

MARK TWAIN

The
Mysterious Stranger
And Other Stories

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With a Foreword by EDMUND REISS



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Published by arrangement with Harper & Row, Publishers.

SEVENTH PRINTING



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REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA
HECHO EN CHICAGO, U.S.A.

SIGNET, SIGNET CLASSICS, MENTOR AND PLUME BOOKS
are published *in the United States* by
The New American Library, Inc.,
1301 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10019
in Canada by
The New American Library of Canada Limited,
295 King Street East, Toronto 2, Ontario,
in the United Kingdom by
The New English Library Limited,
Barnard's Inn, Holborn, London, E.C. 1, England

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Foreword

As the most significant of the significant stories in this collection, *The Mysterious Stranger* represents Mark Twain's final attempt to put into fictional form the misanthropic ideas of his old age, ideas that render incongruous the appellation of humorist usually given to him. The work stands in all its bitterness and scorn at the end of a long line of stories and novels beginning with the jocular "Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Although the differences between these two pieces are immeasurable, one may see developing through the Twain corpus the *Weltschmerz* explicit in *The Mysterious Stranger*.

Sometimes this changing attitude toward life is revealed in the world created in each work. In "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" the world is one of pleasant memories, of anecdotes, of the folk hero Jim Smiley. The world shown has little meaning to a reader, for even with its con-man's tricks and exaggerated tall tales it still is innocent, not a true reflection of life. Although similar in appearance to the Faulknerian world seen, for example, in the horse-trading episode of *The Hamlet*, it is essentially different; for there is an implicit evil in Faulkner's world that never touches or taints the frontier Arcadia of "Jumping Frog."

We read such works as "The Stolen White Elephant" and "Luck" for their humor and only as an afterthought think that the stories may contain out-and-out satire. They continue to have a detachment from life and, although not to be termed escape literature, they nevertheless tend to exist in a world of their own. In "The £1,000,000 Bank-Note" Twain's world is more than humorous; it is truly comic, revealing an inherent faith in the outcome of human achievement and an abiding belief in the success of life. The story is a romantic idyl

showing the poor hero, down on his luck, eventually gaining through a *deus ex machina* reputation, position, wealth, and the woman he loves. It is the American dream of success come to life. One really need not worry about the future; the benevolent hand is outstretched around the next corner. Man is important and will be cared for.

In "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" the faith begins to shatter. Mankind's goodness is merely skin-deep, and the benevolent hand may really be attached to the body of a demon, or perhaps to the body of a confidence man who has changed from the folksy stranger of "Jumping Frog" to a deceiver who tricks men into revealing hidden faces, or perhaps even to the body of someone like the new Mark Twain, who intends to reveal to public eyes his discovery of the ignobility and greed of man. Nevertheless, Twain still offers man the opportunity to change. Hadleyburg is able to change its name and become "an honest town once more" because its citizens finally realize that rather than sit back and feel self-satisfied and have faith in man's future, they must get up and make the future. One word is deleted from the town's official seal to make it read, "Lead Us Into Temptation." There is still hope for man but only if he understands what he is and that he is responsible for what he becomes. One must, says Twain, shun the benevolent hand, not the hard road away from the hand.

A similar theme appears in "The Five Boons of Life." Here man again takes from the outstretched hand, and again he suffers, now because, having to make a choice, he chooses the wrong boon, not once but four times. Of all the gifts—Fame, Love, Riches, Pleasure, and Death—only Death is valuable, and man loses even this blessing. All that is left for him is "the wanton insult of Old Age," an empty barren existence shot through with memories of waste, frustration, and nonachievement, an existence as horrible as that portrayed by Jonathan Swift in Book III of *Gulliver's Travels* when he shows the *Struldbrugs*, the deathless ones, who have nothing left but existence.

"Was It Heaven? Or Hell?" continues the theme as

Twain here states explicitly what man must do if he is to be saved: "Reform! Drop this mean and sordid and selfish devotion to the saving of your shabby little souls, and hunt up something to do that's got some dignity to it! *Risk* your souls! risk them in good causes; then if you lose them, why should you care? Reform!" Thus pulpit oratory, used to render an antipulpit thought, heightens the paradox that, for Twain, the saving of man may be quite different from the saving of man's soul. But again Twain gives man no promises. His main characters, by lying for the good of someone else and at the risk of their own salvation, do "reform"; but the story, ending on a Lady-or-Tiger note, leaves unanswered the fate of their souls, the question stated in the title. By negating the value of the soul here Twain approaches the view of man and of life he finally gives in *The Mysterious Stranger*.

In this work Twain again asserts the value of death, again negates the comic view of life, and again reveals human greed and hypocrisy. The responsibility is again man's; no force or deity is on his side to make things ultimately turn out right for him. At the end even existence is taken away from man as Twain in the guise of the Stranger—a reincarnation of the figures in "Jumping Frog" and "Hadleyburg," but now openly supernatural or demonic—asserts that "nothing exists; all is a dream." Man may "dream other dreams, and better"; he may re-create as the citizens of Hadleyburg re-created their town. But Twain does not show how re-creating will help. As in "Was It Heaven? Or Hell?" he promises nothing, but here Twain goes further, denying man a soul, an afterlife, even a present life: "there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a dream—a grotesque and foolish dream." Man is "but a *thought*—a vagrant thought, a useless thought, a homeless thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!" Perhaps dreaming and seeking will be of value but perhaps not. Nothing is given to man, not "the wanton insult of Old Age," not even existence.

By wiping the slate clean in *The Mysterious Stranger* Twain is, however, doing more than denying the existence

of man. Rather than merely turn his back on the human race, he asks man to rid himself and his life of all illusions. In making free will and predestination meaningless terms, in asserting that the world around man is one of his own making and that man may change this world that has failed him—just as it failed Twain in his personal life—he gives to man the supreme compliment. Man must answer only to himself; he must in fact accept the responsibility of being both asker and answerer or, in other words, of assuming the roles of both familiar hero and stranger.

The changing attitude of Twain to the world around him may also be seen in the quality of the laughter which appears in his narratives and that which the reader brings to the writings. In "Jumping Frog" the laughter is innocent, a chuckle at a joke; in "The Stolen White Elephant" it is rollicking burlesque, not yet the horse-laugh and jocular scorn directed at the famous hero of "Luck" who is really "an absolute fool." In "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" the laughter is bitter, derisive, sarcastic, angry, discomforting, even frightening. Laughter has no part in the narration of such stories as "The Stolen White Elephant." In fact Twain is careful to make his narrator there unconscious of the ridiculousness of the episode. The narrator is a straight man, one not in on the joke; and the laughter results from the reader's realizing the difference between his own reaction and that of the narrator. The laughter is, in other words, the result of dramatic irony. In "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," however, laughter forms a continuous backdrop to the central scene of the story, the scene revealing the hypocrisy of the solid, self-righteous citizens of the town. Here the reader does not laugh; he realizes that the laughter is not at something humorous but at man in all his weakness. Perhaps the reader wonders how he himself would have reacted to the money, and if he is honest, he may feel that the laughter is also being directed at him.

Laughter can be a deadly weapon in the hands of a bitter writer. Besides reducing its object to shambles, it

also succeeds in disturbing the reader, in making him feel uncomfortable. The dry laugh is really like the thrust of a dagger; the uncontrollable laugh makes one's hair stand on end—the fiend who laughs is more horrible than he who roars. In *The Mysterious Stranger* Twain shows the Stranger, Philip Traum or Satan, laughing “in the most unfeeling way,” and has him speak of the power of laughter:

. . . your race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon—laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug—push it a little—weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand. You are always fussing and fighting with your other weapons. Do you ever use that one? No; you leave it lying rusting. As a race, do you ever use it at all? No; you lack sense and the courage.

But Twain is not able to laugh here as he could in “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg.” For him there is only the hope that mankind can laugh and “dream other dreams, and better.” For him nothing is left. With his life almost over, with an increasing understanding of the waste that hovers over man, he realizes that if his laughter, the laughter of one man, is to be effectual, one must first have something at which to laugh; for him there is only a void.

Twain is in many ways similar to his contemporary, Henry Adams, who entered the new century conscious mainly of the multiplicity in life, of the lack of direction and lack of unity in the world, of the machine—the Dynamo—that had become man's new god. He is also like another contemporary, Henry James, who insisted throughout his writings on the ambiguity of human existence and experience. For James the end of man's life is less likely to be achievement and success than it is waste, frustration, and grayness. None of these writers denies the emptiness of life: Adams makes multiplicity the norm; James presents man as gray in the grayness; and Mark Twain shows that this world and man are

perhaps not the permanent, real things we think them to be. None of these views represents an answer—they are more statements of the problem than anything else—but by stating the problem, or rather, by calling up statements in the reader, they are all successful.

While the bitterness and pessimism of the later writings of Twain are in part the result of personal misfortunes, they are also states of mind present in Twain all his life but largely dormant. Such a story as the relatively unfamiliar "Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut," written in 1876, is somewhat anomalous when viewed in the light of the stories chronologically contiguous to it but perfectly understandable when seen as part of Twain's complete works. In this story of a man's coming to grips with his conscience and then destroying it Twain seems to sway back and forth between pure farce and cynical questioning, not able to decide exactly what he wants to do. The title of the piece is meaningful only because of the last few sentences, but both title and ending give the impression of being superfluous and irrelevant to what would seem to be the theme of the story. The work finally ends as a farce, just as "Hadleyburg," "Was It Heaven? Or Hell?" and *The Mysterious Stranger* also could easily have tipped over at the last minute, ending as little more than curious pieces of humor. Nevertheless, "Carnival of Crime" shows that the capability for questioning was in Twain throughout his life.

The pessimistic spirit was active in Twain, however, after the death in 1896 of his favorite daughter, Susy. After a long illness his wife, Livy, died in 1904; and Twain wrote to his friend, William Dean Howells, "I am tired and old; I wish I were with Livy." Soon after, another daughter, Clara, suffered a nervous collapse and had to remain in a sanitarium for a year. At the same time his youngest daughter, Jean, was hospitalized after an accident, and within a few months news came to him of the death of his sister, Pamela. During the following years Twain, filled with self-reproaches, exclaimed several times that he was to blame for the misfortunes that had come to his family. In 1908, a favorite nephew died and

shortly after, Twain suffered what may have been the first of several heart seizures. In 1909, he had an actual heart attack; his daughter Jean experienced recurrent attacks of epilepsy; and his private secretary was found to be an embezzler. He also received news on two consecutive days of the deaths of two good friends, and on Christmas Eve, Jean died of an epileptic convulsion. Less than four months later Twain himself died.

It was in these final years of his life that Twain wrote "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," "The Five Boons of Life," "Was It Heaven? Or Hell?" and *The Mysterious Stranger*. In 1899, Twain expanded an earlier sketch into what is now known as the Hannibal Version of *The Mysterious Stranger*, a story different in setting, characters, and aims from the final version of 1905-1906 when he left off writing the piece. During the years between these versions, however, Twain overhauled the work at least twice; but even at the time of his death, he had not attached the ending. The great final chapter was "found" by Albert Bigelow Paine, Twain's literary executor, in a heap of fragmentary papers, selected as the intended ending, and attached to the work, which was first printed posthumously in 1916. Whether or not Paine's discovery represents the ending Twain intended for the piece, it nevertheless brings the work together and gives it direction.

Although beginning auspiciously, the novelette tends to become disjointed. The questions of the worth of man, of the ambiguity of good and evil, of free will, of the Moral Sense, begin to fade into the background as Twain emphasizes the adventurous part of the story. The wonderful irony of the boy-angel, Satan, in the earthly paradise, Eseldorf (Jackassville), of his being both the creator and destroyer of life, fades as Twain makes his narrator, Theodor Fischer, the center of his attention. Father Peter's freedom becomes a dominant issue, and we see Theodor almost become the boy-hero-rescuer—the Tom Sawyer freeing Jim from the bedpost—who is a stock character in a stock scene in Twain's fiction. Incidents that are interesting but distracting begin to appear. In not contributing much to the whole work, many of

Theodor's adventures, which may have been designed earlier as part of an initiation of sorts, are comparable to those of Faustus and Mephistophilis in the middle scenes of Marlowe's play—satirical, curious, but yet, as they stand, not really necessary. It is with the final chapter that *The Mysterious Stranger* regains the intensity of its opening episodes.

One must note, however, that Twain's works are rarely tied up neatly in packages of the right shape and the proper color; and usually the string around them is somewhat loose. The works rarely achieve the organized direction and unity found in *Huckleberry Finn*, but at the same time they also rarely achieve the intensity of language and general effect seen in *The Mysterious Stranger*. Moreover, while Twain had a tendency to concentrate on matters of momentary relevance at the expense of basic philosophical problems, he has here written a work unhurt by topical allegory or by matters belonging on the editorial page of a newspaper.

Still, one might question the effectiveness of the overt didacticism throughout and at the end of *The Mysterious Stranger*. Although the work is effective because of its philosophizing, it falls short of the artistic achievement of "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg." There Twain does not have to intrude into the story to announce his theme. Everything from the beginning of the story leads to the end, and the reader is swept along and made to see the theme and feel the author's attitude without the author's having to throw away his narrative garb and come out in front of the footlights to address him. "Hadleyburg," even with all its narrative art, is, however, tame and undramatic beside *The Mysterious Stranger*, especially beside its memorable and really tormenting conclusion. "Hadleyburg" is like the first two books of *Gulliver's Travels*—controlled and well organized—and Twain is like the Swift of these books—calm, detached, and objective. But *The Mysterious Stranger* suggests the account of Gulliver's fourth voyage, the voyage to Houyhnhnmland, with its bitter invective against mankind. Twain begins in full control but ends with a violent burst

suggestive of the savage frenzy of Swift in this section of the *Travels*.

The Mysterious Stranger, along with the other late writings of Twain, is not the work of an author sitting back in a comfortable easy chair dispassionately viewing life. It is rather the struggle of a man in the midst of life trying desperately to understand what he is and what he is a part of, what life is and why it is so bad. Twain is more than a *fin de siècle* writer fashionably mourning his fate; his cry is similar to that of all who have ever questioned and not been answered.

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