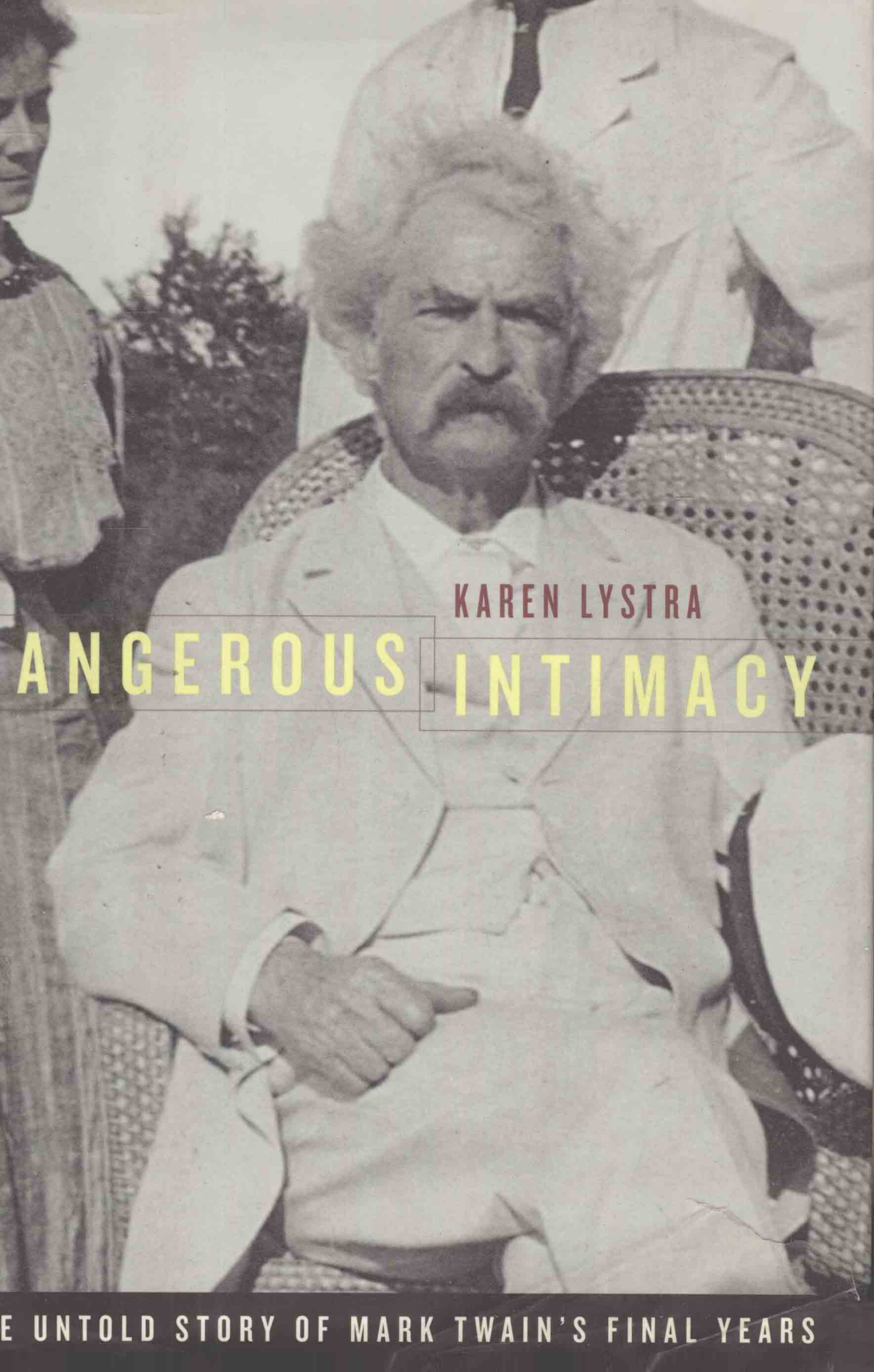

KAREN LYSTRA

# ANGEROUS INTIMACY

E UNTOLD STORY OF MARK TWAIN'S FINAL YEARS

# DANGEROUS INTIMACY

## *The Untold Story of Mark Twain's Final Years*

Karen Lystra

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*Frontispiece.* Lyon, Twain, and Ashcroft at Stormfield in a photo Twain used for Christmas postcards in 1908.



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# PREFACE

IN THE SPRING OF 1987 I was invited to serve as co-editor of a set of documents that had been recently acquired by the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California. The library had purchased diaries kept by Mark Twain's youngest daughter, Jean Clemens, from the estate of her sister's secretary, Phyllis Harrington. Though the diaries chronicle only four of the last ten years of her life, those were years in which Jean struggled with severe epilepsy and endured a variety of treatments at her family's behest, including an extended stay in a private sanitarium. My work in American nineteenth-century social and cultural history provided a helpful background for reading the diaries in the context of their period, especially in understanding the position of young women of the time.

What I found in the diaries was a compassionate, lonely woman in her twenties, frustrated by all the ways that her disease had interfered with her life. Jean's writing showed her to be a sensitive, kindhearted person who loved horseback riding and dancing and who participated joyfully in almost any outdoor sport or activity. Her intelligence and sense of fun, her tenderness for the downtrodden, her quick but forgiving temper, and her low self-esteem and hunger for love combined to touch me deeply. In order to understand her more fully, I went looking for the wider context of her life, in particular the life of her father.

At that point, I shared the common American images of Mark Twain: the Missouri boyhood captured in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,* the Mississippi riverboat pilot (where the measure of river depth—"mark twain," or two fathoms—gave him his pseudonym), the Western adventurer and journalist, the hugely successful novelist, and finally the charmingly irascible lecturer and raconteur, wisely and wittily challenging the absurdities of everyday life. Indeed, thanks to the one-man show the actor Hal Holbrook has performed for some fifty years, many Americans feel they almost know Mark Twain and cherish his quintessentially American humor, with its basic urge to get even with petty despots and expose the cant of hypocrites.[1]

The private life of Mark Twain—or, more properly, of Samuel Langhorne Clemens—is more obscure. That there was a darker, more deeply cynical face to his humor is evident in much of his later writing, especially in the desolate satire of human cruelty, greed, and selfishness of *Letters from the Earth* and the evident heartlessness of fate and the universe in *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger.* This has led to the widely accepted view that Twain in his late sixties and early seventies, especially after the death of his wife in 1904, was a downcast, cheerless old man. And, indeed, most of the writers and scholars who have made his life and work the subject of many books and documentaries portray his old age as depressed, despairing, and possibly incompetent.

When I began to research the life of Mark Twain, I expected that the basic biography of such a popular icon, over ninety years after his death, would be incontestable. Every inch of his life should have been minutely sifted—or so I thought. Yet on the strength of what I had learned from Jean's diaries and my first foray to the Mark Twain Papers, the vast depository for Twain's private papers and manuscripts at the Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley, I felt at first uncomfortable and ultimately strongly at odds with the traditional interpretation of Twain presented by the standard biographies. Of course, the vast majority of public facts and events of this period have been established: Twain's whereabouts delineated; the characters of his life story sketched; even his tangle of manuscripts has been well sorted out. But, as I went beyond the biographies, the plot line of his private life in his last years began to seem woefully incomplete to me. Most of the manuscripts and other primary sources I consulted in my research have been available for some time, but the more I studied them, the more I became convinced that they simply could not be examined closely or placed next to one another chronologically without revealing an entirely new picture of Twain's final years. There was a "hidden" story yet to be told in the life of Mark Twain.

I came to see the tragedy of Jean Clemens as the key to the story of Twain's later life, even though she was the person who, ironically, had the least control over events. That Jean had epilepsy and that she spent several years in virtual exile from her home after her mother died was set forth in all the biographies, but in them the details of the rest of her life remain sketchy at best. The most important biographer of Twain's last

ten years has characterized Jean as "the daughter Mark Twain wanted to forget" and asserts that as Jean's epileptic attacks became more violent, she attempted to kill the family's housekeeper, Katy Leary.[2] Twain, according to this account, banished Jean from his household because of her assault on Katy. Having met Jean through her diaries, I found this claim startling, raising questions about the state of her mental health and about the connection between epilepsy and violence.

Of course, Jean, like many diarists, might simply have refused to put powerful and frightening emotions on the page, but *nothing* in her diaries had suggested to me unmanageable anger, "homicidal" aggression, or any form of mental illness. I went to the secondary literature on epilepsy—including both the social history of the disease and the results of current clinical research. Scientific opinion is firm: there is absolutely no physiological connection between epilepsy and violence directed against another person. Nonetheless, the belief that epilepsy caused homicidal behavior had been widespread in the nineteenth century—and it had obviously not been put to rest in the twentieth.

Thus I found myself on the trail of a mystery, which I set out to solve with the sleuth's process of deduction. (Like many investigators, I uncovered much more than I had expected.) The claim that Jean attempted murder has never been challenged. Who, I wanted to know, originally thought Jean Clemens was a homicidal killer and why? The accusation had apparently been made by Isabel Lyon, who was Twain's secretary from 1902 to 1909. Her papers, including her diaries, are part of the Mark Twain Papers, housed in the Bancroft Library. In reading those diaries there, both the original and a typescript version, I found the entry in her Daily Reminder for January 27, 1906, where she writes that Jean had struck Katy Leary in "a burst of unreasoning rage," with the intent to kill. But by that date her diaries also revealed that the forty-two-year-old Lyon had fallen deeply in love with her seventy-year-old employer. She would eventually use all her wiles to try to get him to marry her. In studying the original diaries, I could see that many revisions had been made, as if Lyon had spent time in later years revisiting and rethinking her life with Mark Twain. Most changes were trivial, but some more substantive emendations related to the charge against Jean. Judging Lyon's truthfulness and sincerity thus became central to untangling this narrative. Was she a victim of late-nineteenth-century culture,

which taught her to fear persons with epilepsy? How much influence did she have over Twain's decisions—and Jean's life—and how did she use it? And these questions led me to what was perhaps the most important one: Did Mark Twain believe that his daughter was potentially homicidal?

To answer this, I turned to Twain's own unpublished account of his later life, which is also held in the Mark Twain Papers at the Bancroft Library. This remarkable 429-page manuscript, written in 1909 and known among scholars as the Ashcroft-Lyon manuscript, in reference to Lyon and Twain's business manager, Ralph Ashcroft, opened an entirely new perspective in my research. For all its faults—not least of which is its lack of organizational structure—this forceful, sharp-edged, and often courageous autobiography may be Twain's most important confessional writing. (It should not be confused with the published autobiographical "chapters" that appeared in *The North American Review* in 1906 and 1907 and that were republished in 1990 as *Mark Twain's Own Autobiography*.)

In the Ashcroft-Lyon manuscript, Twain recounts the tale of an amazing plot, abetted by his own folly, weakness, and vulnerability to the flattery and lies of his secretary and business manager, who became his confidants and who, he says, thought "I couldn't help myself; that all in good time they would be indisputably supreme here, & I another stripped & forlorn King Lear."[3] Twain charges that Lyon sought to exile Jean from his house forever and confesses that as a widowed father he had failed—to the point of betrayal—to confront his daughter's condition and to live up to his parental responsibility. Yet he furiously repudiates any characterization of his youngest daughter as "crazy." He also accuses his secretary and business manager of financial skullduggery once Jean was out of the way.

I was puzzled. Twain's charges, with the exception of embezzlement in connection with building his house in Redding, Connecticut, do not figure in the biographies. Why had they been rejected? Why would a man of Twain's enormous vanity make such humiliating confessions if they were not true? Yet those who have examined the Ashcroft-Lyon manuscript closely have essentially dismissed it. Some suggest that Twain was close to paranoid fantasy, while others more charitably hint that he was losing his grip on reality as he slid into depression and despair.

Twain's accounts are most often simply discounted in favor of his secretary's version of events, put forward in her diaries and also in a series of interviews that appeared in the *New York Times* after she was fired.

It thus became important to determine whether Mark Twain in his seventies was still a rational man fully in possession of all his mental faculties or a senile old fool who defamed two loyal and caring employees. I wanted to check every fact that could be verified independently. One important source was a professional audit of Twain's finances ordered by his lawyers in 1909, after Lyon and Ashcroft had been dismissed. I closely studied this voluminous ledger-sheet, and as I pored over it for the record of his financial dealings, I found evidence to support Twain's case. I also found other illuminating documents, including a much-contested power-of-attorney, drafted by Ralph Ashcroft, as well as letters, private contracts, and a memorandum written by Ashcroft in defense of Lyon and himself. Ashcroft also did two revealing interviews with the *New York Times* that help to clarify his role.

Many other details that could not be verified externally were examined for internal consistency. Here Jean's diaries and letters were critically important because she—unlike Twain, who wrote for an "Unborn Reader," or Ashcroft and Lyon, who sought more immediate vindication—was not campaigning for a place in history. She wrote of events with a directness, openness, and guilelessness that were extremely helpful in sorting out the claims and counterclaims between her father and his employees. I also appreciated the value of the diaries for their depiction of the experience of a person with epilepsy in the early twentieth century, when effective treatment was still decades away, and for their rare glimpse at life inside a private sanitarium of the day, where men and women with financial means voluntarily sought a cure for the incurable. Although these did not bear directly on my questions about Twain and Lyon, I saw them as an important part of the larger story of Twain and his family.

I also drew on three other important primary sources: a memoir by Twain's middle daughter, Clara; the first biography of Twain, by Albert Bigelow Paine; and Katy Leary's memoir, as told to Mary Lawton, a friend of Clara. What I found most telling in these books is the near invisibility of Isabel Lyon, as if she had been purged by common consent. Clara Clemens wrote *My Father, Mark Twain* in 1931; it is a cheerful ac-

count of her family life that studiously ignores Lyon and Ashcroft. After her mother's death, Clara largely lived away from the family home as she struggled to establish an independent identity in the glare of her father's celebrity. Her absence left the stage open for the growing intimacy between Twain and Lyon, and some have attributed the tensions that developed in the household to Clara's jealous perception of Lyon as a rival for her father's affection. But Clara's separate life was largely dependent on her father's ample financial support, and her motivations for ultimately intervening actually revolved around money. After the deaths of Jean and Twain, Clara became the guardian of the family story.

Albert Bigelow Paine was invited by Twain to act as his official biographer in 1906 and became a member of Twain's inner circle, essentially a member of the household. He had to wage a struggle to retain his position, however, in the face of Lyon's increasing control over Twain's life. In *Mark Twain: A Biography,* published in 1912, Paine made a single reference each to Ashcroft and Lyon in 1,587 pages. He was following the wishes of Clara, who successfully imposed a fifty-year blackout on information about her father's life with his secretary and business manager. In Katy Leary's oral history, *A Lifetime with Mark Twain,* published in 1925, much that is relevant has clearly been censored by Clara's friend Mary Lawton, who conducted and transcribed the interviews with Katy. Leary is nonetheless a vital witness to the events that unfolded in the Clemens household.

At the end of my research I found I had a story I could not walk away from—a *Rashomon*-like tale of the family triangle involving Twain, Lyon, and Jean, each with his or her recounting of events. But for this tale there were other witnesses as well. Indeed, I decided I could write this book in large part because the record of private thoughts and feelings was so rich. One challenge of telling a dramatic nonfiction story is how to get inside the feelings and motivations of the main characters without inventing monologues and dialogues. So many members of Twain's inner circle were on the record that I could give every participant a voice, allowing each to speak his or her mind directly from within the available documents. I believe the story as I re-create it here presents each of these powerful voices fairly. I believe, as well, that it contains many enduring elements: a disabled child, a May-December

romance, the vulnerabilities of age and aging, the vanity of success, the power of prejudice, the loneliness everyone seeks to overcome, the longing for love at any age, and the barriers that seem to keep people apart, including (or especially) parents and children. The story has a universal attraction: although it is rooted in the specific history of one remarkable family, it functions as an emotional sampler of the precarious balance of love and pain that motivates us all.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To PARAPHRASE THE WORDS of a famous fictional character, authors often depend on the kindness of strangers. They also rely heavily on their friends. Acknowledgments are born of the gap between this dependence and the paltry means most writers have to repay their debts.

The generosity of large numbers of people, and of the institutions in which they work, have helped see this book into print. Time to write is the most precious gift a teacher can receive, and two institutions have been especially instrumental in giving me this time. First is the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California, which supported my work with a Summer Research Stipend in 1995 and then became the home for my National Endowment for the Humanities Grant in 1999–2000. Roy Ritchie, Director of Research at the Huntington, encouraged me to set my sights on a full year off from teaching and other responsibilities. The National Endowment for the Humanities provided the financial means. And the long-term fellows at the Huntington added sociability and discernment to my year of intellectual nirvana.

Many people who work at the Huntington were supportive of my project, including Alan Jutzi, Curator of Rare Books, Carolyn Powell, Assistant to the Director of Research, and Virginia Renner, now retired from her position as the Head of Reader Services. I also thank the current Head of Reader Services, Romaine Ahlstrom, and her staff, including Christopher Adde, Jill Cogen, Susi Krasnoo, and Mona Shulman, for the many courtesies that make working at the Huntington so satisfying. Sarkis Badalyan presides over the daily entry and exit into the library with gentle grace.

Scholars who work at the Huntington are called *readers.* Many readers too numerous to mention listened to snippets of my work with interest. One of my favorite parts of the day at the Huntington was lunch, where lively dialogue, social commentary, cultural and political observations, and humorous repartee gave me a boost for meeting the intellectual demands of the afternoon.

The second institution that has been especially supportive of my research is also the place where I teach: California State University, Fullerton. Without the support of former Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences Don Castro, Associate Dean Kurt Swanson, and their administrative assistant, Bunny Casas, as well as my department chair, Jesse Battan, I would not have been able to take a full year off to work on the book. The university also supported my research on this book with two Summer Faculty Research Awards and a semester of sabbatical leave.

Another institution that has been central to this project is the Mark Twain Papers at the University of California, Berkeley. The director, Robert Hirst, took time out from his demanding schedule to explain the intricacies of Twainian copyright. He generously granted me permission to quote from unpublished manuscript sources and also allowed me to reproduce photographs from the collection. Over the years, other scholar-editors at the Mark Twain Papers have been helpful, including Victor Fischer, Kenneth Sanderson, and Robert Pack Browning.

The University of California Press believed in my book, beginning with the reassuring support of Jim Clark, the now-retired director, and his assistant, Mari Coates. Mary Severance skillfully assumed responsibility for the book during the later stages of editing and production. I have been blessed with an extraordinary editor, Ellen F. Smith, whose commitment and dedication to the craft of writing is priceless. She was indefatigable in her efforts to improve my work and pushed me to dig for the telling little detail as well as to strive for the most exacting clarity of exposition. She polished off the rough spots and pushed for changes that at times no doubt saved me from myself. I am especially grateful for her work on my preface, which helped to get at the heart of my intentions. Her probing questions and guidance on matters of style and content have combined to make this a better book.

Several friends have made unique contributions to my project. Paul Zall introduced me to Jean Clemens's diaries and took seriously my ambition to write a book on Twain. He allowed me to use a partial typescript of Jean's diaries that he had banged out on his venerable Remington typewriter. Leila Zenderland and Allan Axelrad read a draft of my manuscript and made suggestions that improved the final work, even if I did not always follow their advice. Bob Middlekauff read a later draft and gave me valuable assistance in the late stages of my project. He has

been a wise friend and an astute critic. Sherwood Cummings read the penultimate draft with the eye of a careful editor. Carol Pearson used her exceptional experience and skill to create an outstanding index.

I was also a grateful beneficiary of the editorial skills of Martin Ridge. Martin's nitty-gritty suggestions came at a crucial stage in the writing process. I am indebted to him for this, as well as for his incisive intelligence, unfailing humor, and generosity of spirit. Even his expressions of cantankerous exasperation with my fretting were somehow reassuring. Martin's death on September 22, 2003, has left his friends with a great vacancy, a hollow space that will not be easily filled; he had a rare kindness that he combined with a razor-sharp intellect, an ever youthful curiosity, and a fierce dedication to the craft of writing history. He took unselfish delight in furthering the work of younger scholars and his legacy is reflected in their accomplishments as well as in his own. He will be greatly missed.

Several people shared the names of their agents and editors, which I gratefully acknowledge. These include: Joan Bromberg, Richard and Marilyn Buel, Michael Fellman, Donna Munker, Walter Nugent, and Charles Royster. Other friends and colleagues—Tom Madden, Carol Srole, Sarah Stage, Brian Stryer, Joan Waugh, Sean Wilentz—invited me to speak on my Twain project at seminars, conferences, and university lecture series. They provided an invaluable opportunity to take my findings "on the road." Finally, I had one conversation with Ellen Dwyer years ago about my project that has continued to inspire me. Her admirable scholarship on epilepsy allowed me to resolve some key dynamics in Twain's inner circle.

I wish to thank my colleagues in the American Studies Department at California State University—Allan Axelrad, Jesse Battan, Leila Zenderland (again); also Wayne Hobson, John Ibson, Michael Steiner, Pamela Steinle, Terry Snyder, and Scott Tang—for valuing my work and for making research and writing an integral part of our collective endeavor. Students who enrolled in my Mark Twain seminar shared their insight and enthusiasm for Twain's work as well as their disillusionment and frustration with some of his life choices. I have also been the grateful beneficiary of the questions, advice, and encouragement of Douglas Temple, a member of the staff at Fullerton. Even his daily trivia question, which I hardly ever got right, has cheered me on my way.

Many other friends provided encouragement through their questions, enthusiastic observations, and cheerful assumption that the book was

going to be worth reading. These include: Norma Almquist, Lanny Amigo, Austin Briggs, Sharon Calhoun, Barbara Donagan, Mary Felstiner, Debbie Girkin, Pat Haley, Bob Hine, Colleen Jaurretche, Barry Menikoff, Lois Nettleship, Jean Nichols, Judy Raftery, Bunny Serlin, Geoff Shrager, and Lucy Steiner. Their encouragement and empathy has been a great boon.

Pat and Jim McPherson took me on a road trip to visit Hartford, Connecticut, to tour the house where Twain lived in his prime. We also went to Elmira, New York, Twain's summer home for twenty years. Making a pilgrimage to his gravesite in Elmira, where his entire family is buried, was a moving experience, and visiting these landmarks with the McPhersons was a highlight of my work on Twain.

"To write is to sit in judgment on oneself," a wise author once remarked. One is lucky to have family and friends who are sympathetic and who temper their expectations with affection. My parents, Jim and Lily Lystra, are among the most unselfish and generous-minded people I have ever met. Their unfailing support has been sustaining. My siblings, Torrey Lystra and Gaylen Mollet, and their spouses, Carol Lystra and Ralph Mollet, have always taken an open and nonjudgmental approach to my work.

Finally, I wish to express my appreciation for all the scholars in the field of Mark Twain criticism, biography, and textual editing whose work I have drawn on and in many cases cited in my notes. I know very few of you personally, and I sometimes disagree with your interpretations of Twain's late years, but your labors on Twain have made my biography possible, and I salute you.

# A NOTE ON NAMES

TELLING A BIOGRAPHICAL STORY in an essentially novelistic style—and, even more, writing about the private life of a man who is universally known by his pseudonym but whose intimates would never have called him by it—presents a problem: What form of the "characters'" names should one use? Because the story is a family one, in which many of the actors share the same surname and all would have addressed each other by given names or other family pet names and designations, I have chosen to refer to the women of the Clemens household by their first names, including Katy Leary. Isabel Lyon, who was almost invariably referred to as "Miss Lyon," is generally designated as "Lyon." I use "Mark Twain" to refer to the writer and public persona when appropriate, but for the man himself I use "Sam" or "Clemens," according to the context.

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