

PAPA
AN INTIMATE BIOGRAPHY OF
MARK TWAIN

by Susy Clemens

HIS DAUGHTER, THIRTEEN

*With a Foreword and
Copious Comments by Her Father*

NOW PUBLISHED IN ITS ENTIRETY
OR THE FIRST TIME A CENTURY LATER

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Charles Neider

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Introduction

by Charles Neider

This is being written in 1985, the great Mark Twain celebratory year—the 150th anniversary of his birth (November 30, 1835), the 75th of his death (April 21, 1910), and the centenary of the American publication of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (February 1885). It is also the centenary of Susy Clemens's biography of her father, begun when she was thirteen and he was fifty, at the height of his powers, living with his family in the famous and luxurious and unusual (one might even say quaint) house on Farmington Avenue in Hartford.

Before we see Clemens at fifty from the point of view of his adolescent daughter, let's briefly regard him as he appeared to an astute, observant, gifted contemporary, his friend William Dean Howells, who, in his book *My Mark Twain* (1910), wrote, "Clemens was then hard upon fifty, and he had kept, as he did to the end, the slender figure of his youth, but the ashes of the burnt-out years were beginning to gray the fires of that splendid shock of red hair which he held to the height of a stature apparently greater than it was, and tilted from side to side in his undulating walk. He glimmered at you from the narrow slits of fine blue-greenish eyes, under branching brows, which with age grew more and more like a sort of plumage, and he was apt to smile into your face with a subtle but amiable perception, and yet

with a sort of remote absence; you were all there for him, but he was not all there for you."

Susy's biography gives a uniquely intimate portrait of Clemens, views of him not seen elsewhere, and proves what had been said about her by her father and some of his contemporaries: what an unusual, wise, observant person she was, and what a loss it was she died so early, at twenty-four (of spinal meningitis). Among other things, it contains letters from her father to her; a description of a visit she and her father made to General Grant (Clemens was Grant's publisher, and Grant was dying of throat cancer); reports of family performances of *The Prince and the Pauper*; her opinions of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*; and a charming, surprising description of Clemens reading a book. I quote from her biography, retaining her punctuation.

"The other day, mamma went into the library and found **papa** sitting there reading a book, and roaring with laughter over it; she asked him what he was reading, he answered that he hadn't stopped to look at the title of the book.' and went on reading, she glanced over his shoulder at the cover, and found it was one of his own books."

About five years after Susy's death in 1896 Clemens noted in his own hand in her manuscript, "That is another of Susy's unveilings of me. Still, she did not garble history but stated a fact."

Jean Clemens was the baby of the family (she was five in July 1885), and she often begged her father to tell her a story, the subject of which she herself insisted on providing. It sometimes strained him to oblige but he did. Later Susy would pump Jean to get the stories for her biography. The results are precious and hilarious. I leave it to the reader to judge if I am exaggerating.

There are many other memorable things in the biography. In January 1885, when Susy was still twelve (she wasn't thirteen until mid-March), Clemens wrote a letter to her from Chicago that shows how much he regarded her as a person able and willing to assume certain adult responsibilities. Susy copied the letter into her biography, spelling incorrectly in two instances. Clemens addresses her as "Susie." This was his early spelling of her name. Soon he would regularly end her name with a y.

"Susie dear, Your letter was a great pleasure to me. I am glad you like the new book [*Huckleberry Finn*]; and your discription of its effect on Daisy is all that the most exacting and praise-hungry author could desire. And by the way this reminds me to appoint you to write me two or three times a week in mamma's place; and when you write she must *not* write. What I am after is to save *her*. [His wife, Livy, was frequently an invalid.] She writes me when she aught to be resting herself after the heavy fatigues of the day. It is wrong. It must be stopped. You must stop it.

"When it is your day to write and you have been prevented, see to it that the day passes without a letter, *she* must not write a line. Goodbye sweetheart

"Papa"

Another letter from Clemens in Chicago, written early the following month, reveals his endless and endearing curiosity about people, and his willingness, perhaps eagerness, to share examples of it with Susy. Again she copied it into her biography.

". . . In this hotel (the Grand Pacific) there is a colored youth who stands near the great dining room,

and takes the hats off the gentlemen as they pass into dinner and sets them away. The people come in Shoals and sometimes he has his arms full of hats and is kept moving in a most lively way. Yet he remembers every hat, and when these people come crowding out, an hour, or an hour and a half later he hands to each gentleman his hat and never makes any mistake. I have watched him to see how he did it but I couldn't see that he more than glanced at his man if he even did that much. I have tried a couple of times to make him believe he was giving me the wrong hat, but it didn't persuade him in the least. He intimated that I might be in doubt, but that *he knew*.

"Goodbye honey

"Papa"

And there is some brilliant, awesome nature writing by Clemens in one of his letters to Susy, this one from Toronto in the middle of February. I'm still quoting from her biography.

"I went toboganing yesterday and it was indiscribeable fun. It was at a girls' college in the country. The whole college—51 girls, were at the lecture the night before, and I came down off the platform at the close, and went down the aisle and overtook them and said I had come down to introduce myself, because I was a stranger, and didn't know any body and was pretty lonesome. ~~and so~~ we had a hand shake all around, and the lady principal said she would send a sleigh for us in the morning if we would come out to the college. I said we would ~~do~~ that with pleasure. So I went home and shaved. For I didn't want to have to get

up still earlier in order to do *that*; and next morning we drove out through the loveliest winter landscape that ever was.

"Brilliant sunshine, deep snow everywhere, with a shining crust on it—not flat but just a far reaching white ocean, laid in long smooth swells like the sea when a calm is coming on after a storm, and every where near and far were island groves of forest trees. And farther and farther away was a receding panorama of hills and forests dimmed by a haze so soft and rich and dainty and spiritual, that it made all objects seem the unreal creatures of a dream, and the whole a vision of a poets paradise, a veiled hushed holy land of the imagination.

"You shall see it some day. . . ."

There is also something dreadfully sad and wonderfully eloquent in the present volume. I have no fear that my mentioning it now will prove to be an anticlimax for the reader, for it can stand being read many times over. On June 26, 1886, Susy writes, "We are all of us on our way to Keokuk to see Grandma Clemens, who is very feeble and wants to see us pertickularly Jean who is her name sake. We are going by way of the lakes, as papa thought that would be the most comfortable way." On July 4th she makes her final entry in the biography. "We have arrived in Keokuk after a very pleasant." That is all. And Clemens writes:

"So ends the loving task of that innocent sweet spirit—like her own life, unfinished, broken off in the midst. Interruptions came, her days became increasingly busy with studies and work, and she never resumed the biography, though from time to time she gathered materials for it. When I look at the arrested

sentence that ends the little book, it seems as if the hand that traced it cannot be far—is gone for a moment only, and will come again and finish it. But that is a dream; a creature of the heart, not of the mind—a feeling, a longing, not a mental product: the same that lured Aaron Burr, old, gray, forlorn, forsaken, to the pier, day after day, week after week, there to stand in the gloom and the chill of the dawn gazing seaward through veiling mists and sleet and snow for the ship which he knew was gone down—the ship that bore all his treasure, his daughter.”

As I'm sure the reader will agree, the combination of Susy's biography and her father's comments on it, the latter written and dictated in 1901 and 1906, respectively (clearly Clemens was planning to include parts of her biography in his autobiography, together with his comments about her and her biography), is a moving narrative of a wonderful relationship, a sort of love affair, between a father and his daughter. In this case both of the persons were remarkable. Yet granted they were, something universal emerges from the narrative, some exaltation on reading it, a sense that the book may be larger than an intimate portrait of the two chief actors, that just possibly it's an unusual, loving, powerful, moving, revealing portrait of other father-daughter relationships—simply (and most complexly) that.

Although Clemens at first planned to publish his autobiography posthumously (at least so he said), he was persuaded (or persuaded himself) to publish a number of chapters of it in twenty-five installments of the *North American Review* of 1906 and 1907, some of which included excerpts of Susy's biography. This was the first introduction of the biography to the public. Albert Big-

elow Paine, Clemens's friend, official biographer and literary executor, had access to the biography when he wrote his three-volume biography of Mark Twain, published in 1912. In the second volume he quoted some 1,700 words of the biography, or 8.8 percent of the original. (I estimate the biography to be 19,200 words long.) In 1924 he published *Mark Twain's Autobiography* in two volumes, in the second quoting approximately 5,750 words (30 percent). In my own edition, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain* (1959), I used 1,100 words (5.7 percent). And *Susy and Mark Twain* (1965), edited by Edith Colgate Salsbury, used some 7,800 words (40 percent). *The North American Review* used about 8,300 words (43.2 percent). These have been the major uses of the biography. Snippets have appeared here and there, for example in *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn*, edited by Michael Patrick Hearn.

Now, although parts of Susy's biography have already been printed, I can assure the reader that there are beautiful, intimate, wondrous events, insights, emotions, and thoughts which have never seen the light of publication and which are included here for the first time. The manuscript of the biography resides in the Manuscripts Department of the University of Virginia Library, specifically in the Clemens Collection in the Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature there. I asked the Manuscripts Department to send me a photocopy of the manuscript, and was told that the manuscript was accompanied by fifty-two footnotes by Clemens—an intriguing piece of information. When I opened the UPS package about a fortnight later and saw how much Mark Twain material there actually was, stacked on top of the biography (in his own hand; I can

truly call some of it copious), I was startled and delighted, for I immediately saw that much of it too had never been published. The biography and Clemens's interspersed comments on it have never previously been published in their entirety despite the fact the published parts are wonderful. The present volume would make an unusual publication in any year. In this celebratory year the timing is especially apt.

As to the care and accuracy with which the biography has previously been used. Susy's mistakes in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and consistency are absolutely delicious, and I thoroughly agree with Clemens that to correct them would be to profane them. The *North American Review* sometimes reproduced her quaint spelling or capitalization or punctuation, and sometimes didn't. I wasn't able to discover a pattern. The cause of the discrepancies was probably sloppiness in the preparation of the typescript handed over to the *Review*. Paine, in both his biography of Mark Twain and in his *Mark Twain's Autobiography*, took many liberties with Susy's manuscript, omitting things, correcting spelling, grammar, and so on. He was inconsistent and whimsical, for at times he left her spelling intact, and at others, even when insisting in print that he was retaining her spelling and punctuation, he took silent liberties with them. As for myself in *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, I too was guilty of infringements, although unlike Paine's mine were involuntary, for I wasn't working with Susy's original manuscript but rather with Clemens's autobiographical dictations in Berkeley, which were in typescript form, or was relying on Paine or the *North American Review*.

Salsbury used patches of the biography out of their

original sequence in a freewheeling way convenient to her book's design (a series of "family dialogues" made up of quotations), and although she seems to have had access to the original manuscript located in Charlottesville (at any rate she ascribed quotations from it on at least eight occasions), she stitched quotations like a crazy-quilt pattern chiefly from several other sources, the great majority of them printed ones—Paine's biography, his *Mark Twain's Autobiography*, my *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, the *North American Review*, and, in at least one instance, a manuscript in the Mark Twain Memorial in Hartford. As for accuracy, the extent to which she deviated from Susy's manuscript depended almost entirely on the accuracy of her sources, which we have already examined.

In the present volume I had a typescript made from the manuscript, emphasizing to the typist that I didn't want Susy's mistakes corrected, because I treasure them. An unusually good typescript resulted. I then myself compared it with the manuscript and restored certain of Susy's errors which almost inevitably had been corrected. The text now presented is as authentic as I personally have been able to make it. I have gathered Clemens's Foreword from sketches of Susy quoted from *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, and have not rearranged their order.

Perhaps it is not irrelevant to note that part of my intense interest in the current project may be connected with the fact that I had a delightfully close relationship with my daughter during her earliest years and that I published a biography of her first four years, titled *Susy: A Childhood* (1966), which I hope to conclude with a volume covering her fifth and sixth years.

If we include Clemens's Foreword, we have in the present volume a vivid picture of Susy's life up to the age of fourteen, when she left off writing the biography. All the world knows of her untimely death in the summer of 1896 and its immense impact on Clemens, and his remarkably eloquent, heart-breaking response to it. There were four great, tragic blows in his life: the death of his younger brother Henry in the explosion of the *Pennsylvania*, a Mississippi steamboat; the death of Susy; the death of Livy, his wife; and the death of Jean, his daughter. But Susy's death may have been the cruelest blow of all, for she was still young, hadn't lived her life. Livy had *had* a life, even though mostly as an invalid, she had had children, a loving husband, she was fifty-eight and a half at her death, and had been married thirty-four years.

What of Susy's life between the time she wrote the biography and her death? We know that she lived the normal life (if it may be called normal) of the favorite child of a successful, famous genius. Are there any surprising, startling revelations to be made? I believe there are, amounting to a whole dimension of her life which has received almost no public attention until now. We know that in the years '890-94, when Clemens was increasingly in financial trouble, crises that led finally to the bankruptcy of his publishing firm, and when he made many anxious business trips between Europe (where his family lived) and the United States, there were the following significant events in her life.

She went briefly to Bryn Mawr College, left for reasons still unclear, accompanied her family to Europe after her parents closed down the Hartford house be-