King in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Merlin in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, Colonel Sellers in The Gilded Age all were adept at the kind of verbal acrobatics that Clemens displays here. Clemens's orneriness in this local column from the Territorial Enterprise of February 25, 1863, was part of a comic feud with his "chief editor" and good friend, Joe Goodman:

In another column of this paper will be found a card signed by "Many Citizens of Carson," stating that the County Commissioners of Ormsby county have removed the Sheriff from office and appointed some one else in his stead. They also ask whether the Commissioners really possess the power to remove the Sheriff, or the Governor of the Territory, or the President of the United States, at pleasure.

This is all well enough, except that in the face of our well known ability in the treatment of ponderous questions of unwritten law, these citizens have addressed their inquiries to the chief editor of this paper—a man who knows no more about legal questions than he does about religion—and so saturated with self-conceit

is he, that he has even attempted, in his feeble way, to answer the propositions set forth in that note.

We ignore his reply entirely, and notwithstanding the disrespect which has been shown us, we shall sink private pique for the good of our fellow men, and proceed to set their minds at rest on this question of power.

We declare that the County Commissioners do possess the power to remove the officers mentioned in that note, at pleasure. The Organic Act says so in so many words . . . : "The executive power and authority in and over said Territory of Nevada shall be vested in a Governor and other officers, who shall hold their offices for four years, and until their successors shall be appointed and

qualified, unless sooner removed by the County Commissioners."

That is explicit enough, we take it. "Other officers" means any or *all* other officers, of course, else such dignitaries as it was intended to refer to would have been specifically mentioned; consequently, the President of the United States, and the Governor and Sheriff being "officers," come within the provisions of the law, and may be shoved out of the way by the Commissioners. . . .

We have been actuated solely by a love of the godlike principles of right and justice, and a desire to show the public what an unmitigated ass the chief editor of this paper is. Having succeeded to our entire satisfaction, we transfer our pen to matters of local interest, although we could prove, if we wanted to, that the County Commissioners not only possess the power to depose the officers above referred to but to hang them also, if they feel like it.

EXPLANATION OF A MYSTERIOUS SENTENCE

Martin J. Burke was Chief of Police in San Francisco and a frequent target (partly for his bullying of the Chinese) of Clemens's satire, as this piece from the San Francisco Examiner of February 7, 1866, makes plain:

Editor Examiner:—You published the following paragraph the other day and stated that it was an "extract from a letter to the Virginia Enterprise, from the San Francisco correspondent of that paper." Please publish it again, and put in the parentheses where I have marked them, so that people who read with wretched carelessness may know to a dead moral certainty when I am referring to Chief Burke, and also know to an equally dead moral certainty when I am referring to the dog:

I want to compliment Chief Burke—I do honestly. But I can't find anything to compliment him about. He is always rushing furiously around, like a dog after his own tail—and with the same general result, it seems to me; if he (the dog, not the Chief,) catches it, it don't amount to anything, after all the fuss; and if he (the dog, not the Chief,) don't catch it it don't make any difference, because he (the dog, not the Chief,) didn't want it anyhow; he (the dog, not the Chief,) only wanted the exercise, and the happiness of "showing

off" before his (the dog's, not the Chief's,) mistress and the other young ladies. But if the Chief (not the dog,) would only do something praiseworthy, I would be the first and the most earnest and cordial to give him (the Chief, not the dog,) the credit due. I would sling him (the Chief, not the dog,) a compliment that would knock him (the Chief, not the dog,) down. . . .

I think that even the pupils of the Asylum at Stockton can understand that paragraph now. But in its original state, and minus the explanatory parentheses, there were people with sufficiently gorgeous imaginations to gather from it that it contained an intimation that Chief Burke kept a mistress! — and not only that, but they also imagined that Chief Burke was in the habit of amusing that mistress with an entertainment of the most extraordinary character! . . .

I am a little at loggerheads with M. J. Burke, Chief of Police, and I must beg leave to stir that officer up some in the papers from time to

time; but M. J. Burke, in his capacity as a private citizen, is a bosom friend of mine, and is safe from my attacks. I would even drink with him, if asked to do so. But Chief Burke don't keep a mistress. . . . I only wish he did. I would call it malfeasance in office and publish it in a minute!

REFLECTIONS ON THE SABBATH

Hell-fire-and-brimstone Christianity endured the ingenious attacks of a professed "sinner" in the Territorial Enterprise in early March 1866:

The day of rest comes but once a week, and sorry I am that it does not come oftener. Man is so constituted that he can stand more rest than this. I often think regretfully that it would have been so easy to have two Sundays in a week, and yet it was not so ordained. The omnipotent Creator could have made the world in three days just as easily as he made it in six, and this would have doubled the Sundays. [But] it ill becomes us to hunt up flaws in matters which are so far out of our jurisdiction.

I hold that no man can meddle with the exclusive affairs of Providence and offer suggestions for their improvement, without making himself in a manner conspicuous. Let us take things as we find them—though, I am free to confess, it goes against the grain to do it, sometimes.

What put me into this religious train of mind, was attending church at Dr. Wadsworth's this morning. I had not been to church before for many months, because I never could get a pew, and therefore had to sit in the gallery, among the sinners. . . . I was sprinkled in infancy, and look upon that as conferring the rank of Brevet Presbyterian. It affords none of the emoluments of the Regular Church—simply confers honorable rank upon the recipient and the right to be punished as a Presbyterian

hereafter; that is, the substantial Presbyterian punishment of fire and brimstone instead of this heterodox hell of remorse of conscience of these blamed wildcat religions. . . .

The Presbyterian hell is all misery; the heaven all happiness—nothing to do. But when a man dies on a wildcat basis, he will never rightly know hereafter which department he is in—but he will think he is in hell anyhow, no matter which place he goes to; because in the good place they progress, pro-gress, pro-gress—study, study, study, all the time—and if this isn't hell I don't know what is. . . .

Dr. Wadsworth never fails to preach an able sermon; but every now and then, with an admirable assumption of not being aware of it, he will get off a firstrate joke and then frown severely at any one who is surprised into smiling at it. This is not fair. . . .

Several people there on Sunday suddenly laughed and as suddenly stopped again, when he gravely gave the Sunday school books a blast and spoke of "the good little boys in them who always went to Heaven, and the bad little boys who infallibly got drowned on Sunday," and then swept a savage frown around the house and blighted every smile in the congregation.

A VOICE FOR SETCHELL

Clemens's defense of the comic actor Dan Setchell was published anonymously in the San Francisco Californian, May 27, 1865. In standing up for the comedian, he also spoke for himself:

My voice is for Setchell. What with a long season of sensational, snuffling dramatic bosh, and tragedy bosh, and electioneering bosh, and a painful depression in stocks that was anything but bosh, the people were settling down into a fatal melancholy, and growing prematurely old—succumbing to imaginary miseries and learning to wear the habit of unhappiness like a garment—when Captain Cuttle Setchell appeared in the midst of the gloom, and broke the deadly charm with a wave of his enchanted hook and the spell of his talismanic words, "Awahst! awahst! awahst!" And since that night all the powers of dreariness combined have not been able to expel the spirit of cheerfulness he invoked.

Therefore, my voice is still for Setchell. I have experienced more

real pleasure, and more physical benefit, from laughing naturally and unconfinedly at his funny personations and extempore speeches than I have from all the operas and tragedies I have endured, and all the blue mass pills I have swallowed in six months. . . .

True, I have heard one man say he was not as good as Burton in "Captain Cuttle," and another that he had seen better actors in *A Regular Fix*, but then I attached no great importance to the opinions of these critics . . . because every time Mr. Setchell plays, crowds flock to hear him, and no matter what he plays those crowds invariably laugh and applaud extravagantly. That kind of criticism can always be relied upon as sound, and not only sound but honest.



Courtesy of the Mark Twain Project, The Bancroft Library.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *In addition to the Mark Twain Project's Early Tales & Sketches, Vol. 1, 1851-1854 (1979), from which some of the excerpts above were chosen, readers may wish to consult Henry Nash Smith's Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer (1962), Justin Kaplan's Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain: A Biography (1966), and Mark Twain's own Roughing It (1872).*