

The Portable Mark Twain

Edited with an Introduction by

TOM QUIRK

PENGUIN BOOKS

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“Bernard DeVoto would have agreed loudest of all that it’s time to redo *The Portable Mark Twain*, time for a fresh look at basic materials and for building in new materials that have turned up since 1946. Though a tough judge of literary critics, he would also have agreed, I feel, that Tom Quirk was the best choice to put state-of-the art wheels, styling, and accessories on this pacesetter for Mark Twain anthologies.”

—Louis J. Budd, James B. Duke Professor of English (Emeritus), Duke University, author of *Our Mark Twain*

“Mark Twain is back amongst us (and not a moment too soon), trailing rainbows and thunderbolts of the American language that he invented, mostly. His escort and great good friend on this visit, Tom Quirk, offers an introduction that reminds us why Twain will never not be necessary to a true understanding of our country. And Mark takes it—and us—from there.”

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“Trying to put your arms around Mark Twain is like trying to embrace the Mississippi. He is endless. This *Portable*, however, should open his richness to the new reader and remind the older ones of the wealth they may have forgotten. Reading him again is like biting into fresh bread.”

—Arthur Miller

PENGUIN  CLASSICS

THE PORTABLE MARK TWAIN

SAMUEL LANGHORNE CLEMENS was born on November 30, 1835, in Florida, Missouri, about forty miles southwest of Hannibal, the Mississippi River town Clemens was to celebrate as Mark Twain. He left home in 1853, earning a living as an itinerant typesetter, and four years later became an apprentice pilot on the Mississippi, a career cut short by the outbreak of the Civil War. For five years, as a prospector and a journalist, Clemens lived in Nevada and California. In February, 1863, he first used the pseudonym "Mark Twain" as the signature to a humorous travel letter; and a trip to Europe and the Holy Land in 1867 became the basis of his first major book, *The Innocents Abroad* (1869). *Roughing It* (1872), his account of experiences in the West, was followed by a satirical novel, *The Gilded Age* (1873), *Tom Sawyer* (1876), *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), and his masterpiece, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Following the publication of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), Twain was compelled by debts to move his family abroad. By 1900 he had completed a round-the-world lecture tour, and, his fortunes mended, he returned to America. He was as celebrated for his white suit and his mane of white hair as he was for his uncompromising stands against injustice and imperialism and for his invariably quoted comments on any subject under the sun. Samuel Clemens died on April 21, 1910.

TOM QUIRK is professor of English at the University of Missouri- Columbia. He is the editor of the Penguin Classics editions of Mark Twain's *Tales, Speeches, Essays, and Sketches* (1994) and *The Innocents Abroad* (2002), and Ambrose Bierce's *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians and Other Stories* (2000), and coeditor of *The Portable American Realism Reader* (1997). His books include *Coming to Grips with Huckleberry Finn* (1993), *Mark Twain: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1997), and *Nothing Abstract: Investigations in the American Literary Imagination* (2001).

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Introduction

I

During his last decade, Samuel Clemens was writing, or rather dictating, his “Autobiography.” It was a work that only death could complete and would be published, if at all, long after he was gone. Clemens embraced the premise, for it meant that he might speak, so he liked to believe, without reserve or constraint; speak with the bluntness only a dead man might enjoy. In casual yet systematic fashion, he committed himself to narrating his life according to whim and random recollection. The publication in 1906 of a bastardized version of his earlier anthology, *Mark Twain’s Library of Humor* (1888), at once incited his fury and provoked a certain introspection and became a subject for one morning’s dictation. Perusing the contents, “Mark Twain” reflected in his “Autobiography” on the fate of nineteenth-century humorists. For the forty years “wherein I have been playing professional humorist before the public,” he observed, a host of literary comedians have come and gone. “Why have they perished? Because they were merely humorists. Humorists of the ‘mere’ sort cannot survive. Humor is only a fragrance, a decoration.” And *Why* (he implicitly asks) *have I lasted?* Because (he implicitly answers) *I am a moralist, and they were not.* “Humor must not professedly teach and it must not professedly preach,” he continued, “but it must do both if it would last forever. By forever, I mean thirty years. With all its preaching it is not likely to outlive so long a term as that.”

Already, Twain is indulging in fuzzy math. The fame of the mere humorist is extinguished in a few years, but even the humorous moralist cannot expect more than thirty years. However, Twain himself has just observed that he has been a professional humorist for forty years, a full decade beyond “forever.” But he is not through with his calculations:

I have always preached. That is the reason that I have lasted thirty years. If the humor came of its own accord and uninvited I have allowed it a place in my sermon, but I was not writing the sermon for the sake of the humor. I should have written the sermon just the same, whether any humor applied for admission or not. I am saying these vain things in this frank way because I am a dead person speaking from the grave. Even I would be too modest to say them in life. I think we never become really and genuinely our entire and honest selves until we are dead—and not then until we have been dead years and years. People ought to start dead and then they would be honest so much earlier.

In order to be absolutely honest with his readers, Clemens imagines speaking from beyond the grave, bound by neither time nor occasion. The presupposition, of course,

is that he is being beforehand with a world not yet born, and he adopts the position of a ghost in the narrative machine of his own making. But behind the undertaking there is also the presumption that Mark Twain will be of continuing interest for generations to come, far longer than the thirty (or perhaps forty) years allotted to him or any other humorist. And, his protestations notwithstanding, Twain remains a humorist to the last. The mysteriously complicated, even irreconcilable, carbon dating of his lasting fame is finally a sly prologue to the punch line—"People ought to start dead."

The vaunted boast of this self-assessment (at once retrospective and predictive) is in stark contrast to the confession he made to his brother Orion, in an 1865 letter: "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, & 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 trusts to our keeping, I would long ago have ceased to meddle with the things for which I was by nature unfitted & turned my attention to seriously scribbling to excite the laughter of God's creatures. Poor, pitiful business!" When he made this declaration, Clemens was thirty years old, high time for a man to have settled into an occupation, however lowly. It is true that he had turned his hand to other work from an early age. It is probably true that he would have been content to have remained a riverboat pilot, had not the Civil War effectively ended that career; at least he made that claim more than once. It is unfortunately true as well that he did not cease to meddle in things beyond his peculiar ken—as entrepreneur and businessman, publisher and self-appointed philosopher, inventor and investor—and much of this meddling cost him hard coin and caused him grief.

In any event, these two statements, made approximately forty years apart, will serve well enough to bracket the career of Mark Twain. Those same four decades provide a vast reservoir of writings from which to gather up representative features of Twain's art and genius—secular sermons and tall tales; vicious wisecracks and tender comedy; testaments of political outrage and deep compassion; antic, and sometimes merely silly, comic indulgence. *The Portable Mark Twain* means to give as complete a picture as possible of Twain's art and comedy. But the complete corpus of Twain's prodigious output is anything but "portable." When one lumps together, in addition to the writings published in his lifetime, the approximately 12,000 extant letters, the voluminous notebooks, the speeches, the unpublished and (in his mind) unpublishable writings, the unfinished manuscripts, not to mention the "Autobiography" itself, some 2,500 pages in typescript, one is tempted to conclude something that is manifestly untrue: Here was a man who had no life apart from writing. But, in fact, for good or ill, he gave over a great deal of time to his business concerns, to his friends and family, to his search for one sort of health cure or another, to his cockamamie schemes for world betterment and personal profit (ranging from food additives to an ingenious bed clamp to keep the baby's covers on), and to his vast and diverse reading. Add to this the hundreds of thousands of hours of talk, acres and acres of the stuff—spontaneous after-dinner monologues, hundreds of newspaper interviews, peripatetic chatter with comrades, or improvised bedtime stories for the children—and one soon enough recognizes that Twain's writings formed only a part, and perhaps not the best part, of the man.

Still, as a matter of simple “coverage” of his written work, this anthology casts a wide enough net to catch the flavor and inexhaustible variety of the man at nearly every stage of his life. At the very least, his salient qualities are here. Those qualities are several, and all their possible combinations make them virtually unnumbered. William Dean Howells, in a review of *Mark Twain’s Sketches, New and Old* (1875), named the characteristic traits of the humorist. Twain is a master of “burlesque,” though, Howells adds, in its special tendency to double back on itself, his travesty acquires a novel subtlety and suppleness. He has a “fine, forecasting humor,” by which I think Howells meant that the author has an ambulatory style that, on the promise of some joke as yet unspotted, engenders in his readers an eager willingness to follow wherever he might lead. Twain is finely “American” in his boisterous “extravagance of statement”; he is reassuringly trustworthy and amiable in his “incorruptible right-mindedness”; and his delightful “dryness,” his apparent oblivion to his own comedy, permits readers, under the spell of his crafty art, to feel smarter than perhaps they should.

More important than all these, Howells detected a “growing seriousness of meaning in the apparently unmoralized drolling.” In California, Twain had sometimes been called the “Moralist of the Main,” and several of his journalistic pieces left his indignant seriousness in little doubt. However, Eastern readers knew Twain as the literary comedian and not much more. Howells was doing the humorist a service in pointing out this other dimension of the man. In fact, Howells singled out “A True Story” as much the best piece in the collection and a sketch generally misunderstood by critics who, expecting a joke and not wanting to be left out, altogether missed the “rugged truth” of this moving story of slave life. This is a reasonably complete list of Twain’s gifts, and I would add only Louis J. Budd’s identification of a “quintessentially Twainian quality”—“an emotional-intellectual drive, an integrative, pleasure-sharing ability to soar above or outside of commonly accepted experience.” That flight from ordinary experience at times may have been mere escape from trials and tribulations, but as often, as Budd observes, it provided the author a special pleasure that one might justifiably call “ecstasy.”

For several decades, it has been fashionable to think of Clemens as having been cooped up and hemmed in (whether he was restrained by the inheritance of a Calvinist conscience, the pressures of a pervasive Victorian gentility, or some perverse inner check hardly matters). He sometimes complained that the world at large valued him only as a funny man, incapable of deep conviction and firm principle, but that may or may not mean he was disposed to be secretly subversive of the prevailing order. Of course Twain himself invites such psychoanalytical second-guessing when he confesses to his frustration with the occupation of humorist, as he did, for example, in an 1875 letter to Howells, by complaining his customary audience required him to “paint himself striped and stand on his head every fifteen minutes.” When Clemens first adopted the pen name “Mark Twain” in 1863, he likely felt some liberation in the persona. Mark Twain appears in a variety of guises (as the tenderfoot, the dandy, the muggins, and so forth) but always in ways that are far less complicated than was the author himself. Still, in disguise, Clemens could speak more forthrightly than he might in his own person. Eventually, however, he began to complain that the public had not

got him “focused” right and thought of him as perpetually jolly and decidedly unserious. Humor was his bread and butter, but often it was a bitter portion to swallow. This dilemma must have eventually contributed something to the deterministic philosophy he adopted in later years.

Twain’s late philosophic meditations, expressed in “Corn-Pone Opinions” (1901), *What Is Man?* (1906), and elsewhere, merely added quasi-intellectual support to a long-standing conviction that conduct and thought are imposed from without. The average man or woman desires above all else, he argued, a sense of self-approval that can only be had by gaining the approval of others. Similarly, the approval of the public required Twain to perform antics of one sort or another that, in their turn, became a humiliation to himself and his family. Small wonder that he should complain that truthful and frank expression is all but impossible. Still, it is at least thinkable that the author’s levity stemmed not simply from a desire to please or to be evasive or to subvert, but because he couldn’t help himself. Perhaps he was addicted to the ecstatic privilege that such flights above and beyond earth-bound decorum and right thinking might afford.

What is more certain, at any rate, is that he was good at it. At a dinner honoring Andrew Carnegie in 1907, for example, Twain gave a speech and found his comic opportunity in Carnegie’s promotion of simplified spelling. “He’s got us all so we can’t spell anything,” Twain fumes. Any rational reformer would address the root of the problem—the alphabet:

There’s not a vowel in it with a definite value, and not a consonant that you can hitch anything to. Look at the “h’s” distributed all around. There’s “gherkin.” What are you going to do with the “h” in gherkin, I’d like to know. . . . Why, there isn’t a man who doesn’t have to throw out about fifteen hundred words a day when he writes his letters because he can’t spell them! It’s like trying to do a St. Vitus’s dance with wooden legs. . . .

It’s a rotten alphabet. I appoint Mr. Carnegie to get after it, and leave simplified spelling alone. Simplified spelling brought about sunspots, the San Francisco earthquake, and the recent business depression, which we would never have had if spelling had been left all alone. . . . Simplified spelling is all right, but, like chastity, you can carry it too far.

Who, in the history of humankind, ever *tried* to do a St. Vitus’s dance? And did the person who put the “h” in “gherkin” do it as a prank, or was it an act of malice prepense, purposely designed to bring about sunspots? And now that the problem has at last been properly diagnosed, who else but Mark Twain would have the nerve to sic the great Andrew Carnegie on it?

II

Early and late, Twain was capable of such antic comedy. As often as not, it supports rather than contests prevailing moral opinion. In a speech called “Advice to Youth” (1882) Twain advises young boys and girls not to “meddle with old unloaded firearms; they are the most deadly and unerring things that have ever been created.” He continues: “You don’t have to take aim even. No, you just pick out a relative and bang away, and you are sure to get him. A youth who can’t hit a cathedral at thirty yards with a Gatling gun in three-quarters of an hour, can take up an old empty musket and bag his mother every time, at a hundred.” Here, Twain is having it both ways. He is outrageous in expression. How did the youth come by a Gatling gun and why on earth does he want to fire on a cathedral? But he is very conventional in his outlook. After all, what could be more agreeable and proper to his Victorian audience than to warn children away from guns? Twain has at once satisfied his audience that he is the master humorist of the age and bolstered his image as a moral sage, but one free of any familiar finger-wagging or fustian rhetoric.

The material for humor seemed to be constantly available to him. There is of course the comedy of situation. His notebook germ for *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) is an inventory of comic possibilities:

Dream of being a knight errant in armor in the Middle Ages. Have the notions and habits of thought of the present day mixed with the necessities of that. No pockets in the armor. No way to manage certain requirements of nature. Can’t scratch. Cold in the head—can’t blow—can’t get at handkerchief, can’t use iron sleeve. Iron gets red hot in the sun—leaks in the rain, gets white with frost & freezes me solid in winter. Suffer from lice & fleas. Make disagreeable clatter when I enter a church. Can’t dress or undress myself. Always getting struck by lightning. Fall down and can’t get up.

The humorous situation was only one of many weapons in his comic arsenal.

There was also the comedy of animals—of moulting cows, asthmatic horses, insomniac clams, and swearing blue jays. There was the comedy of customs—of burials (of the stalwart Buck Fanshaw or the unlucky William Wheeler, who got nipped by the machinery of a carpet factory and had to be buried “just so”); and of sentimental grief (expressed in the morbidly bad poetry of Emmeline Grangerford, alas). There was the comedy of vegetables (of Simon Erickson’s fanatic desire to grow turnips as a vine or Pudd’nhead Wilson’s acute adage: “Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education.”). There was comedy in holidays and hospitality, in sacred places and in slang; there was comedy in apprenticeship and penmanship, in clothes, furniture, and scripture, in undertakers and editors. Amazingly, with such imaginative power at his disposal, Twain never really pressed his advantage. He did not condescend to his created characters, no matter how mean their condition or amusing their idiom. Nearly always, Twain refused to play the humorist as bully; he preferred to pick on someone or something his own size or at times much bigger. Two notable exceptions are to be found in his treatment of the particularly vulnerable states of Arkansas and New

Jersey, however.

As a purely chronological matter, this collection includes diverse specimens of his writing, beginning in 1865 with the publication of the famous jumping frog story and continuing throughout his writing career to his last years. And if *The Portable Mark Twain* does not exhaustively survey the author's professional life, it at least touches upon nearly every important phase of it. In a letter to an unidentified correspondent, Twain confessed that he confined himself in his writings to "familiar" experience. That experience was diverse, he reported, and included stints as jour printer, pilot, soldier, prospector, journalist, publisher, lecturer, and the like. The inventory ends with this revealing disclosure: "I have been an author for 20 years and an ass for 55." Ass or no, Clemens nevertheless dramatized his recollected experience with an exquisite attention to detail and mood. There are in "Early Days" (1907) delicious memories of the time spent on his uncle John Quarles's farm close to his birthplace in Florida, Missouri. In "Old Times on the Mississippi" (1875) Clemens vividly recalls his childhood ambitions in Hannibal and his awkward apprenticeship under the seasoned riverboat pilot, Horace Bixby. There are comic pictures of "the boys" in Nevada Territory, of Twain himself tearfully grieving at the tomb of Adam or puzzling over the vast canvasses of the Old Masters. There are the biting satires of colonial endeavor and the decimation of native populations, and the almost but not quite reverential description of the Sea of Galilee seen by starlight.

In matters of geography, too, this volume is reasonably comprehensive. The great Mississippi River valley receives the greatest space, and this is as it should be, if for no other reason than it is the setting of his masterpiece, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. There are also specimens from his actual travels in the Holy Land and in Germany and Italy and his round-the-world tour made in 1895-96, as well as the wholly fantastic journeys to Camelot and the Garden of Eden (magically transported to Niagara Falls). Twain had Pudd'nhead Wilson say in one of his maxims, I have "traveled more than any one else and I have noticed that even the angels speak English with an accent." This is arrant nonsense, of course. If David Wilson, attorney at law, a.k.a. the "pudd'nhead," had had a lick of sense or an ounce of self-respect, he would have left Dawson's Landing instantly. Instead, he perversely lingered most of his life fashioning maxims for his "Calendar," collecting fingerprints, and living among people who had decided from the moment he stepped off the boat that he was a "lummo," a "labrick" and many other unflattering things.

Twain, on the other hand, had indeed traveled more than most people, enough to know that, the effects of British colonialism notwithstanding, the English language and the Anglo-Saxon point of view were not the only games being played in the world. In fact, by the end, Clemens had circumnavigated the globe and gone nearly everywhere except the place he set out for in 1857, the Amazon. But he got diverted into riverboating and did not look back. Twain later transferred the childhood ambition to get to South America to Huckleberry Finn, but Huck never made it either.

Twain (and Clemens, too, for that matter) had also traveled up and down the social ladder in remarkable ways. In his San Francisco days, it was oysters and champagne one day, unemployment and despair the next. In the mid-1880s he owned his own

publishing house that had just published the monumentally successful memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant, and he had high hopes for his investments; ten years later he was trying to find his way out of debt. These swings in personal fortune probably made him that much more alert to thwarted ambition and to matters of class distinction and the spurious lines that divide human creatures from one another. Clemens knew firsthand the profligacy of ambition and the meagerness of destiny, but in this, as in most matters, he was on both sides of the question. He could have Pudd'nhead Wilson sardonically remark, "There isn't a Parallel of Latitude but thinks it would have been the Equator if it had had its rights." Yet in "Extract from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven" (1909) he could picture true "heavenly justice"; the hereafter was a place where one was judged and rewarded according to an inward greatness that, on earth, often never had the opportunity to develop.

As a rule, Twain recognized the markers of supposed merit for what they are, patent absurdities. In his day they might be pretentious titles, epaulets, or bad French; in our own they might be stretch limos, buns of steel, or bad French. He typically satirized such inequity and pretense with an eager glee. In *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), for example, Twain meets the Czar of Russia and marvels at the terrible yet whimsical authority he wields: "If I could have, I would have stolen his coat. When I meet a man like that, I want something to remember him by." However, the author himself was not exempt from like affectation. Clemens had a love/hate relation with the English and more than once satirized their aristocratic ways. Nevertheless, he sometimes strutted around in the scarlet robes he had worn when he received an honorary degree from Oxford—there was no other red that could compare with it, he thought, "outside the arteries of an archangel." He once bragged, "An Oxford decoration is a loftier distinction than is conferrable by any other university on either side of the ocean." And, in the persona of Mark Twain, Clemens could become the ultimate name-dropper. He recounts in *Following the Equator* (1897) a visit by a Mohammedan "god." A direct descendant of the Prophet and worshipped accordingly, this walking deity wants to discuss the "philosophy of Huck Finn." Twain's reaction is predictable: "It would be false modesty to pretend that I was not inordinately pleased. I was. I was much more pleased than I should have been with a compliment from a man."

These sorts of encounters between social unequals can make for great comedy, and Twain applied the attendant mechanisms of social adjustment (envy and flattery, obsequiousness and exasperation, indifference and condescension) in a variety of ways and to diverse effects. "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1865) begins with a letter addressed to Artemus Ward. Twain, in this instance cast in the role of a dandified gentleman, expresses his "lurking suspicion" that he has been set up. In urging him to search for the edifying company of Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley, Ward has deliberately thrown Twain in the way of Simon Wheeler and a reminiscence of the notorious Jim Smiley. What follows, of course, is a rambling and hilarious narrative about a "fifteen minute nag," a bull pup named "Andrew Jackson," and the precocious jumping frog "Dan'l Webster." If Twain had been less impatient with Wheeler, we might have heard the tale of a "yaller one-eyed cow" as well, but he storms off in a huff and his readers necessarily must follow. In "An Encounter with an Interviewer" (1874), a "peart" young reporter from the *Daily Thunder-storm* seeks an interview

with the estimable Mr. Twain. The persona here is simpleminded and afflicted with an “irregular” memory, and Twain leads the interviewer on a wild goose chase for even the most basic information. The young man—having learned that Twain is 180 years old, attended Aaron Burr’s funeral, and many other curious things—leaves exasperated and befuddled. Twain regrets the departure: “He was pleasant company, and I was sorry to see him go.”

In “The Story of the Old Ram” (1872) Twain the tenderfoot is tricked by “the boys” into mouth-watering anticipation to hear Jim Blaine’s inebriated tale. The storyteller meanders about, getting further and further from the announced subject, and it is not until the raconteur falls asleep mid-sentence that Twain perceives that he has been “sold.” There are many other instances of unlikely pairings of character—those emissaries from the “grand divisions of society” in Virginia City, Nevada, Scotty Briggs and the Parson; or Twain the self-satisfied and ignorant substitute editor for an agricultural journal (who advises among other things that “clams will lie quiet if music be played to them”) and the outraged editor who rebukes him; or Hank Morgan, the practical, hardheaded, nineteenth-century Yankee, and Sandy, the good-hearted, innocent, sixth-century jabberer.

Some of Twain’s encounters were not humorous, however, nor were they intended to be. In “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It” (1874) the former slave and now a servant, Aunt Rachel, literally and figuratively towers above the author, clearly his moral superior. For once, Clemens did not hide behind the camouflage of an adopted persona but is known simply as “Misto C—” and as such bears the full weight of an unwanted recognition: namely, that his judgment of Aunt Rachel’s character borders on criminal stupidity and callousness. Similarly, in one of the most affecting episodes in *Huckleberry Finn*, after playing yet another joke on Jim, Huck receives such a tongue lashing from the fugitive slave that he mulls over his deserved upbraiding and finally “humbles” himself to a black man. “The Private History of a Campaign That Failed” (1885) was published in the company of other Civil War memoirs in the *Century* magazine. Clemens had spent a very brief time in the pro-Confederate Marion Rangers before removing to the Nevada Territory, and he freely admits that perhaps he “ought not be allowed much space among better people.” For the most part his description of the campaign is pure burlesque at the author’s expense, but a sudden revulsion of moral feelings brought about by the shooting of an innocent man decides him on quitting the business of war “while I could save some remnant of my self-respect.” It is almost a certainty that this killing was pure fabrication, introduced to provide the author with a moral dilemma he might respond to with the sort of sensitivity he had attributed to *Huckleberry Finn*, whose narrative he had completed only a few months before writing this memoir. Clemens is extenuating his conduct during the war, but he is also expressing a value. The ultimate worth and dignity of a man or woman cut across class lines and unmistakably declare themselves, if only by appealing to one’s moral sympathies and wounded sense of justice.

III

Despite the orthodox language of Clemens's confession to his brother that he was answering to the inner promptings of the Lord's will in becoming a humorist, it is more likely that he was following the path of least resistance. Comedy came naturally to him. It was apparently irresistible and, for the most part, something more than mere "fragrance" or "decoration." Far from doing God's work, at least as early as 1865 and probably before, he seemed motivated to offer up the comforts of laughter as relief from a world that, depending on his mood, he had decided was an annoyance, a trial, an affliction, or a tragedy; a world that, if it could not be redeemed, might at least be made more tolerable. At any rate, in the same letter to Orion he confided a less than reverential regard for the workings of providence: "I have a religion—but you will call it blasphemy. It is that there is a God for the rich man but none for the poor."

The poor was not his cause, but it was, from time to time, his affiliation. There was not much young Clemens inherited from his father that he could not disavow or outgrow, but he did seem to be permanently affected by the idea that prosperity was just around the corner. In the 1820s, John Marshall Clemens had purchased at least 70,000 acres in Tennessee, and he held fast to the conviction that it would one day make the family rich. It didn't. To the contrary, it engendered in the children false hopes. As Clemens recalled late in life, "It put our energies to sleep and made visionaries of us—dreamers and indolent. . . . It is good to begin life poor; it is good to begin life rich—these are wholesome; but to begin it prospectively rich! The man who has not experienced it cannot imagine the curse of it."

It was a curse that Sam Clemens could never quite shake. No doubt that prospective fortune grew in proportion to the degree the family felt the pinch of necessity. John Clemens died in 1847, but even before that his debts had mounted; the family auctioned off property, sold their furniture, and took in boarders. Young Sam Clemens never experienced the penury of Tom Blankenship (the impoverished and neglected Hannibal boy who apparently served as the model for Huck Finn), but at times he must have felt something of a child of misfortune himself. Still, the visionary in him persisted throughout his life, as even only a few items from the large inventory of his enthusiasms will attest. In the Nevada Territory in the 1860s, Clemens thought he would strike it rich by trading in mining stocks. He didn't. As the owner of his own publishing house, he enthusiastically believed every Catholic family in the world would purchase the authorized biography *Life of Pope Leo XIII* (1887). They didn't. He was right to believe that an automatic typesetter would make a fortune; he was wrong to believe the inventor James W. Paige, an inveterate tinkerer and perfectionist, would ever produce a commercially viable product. He was wrong, too, in investing around a quarter of a million dollars in the project and as a consequence leaving his own publishing concern undercapitalized. In 1894, Clemens entered into voluntary bankruptcy; by 1898, largely through the success of his around-the-world lecture tour, he was able to repay his debts in full. One would think Clemens might have learned the wisdom of Pudd'nhead Wilson's maxim published in *Following the Equator*: "There are two times in a man's life when he should not speculate: when he can't

afford it and when he can.” However, in 1900 Clemens began investing in a food supplement called Plasmon and eventually lost around \$50,000.

These are merely instances, but they indicate, in Clemens, a tendency that was abroad in the land. Get-rich-quick schemes, grand aspirations, exploitation, and corporate and government corruption abounded after the Civil War. Twain dramatized the passion for instant wealth in such tales as “The Facts in the Case of the Great Beef Contract” (1870), “The £1,000,000 Bank Note” (1893), “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” (1899), and “The \$30,000 Bequest” (1904). Twain and Charles Dudley Warner wrote a novel naming the era *The Gilded Age* (1873), but the literary historian Vernon Parrington might have come closer to the spirit of the times when he called it “The Great Barbecue”: “A huge barbecue was spread to which all presumably were invited. Not quite all, to be sure; inconspicuous persons, those who were at home on the farm or at work in the mills and offices, were overlooked; a good many indeed out of the total number of the American people. But all the important persons, leading bankers and promoters and business men, received invitations. There wasn’t room for everybody and these were presumed to represent the whole. It was a splendid feast.”

The Gilded Age is political and social satire, but the character of Colonel Beriah Sellers outshines the invective and is finally more interesting than the convoluted plot of the novel. He is, at any rate, something more than a mere satirical device and better illustrates the impulses behind the venality of a certain kind of American than do Twain’s tales and sketches that explore this theme. Sellers is an altogether memorable creation—part visionary and part windbag; at once calculating and naïve. He is a quixotic braggart, but capable of quickly improvising explanations for events that might permit him some scrap of dignity. He is compromised in his material condition but rich in the affection of his wife and children. “Good gracious, it’s the country to pile up wealth!” he proudly exclaims, but he dines on turnips and water and heats the room with a tallow candle. Sellers is a major stockholder in the soap bubbles of his effervescent imagination and charitably disposed to let others in on the ground floor of his next big deal. There is something majestically helpless about the man that simultaneously commands our sympathy and provokes our laughter.

Clemens based the character of Colonel Sellers on the personality of his mother’s cousin, James Lampton, but there was a portion of himself in the figure as well. Clemens’s imagination, when it was functioning well, was at once projective and assimilative, which is to say it was a compound of keen observation (of mannerisms, colloquial idiom, gesture, and the like) and a genuine identification with the created character. In his “Autobiography,” he emphasized only half of this equation: “Every man is in his own person the whole human race, with not a detail lacking. I am the whole human race without a detail lacking; I have studied the human race with diligence and strong interest all these years in my own person; in myself I find in big or little proportion every quality and every defect that is findable in the mass of the race.” Samuel Clemens, unique in himself, acknowledged that he was representative, too—representative of material ambition and the desire to be accepted into a social order he had some doubts about, but also of a certain native social and cultural uncertainty vying with an equally native pride and vernacular boisterousness.