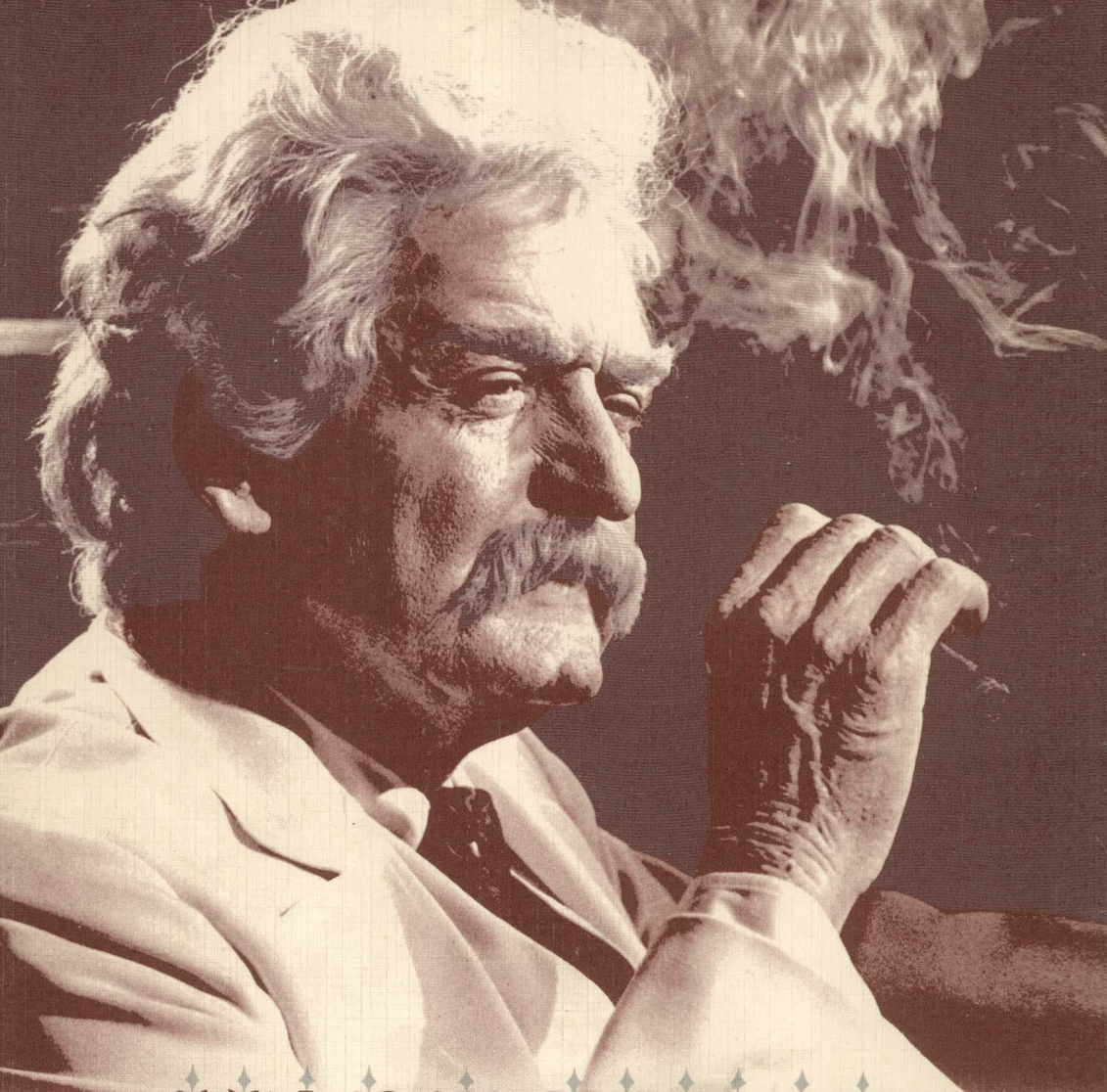

MARK TWAIN

Speaks for Himself

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Front endpaper: *Mark Twain in 1869 at age thirty-four. (From The Mark Twain Papers, University of California, Berkeley.)*
Back endpaper: *Mark Twain in 1907 at age seventy-two. (From the collection of Franklin J. Meine, Chicago.)*
Opposite beginning of text: *Mark Twain as a young man. (From the California State Library, Sacramento.)*

Appreciation is expressed to the above-mentioned sources for their courtesy in permitting use of these photographs and others credited to them in this book.

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MARK TWAIN
SPEAKS FOR HIMSELF

For Bill Tindall

PREFACE

This book evolved out of a number of trips to the University of California at Berkeley and many agreeable hours there in the Bancroft Library. Combing the Bancroft's extensive files of nineteenth-century western newspapers on the trail of whatever subject was of concern at the moment, I was like Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale,* a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles. Frequently I came across news stories lifted by California editors from the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise* when Sam Clemens was a reporter on the paper, none of the items credited to him but some probably written by him. Those that looked promising I filed away for future reference. Since no file of the *Enterprise* is known to exist for those years, fragments reprinted elsewhere were a roundabout way of viewing the Virginia City of his time and occasionally, in comments about the *Enterprise* "Local," of getting a conjectural glimpse of the man himself.

After he had adopted the *nom de plume* of Mark Twain early in 1863 and had gained, by reason of exploits funny and outrageous, a measure of regional fame or notoriety or both, the pen name was often attached to editorial borrowings and his doings were more likely to be noticed than heretofore. Among his contemporaries, who expressed frank opinions about him as a person and as a writer, he was both admired and derided. His tall tale about the petrified man, published in the *Enterprise* soon after he had arrived in Virginia City, was received with amused favor, but a later hoax, the bloody massacre of the Hopkins family, was roundly condemned.

We hear of "this great and truly original, unapproachable humorist," also of "the distinguished humorist, traveler, correspondent and missionary." He was fulsomely complimented as "a refined humorist and a

scholar" and as a man whose "fine sense of humor is surpassed by his acute moral perception." One reporter described his first San Francisco lecture in 1866 as "an intellectual draught from his inexhaustible fountain of mental lore."

Countering laudatory words is the dispraise of critics who looked upon him with a jaundiced eye. They called him "this miserable scribbler," "this wandering Bohemian," and "this desperate joker," compounded of "brass and triple cheek," whose writings were "so intolerably silly that they have not seemed like the production of a sound mind." One fellow said that Mark Twain was thinking of writing a book about "adultery, more and more of it," adding the scurrilous remark: "We know of no one more capable of writing such a book than Mark Twain." Another wit spoke of a projected drama entitled *One Night in Ten Bar-Rooms,* of which he said, "No doubt it will have a successful run, as Mark understands that subject to a dot."

Now and then a perceptive observer gives us a picture of Mark Twain in action, as in the following account from the Oakland, California, *News* of April 10, 1868:

> Yesterday afternoon . . . Mark Twain might have been seen rushing madly about in the neighborhood of the Oakland and Alameda ferry landings . . . inquiring in a bewildered manner of all whom he met, "which boat he ought to take in order to get to the place where the dinner is to come off?" "What dinner?" inquired a benevolent looking citizen, who seemed to think that something was the matter with the pilgrim from the Holy Land. "Well," responded Mark, with a bewildered look, "that's the question. I agreed yesterday, or the day before, or the day before that, or some time or other, to go somewhere to a dinner that was to come off to-day, or maybe to-morrow, or perhaps to-morrow night, at some d——d place, across the bay. I don't know exactly where it is, or when it is, or who I agreed with. All I know is, I'm advertised in the newspapers to be somewhere, some time or other this week, to dine, or lecture, or something or other—and I want to find out where the d——l it is, and how to get there."

That account may have been touched up by the reporter's fancy, but no matter. It is an engaging view of Mark Twain's absentmindedness, which was genuine and permanent.

Whether Pacific Coast editors approved of him or disapproved, they kept on printing stories by and about Mark Twain long after he had left California for good. Out there, his rise to eminence and fortune in the East seemed a surprising example of hometown-boy-makes-good, an event entirely unexpected in some quarters of San Francisco. Still in the air in the late twentieth century is an occasional hint of incredulity over such an unlooked-for occurrence.

Stray pieces of his writing gleaned from California and Nevada papers, together with others from eastern dailies, as well as weeklies and monthlies, are all part of this book, which is intended as a collection heretofore unpublished between covers. I cannot be certain that the claim is valid, but it is almost so. At this late date it is difficult to find anything by Mark Twain, printed anywhere, that has not been unearthed by diligent researchers, cataloged, and possibly resurrected to be republished, but the contents here, except perhaps for a few exceptions, have been hitherto uncollected.

So far as I am aware, there has been no systematic publication of his remarks to newspaper reporters, whose attentions became more pressing as he became more famous during rambles over the world for forty years. Included here are several examples, ranging from the conventional interview to brief observations. All suggest that the spoken word was as important to Mark Twain as the written one, if not more so. Consideration of the man as a writer can hardly ignore the talker, for the vernacular style of his best writing is fashioned upon the rhythms of speech. He considered English as a spoken language, and in top form he wrote as he talked or, as in *Huckleberry Finn,* as his characters talked. Even his idiosyncratic punctuation, which bothered editors, who enraged him when they tinkered with it, accords with the word groupings, pauses, casual repetitions, and loose structure of conversational speech.

Spanning the years between his first days as a reporter on the *Enterprise* and the last months of his life, this anthology gives sporadic glimpses of almost his entire career as writer and talker. No ulterior motive prompts the presentation. It is not intended to advance a theory, psychological or literary, to confirm a thesis, or to defend a critical point of view. The purpose is only to recall from obscurity some of his little-known efforts, oral and written, out of which the reader, if so minded, may construct any hypothesis he chooses.

The chronological arrangement, however, offers grist to the mill of the inquirer seeking to trace some sort of development, in style, ideas, or whatever. Walter Blair remarks in his introduction to *Selected Shorter Writings of Mark Twain* (1962) that Mark Twain's short sketches are essential to any analysis of his development. "One who studies such works," says Blair, "perceives that, for all his apparent diffusion, Twain works best in small compass. . . . Varied though they are, works which—as wholes—show Twain coming closest to perfection all are short."

Waiving that point, the short pieces in this collection illustrate the man's versatility in turning his hand to a variety of topics, illuminate episodes in his life as well as facets of his character, and affirm opinions that are provocative even when wrongheaded. Mark Twain is observer and reporter, reflective moralist, teacher and preacher, advocate of causes, teller of tall tales, hoaxer, crusader for copyright, industrious writer of letters to the editor, ostensibly a casual talker who is more studied than casual when he talks for publication.

If any other reason be needed for rescuing fugitive pieces, it is this: that in almost anything written by Mark Twain, even his offhand journalism, some trace of his best style is likely to appear—as in Shakespeare's blood-and-thunder potboilers that pleased the groundlings—the right word, a striking phrase, a sharp figure of speech, a pungent remark that is uniquely his own and that momentarily gives the whole a lift. The authentic Twainian touch is equally the property of the *Enterprise* reporter and of the seasoned

writer thirty years later. The reader comes upon these flashes with surprise and delight. As a longtime follower of Mark Twain, I am as pleased by such finds as an old prospector exhilarated by a show of color in the pan.

In this book the tone, infused with familiar satire and irony, ranges from the grave to the frivolous. Undercurrents of moral indignation, subdued rumblings of disgust over the idiocies of what he called the damned human race, moments of good humor that approach serenity, and forays into nonsense: all manifest the variable character of Mark Twain, an elusive sort of character that evades easy classification.

Because of his variable character, I have not attempted to follow the contemporary vogue of dividing him into Samuel L. Clemens and Mark Twain. I cannot do it, furthermore, because the line of demarcation seems to me so vague and shifting, so blurrily defined that it is difficult, at times impossible, to discern where Clemens yields to Twain and vice versa. The division is credible, as it is likely to be in any man as much in the public eye as he was and desirous, like a campaigning office-seeker, of projecting a popular concept of himself, but the two parts are often too close for separation. If he was a one-man version of the Siamese twins, who continually fascinated him, the ligature is frequently invisible. Still, the divided personality, which is of concern to scholars, is a tantalizing subject that merits attention.

We are offered a medley of opposing personae: Mark Twain, the public man, vs. Clemens, the private citizen; Mark Twain, the popular funny fellow, vs. Clemens, the serious thinker; Mark Twain, the careless bohemian, vs. Clemens, the respectable pillar of society; Mark Twain, the iconoclast, vs. Clemens, the conformist; and so on as the ingenuity of the analyst may discover other conflicting roles. The confrontation of opposing forces conveys the impression that he shifted from one to the other as a driver shifts gears, and that the behavior of one party to the contest did not infringe upon the mode of the other.

Such compartmentation seems oversimplified for a complex entity like Mark Twain. He provides contrary views in his conceptions of the Siamese twins. In one of these, "Those Extraordinary Twins," a character called Angelo is an upright Methodist teetotaler joined to Luigi, a dissipated and shocking freethinker. Luigi's steady drinking does not affect him but makes Angelo drunk; Luigi's gluttony gives Angelo indigestion, and Angelo is generally blamed for Luigi's low pranks. Mark Twain acted out this fantasy for a few guests at a New Year's Eve party, 1906, in his home at 21 Fifth Avenue. He and a young man, their arms around each other, were bound together by a sash symbolizing the ligature. While Angelo (Mark Twain) tried to deliver a fervent temperance lecture, Luigi kept nipping from a pocket flask, making Angelo more and more unsteady as he staggered about and his lecture degenerated into hiccupping incoherence—a convincing performance that brought down the house.

Another version of the twins appeared when Mark Twain introduced James Whitcomb Riley and Bill Nye to a Boston audience (1889) as the Siamese twins, Chang and Eng. He elaborated upon the theme that one of the pair was dynamo or creating force, the other motor or utilizing force, and that these roles were interchangeable. Thus each complemented the other, the merits of Chang compensating for the shortcomings of Eng, and vice versa. Hence, said Mark Twain, "They must travel together, conspire together, hoe, and plant, and plough, and reap, and sell their public together, or there's no result."

In the light of such interpretations, Mark Twain as an example of twinship becomes perplexing. Did his two selves assist each other or obstruct each other? And which of the twins was he among his associates?

Of his two best friends, Howells called him "Clemens," and the Reverend Joseph Twichell called him "Mark," and he called them "Howells" and "Joe." The distinctions suggest duality of attitudes, yet Clemens-Mark was surely not an entirely different person for each of his intimates. Still, there were probably variations in behavior.

Twichell, as the audience for the first reading of that bawdy sketch "1601," which he thought hilariously funny, is in keeping with an easy association fostered by the neighborly habits of Nook Farm. Apparently their conversations were uninhibited, as befitted the casual camaraderie that existed between them. Twichell, a Civil War chaplain accustomed to the rough talk of army camps, was tolerant of his friend's earthy mode of expression and his spectacular profanity.

The relationship with Howells may have been more formal, but he testifies in *My Mark Twain* that his friend had "the Southwestern, the Lincolnian, the Elizabethan breadth of parlance, which I suppose one ought not to call coarse without calling one's self prudish." Since he is, in effect, calling himself prudish, very likely Mark Twain made a point of trying to shock his sensibilities; at any rate, he did not modify his language out of deference to squeamishness. Howells also remarks, "I was often hiding away in discreet holes and corners the letters in which he had loosed his bold fancy to stoop on rank suggestion; I could not bear to burn them, and I could not, after the first reading, quite bear to look at them." Hence, Mark-Clemens must have been something of both his twin selves for both of his friends. Or as if, at times, Mark Twain and Clemens spoke with the same voice and used the same words.

One tenet of the divided personality theory is that the man called Mark Twain played a role of his own creation. No doubt. He was his own best public relations advocate, and we all know how diligently a PR man labors to fashion an attractive image of his client. In an after-dinner speech to a Boston club in 1907, he said: "One must keep one's character. Earn a character first if you can, and if you can't, then assume one." The inference is that he had done just that.

In another speech (1902), he told of riding on an elevated train and of being approached by a stranger who said, "I have never seen Mark Twain, but I have seen a portrait of him . . . and I can tell you . . . that you look enough like Mark Twain to be his brother. Now, I hope you take that as a compliment." Mark Twain replied:

> Certainly, I take it as more than a compliment. Yes, this is the proudest moment of my life to be taken for Mark Twain, for most men are always wishing to look like some great man, General Grant, George Washington, or like some Archbishop or other, but all my life I have wanted to look like Mark Twain. Yes, I have wished to look like that synonym, that symbol of all virtue and purity, whom you have just described. I appreciate it. . . . In my desire to look like that excellent character I have dressed for the character; I have been playing a part.

Perhaps that story was one of his stretchers. Nevertheless, we may ponder its implications, as well as the hint in yet another speech (1902) when he said: "As a rule, we go about with masks, we go about looking honest, and we are able to conceal ourselves all through the day."

These several allusions support the argument that Mark Twain created an image, which, it is generally assumed, was at odds with his genuine being, whatever that was. Possibly he himself was not sure what it was. As Hawthorne says of Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter,* "No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true."

If Mark Twain was puzzled, we should not be surprised that outlines become indistinct and that outward image and private image merge and exchange places. In this volume some pieces signed *Mark Twain* are fraught with sober purpose, as if he were the serious thinker; others, signed *S. L. Clemens,* are flippant as befits the jester. Episodes like that in the Hartford home when householder Clemens entertained guests with a hoedown, and later in New York, as previously mentioned, with a burlesque temperance lecture, reveal him in the role of Mark Twain, public showman working for laughs.

Reversal of roles increases confusion, which might be partially dissipated if we concede that the character known as Mark Twain may have been as close to the core of reality as the man called Clemens. When he introduced himself to

audiences on the lyceum circuit as "the lecturer of the evening, Mr. Clemens, otherwise known as Mark Twain," he implied that the two names were interchangeable, one as accurate as the other. We might also inquire whether attributes ascribed to Mark Twain are also visible in Sam Clemens before he adopted the pen name and became a public figure in need of an image.

The foregoing paragraphs about Clemens-Twain are not strictly relevant to the contents and purpose of this book. They are a digression into a sort of amateur psychoanalysis, interesting to me but not really necessary. If somewhat skeptical about dualism, I am not beyond conviction. Nevertheless, to me the man has always been Mark Twain, and that name I have used throughout, recognizing the contradictions, inconsistencies, and exasperating vagaries of his enigmatic character.

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Yours truly Mark Twain

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