

MARK TWAIN'S REPRESENTATION OF
THE AMERICAN WEST

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**MARK TWAIN'S REPRESENTATION OF
THE AMERICAN WEST**

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PREFACE

The purpose of this paper is to picture the West as Mark Twain saw it. Many books have been written which describe Twain's Western years, but few have given much consideration to the accuracy of his account of the West in the 1860's. This paper attempts to portray Twain not only as a social and political satirist, but also as a possible historical satirist. Because of the nature of this paper, few references have been used other than the thirty-seven volumes in the Definitive Edition of The Writings of Mark Twain.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to depict the West of the 1860's—the frontier, the land, the people, the life, the natural resources, the history—as seen and recorded by Samuel L. Clemens, better known as Mark Twain. His picture of the West is inexpressibly gay and colorful because he found humor, interest, and satire within himself, his associates, and his surroundings. Exaggeration was as inherent in Mark Twain as an accent is to a Harvard graduate. For this reason it would be prudent to review briefly but historically the birth and childhood of the Far West in order to discriminate between fact and fiction.

The present states of Utah, Nevada, and California cover most of the territory viewed by Twain in his western excursion of the 1860's. Of course, Utah and Nevada were only territories at that time, but California had obtained statehood as early as 1850. Nevada was to become a state during Twain's visit, in 1864, but Utah was destined to wait until 1895.¹ The West was still a boom country during this period. The Gold Rush of 1849 had hardly subsided in California before a similar rush occurred in Nevada.

¹Ina Faye Woestemeyer, The Westward Movement, pp. 1-2.

The Gold Rush of 1849 has become so integral a part of our American heritage that it is difficult to realize the United States did not acquire California until 1848, the same year gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill.²

The United States had been trying to buy California since 1835. Their overture at that time was rejected by Mexico. Nine years later, in 1844, the United States sent Duff Green to purchase Texas, New Mexico, and California; however, the Mexican officials would not even discuss such a possibility. President Polk was not to be discouraged. He wanted the territory badly and sent several special agents into California and Mexico to appraise the situation. Their reports were alarming! Santa Anna was negotiating with England. France already had representatives in California. Polk's apprehensions, from a hundred years' vantage point, proved groundless although the Oregon situation with England at that time made the whole affair look suspicious. Polk again tried to buy the territory and was refused. Shortly thereafter the war with Mexico began as a result of the long suppressed feelings on both sides overflowing into climactic skirmishes on the Rio Grande, where General Zachary Taylor was stationed with American troops.³

²R. N. Richardson and C. C. Rister, The Greater Southwest, p. 160.

³Ibid., pp. 141-155.

Polk rushed troops to California when war was declared. Little resistance was offered since the Anglo-Americans there distrusted the Mexicans, and the other nationalities represented were more or less indifferent. By February, 1848, a peace treaty was in the making. The Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty fixed the international boundary along the Rio Grande River to New Mexico, thence west along the Gila River to the Colorado River and from that point along the boundary of lower and upper California to the Pacific. The United States paid \$15,000,000 for the territory ceded. Thus was added to the United States more than half a million square miles and more than one sixth of the area of continental United States.⁴

Once the war was over, California wasted no time in applying for a territorial government, but was refused by the United States in 1849. Undaunted and determined, a convention was called in Monterey which organized a government and drew up a state constitution patterned after those of the other thirty states. Fortunately for California, President Taylor energetically supported her cause and presented to Congress in 1850 the constitution of the "State of California." Ironically enough, this feat of statehood was not accomplished by Taylor's support, but rather by the Compromise of 1850 introduced

⁴Ibid., pp. 141-155.

by Henry Clay, which also made Utah a territorial government under the jurisdiction of the United States.⁵

The years 1848-1850 in California were turbulent, wild, and historic. Little did James Marshall⁶ realize that his discovery of gold that fateful January of 1848 would produce the hysteria and total abandon upon the people from coast to coast, or that his announcement would precipitate the famous Gold Rush of 1849 which would suddenly populate the West and force it into the national focus.

The Gold Rush proved to be one of the most exciting times in our history.

People flocked from everywhere. Clerks left their counters, merchants closed their stores, sailors deserted, newspapers shut down and San Francisco for a time became a lifeless shell of a town.⁷

The mad, frenzied rush of rich and poor, white and colored, master and servant all meeting and working together comprised our first truly democratic brotherhood with no thought to race or creed, a strange development indeed when contrasted with the left-over British aristocracy of the East and the fabulous feudal aristocracy of the South. Oregonians left their ripening grain for the uncertain wealth of gold. Thousands left from the East either by boat or overland journey. The stampede was not limited to Americans. Mexicans, Chinese,

⁵ Ibid., pp. 216-217.

⁶ Woestemeyer, op. cit., pp. 98-104.

⁷ Richardson, op. cit., p. 185.

Chileans, South Sea Islanders, as well as representatives from most European countries, had started for this land where a fortune was to be had for the taking. Within four years a quarter of a million people had come to California.⁸

Gradually the Gold Rush began to subside. Many miners became farmers or business men and settled in California. Many others stayed in the general territory to speculate. Of course, still others went home, but the West was launched and population would never again be a factor since many Americans could not resist the lure of the frontier.

California was extremely reluctant to participate in the Civil War. The state was isolated geographically from her countrymen. The prevalent feeling was one of disgust that the radicals on both sides had been able to draw the country into war, with the conclusion that since they had baked the pie, they could now eat it. After some heated debates in which California threatened to become an independent republic, the state voted to stay with the Union cause. Sixteen thousand men volunteered from California and entered the ranks for the North, and the people of California supplied one-fourth million dollars for aid and sanitation.⁹ In spite of this, the Civil War did not seriously affect California. Her man power was not impaired and the exploitation

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., p. 253.

of her natural resources was not interrupted. During the decade of the 1860's her population increased rapidly. The daily overland mail boosted communication, but the real boom came with the transcontinental telegraph service. Finally, in 1869, the first transcontinental railroad was finished as an outgrowth of the Civil War, and brought with it the end of an era of aloofness and isolation, thus making California truly a part of the American Union.¹⁰

By this time, the territory which was later to become California's sister state of Nevada was beginning to attract attention. Some miners on the way to California in 1849 had found gold in the vicinity of Sun Peak or Mt. Davidson in the Washoe Mountains. As a result, there was much placer mining done in the area between 1849 and 1859. However, these men were drifters for the most part, and settlements were not made until 1854 when Brigham Young sent out a group of Mormons and Gentiles who formed a series of settlements in what was then Carson County, Utah, but later, in 1861, was organized into the territory of Nevada.¹¹ About 1859 a group of miners found profitable digging at Gold Hill and later there was a discovery made at the head of Six-Mile Canyon in the same general vicinity. Many miners came to this locality as a result of these discoveries because some of the best claims paid from \$500 to \$1,000 a day per man. While digging for

¹⁰Woestemeyer, op. cit., p. 2.

¹¹Richardson, op. cit., p. 172.

gold, the miners found much "base metal" and "blue stuff" which made the mining of gold difficult. One farmer became either curious enough or irritated enough to have the "blue stuff" appraised and found it to be worth \$1,595 in gold and \$4,791 in silver per ton. Hence came the Comstock Lode boom. By late 1859, four thousand people had gathered in Carson City and overflowed into the surrounding area which became known as Virginia City.¹²

The development of the Comstock mines was essentially different from that of the gold mines. Quartz veins did not lend themselves to placer mining, and silver, the most valuable part of the Comstock, required a different method of mining. At first, crude mills or arrastras were set up to grind the stone, but later huge machines and engines were brought in. Unlike placer mining, the operations in the Comstock called for large outlays of capital. No longer could the men with a pick and shovel take out large quantities of the precious metals. Anyone would be permitted to stake a claim, but money was needed to develop it. Thus the claims were divided and subdivided into smaller units until men on every hand peddled shares or "feet" in companies. Because of the undeveloped state of mining law, and the peculiar formation of the great lode, there was much costly litigation over claims and rights.¹³

¹²Ibid., p. 200.

¹³Ibid., p. 201.

In the midst of this excitement came the Civil War. After some confusion, Nevada stood by the Union, but the scarcity of population prevented her from entering the ranks of service to any great extent. However, the people of Nevada contributed liberally to the sanitary fund to alleviate suffering among men at the front.¹⁴

As if the silver rush and the Civil War were not enough, Nevada found herself in the throes of impending statehood. In 1861, the Territory of Nevada was carved out of Utah. The drifting mining population plus the other difficulties that beset a frontier country made its career as a territory a stormy one. The courts were packed with litigation resulting from the confused and mismanaged state of affairs at the Comstock Lode.¹⁵

In 1863, the people of Nevada appointed representatives to frame a state constitution. It was defeated at the polls. Meanwhile, Lincoln had become interested in passing the thirteenth amendment and decided that more loyal states might be needed in order to ratify the amendment. Whether or not this was his real reason for pushing Nevada into statehood, he did sign a bill authorizing the Nevadans to draw up another constitution. Without further debate, the constitution was finished and passed. Thus, Nevada became a state in March, 1864,

¹⁴H. H. Bancroft, History of Nevada, Colorado, and Wyoming, 1540-1888, pp. 181-183.

¹⁵F. L. Paxson, The Last American Frontier, p. 158.

by presidential proclamation, and without other congressional act.¹⁶

The Mormons must have bitterly resented this easy climb to statehood in view of the fact that Nevada had been taken from the original territory of Utah and that her scanty population hardly warranted statehood. This situation was all the more trying since Utah had been made a territory as early as 1850, and had been petitioning for statehood since that time.¹⁷

The history of the Mormons was a long story of wandering and misunderstanding. After Brigham Young replaced Joseph Smith as leader of the group, he began the great migration to New Zion or Utah. The people's hopes soared to think that at last they had found an oasis in the wilderness where other people would be forced to leave them alone. The Mormons worked hard to make Utah self supporting as well as beautiful. When the gold and silver rushes came, Young forbade his followers to join the speculators. In spite of their long journey and hard work, the Mormons were not destined to be left alone. They wanted to be a territory of the United States but, having gained that goal, they did not want to obey the laws set forth by Congress. The Mormon laws were too radical for compromise so the inevitable trouble began again. The political history of Utah was filled

¹⁶Richardson, op. cit., p. 172.

¹⁷Paxson, op. cit., p. 10.

with intermittent strife and recrimination. The Mormon leaders and the civic leaders representing the United States simply could not agree. The situation reached such a peak that in 1857 President Buchanan sent Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston and over a thousand troops to Utah. They were so harassed by Brigham Young's cavalry that they could not enter the territory until 1858 after a compromise had been effected. Thus ended the conflict known as the Mormon War.¹⁸ As a consequence of the war, Young gave up the governorship but not his power.

The chief point of contention was the polygamy practiced by the Mormons. In 1856 the Republican Party had named polygamy with slavery as "the twin relics of barbarism."¹⁹ During the Civil War Lincoln was inclined to ignore them but the Mormons knew they were not trusted. This delicate predicament was thrown off balance when seven hundred California soldiers were sent to Salt Lake City ostensibly to guard the mail lines. A bad matter was made even worse when Young was arrested for polygamy following a law passed by Congress in 1862. From that time until 1895, when Utah was finally given statehood, there was a continuous struggle between the Mormon laws and the United States' laws. By 1887, most of the Mormon leaders

¹⁸Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁹Richardson, op. cit., pp. 163-177.

were either in jail or fugitives. All the church property except those buildings used for regular church services was confiscated. There was no alternative for the Mormons. Polygamy was abolished and Utah was made a state. Young, having died in 1877, did not live to see either the subjection of his people or the fulfillment of his desire that Utah become a state.²⁰

The preceding pages have summarized the historical background through the decade of Mark Twain's stay in the West. Let us now discuss the appeal of the West and the type of person who was drawn to this wild frontier country. Seemingly, the West inspired the hero in the man, and the Western man inspired the admiration in the author. For example, one writer said:

The story of these men who ranged the mountains and streams of the Far West so widely is the story of life nobly lived, of heroes who scorned every peril, of men whose stark courage and intrepid daring faced the crude, raw forces of elemental things, and who valiantly fought every foe.²¹

Another author paid the pioneer men an even nicer tribute:

. . . that simplicity of manners, manly hardihood, Spartan energy and force of character which formed so conspicuous a part of the nature of the settlers of the western wildness. Even the rudest and most boisterous of the mountain men were fundamentally honest, just, and kind.²²

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 163-177.

²¹ J. G. Masters, Stories of the Far West, p. 2.

²² R. G. Cleland, This Reckless Breed of Men, p. 51.

The early pioneer made the West a frontier of democracy. He was an individual and sought to remain one. He was self-reliant and expected his neighbor to be the same. The humbug of custom and tradition meant nothing to him; his character was rooted in common sense. There was, however, another side to these men of the West. As a class they were usually "boisterous, indulged in profanity, and were fond of whiskey."²³

These varying accounts of the frontiersmen lead one to believe that, after all, they were not a separate species of man, but rather plain, ordinary Americans who saw an excellent opportunity and made the most of it.

What was the lure the West had for these men to make them leave their families and homes and travel hundreds of weary miles on horseback or in covered wagons through Indian territory to an unknown and often unexplored land? The unknown and the Indians were poor competition against the lure of vast areas of land for the taking, escape from the ordinary, love of adventure, visions of gold and silver, and a new life. Frank King, a renowned Texas cattleman, describes the reasons for going West as follows:

In the early days of Los Angeles there were a heap of folk from southern states, before and after the war between the states. A lot of them had left from where they was at in a hurry to keep away from sheriffs and rangers.

²³Henry Inman and William Cody, The Great Salt Lake Trail, p. 205.

Strange as it may seem, they became good citizens over here and many of them prospered.²⁴

Certainly, that would be one excellent reason for going West, where the law was on the side of the six-shooter. All things considered, the challenge of the West would have been hard for any man to forego. The newspapers with their propaganda of a Utopia on the frontier did their share in urging settlers to move west. The most famous of these newspaper editorials was written by Horace Greeley which began, "Go west, young man, go west."²⁵ Several religious and communistic groups which felt themselves discriminated against in the Eastern United States hurried West hoping to find a secluded haven. The Mormons offered the best example of this group.

Regardless of their reasons, the people came by the thousands.

Twain describes them thus:

It was the only population of the kind the world has ever seen gathered together and it is not likely that the world will ever see its like again. For, observe, it was an assemblage of two hundred thousand young men—not simpering, dainty, kid-gloved weaklings, but stalwart, muscular, dauntless young braves, brimful of push and energy, and royally endowed with every attribute that goes to make up a peerless and magnificent manhood—the very pick and choice of the world's glorious ones.²⁶

²⁴Frank King, Pioneer Western Empire Builders, p. 27.

²⁵Woestemeyer, op. cit., p. 4.

²⁶Samuel L. Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, Vol. IV, p. 132.

These frontier men exerted their more sterling qualities and produced a rapid change from savagery to social stability. To the participants the change probably seemed slow indeed, but the taming of the West was accomplished in two generations, whereas similar developments took several thousand years in some parts of the world. Certainly, the era was marked by violence. "Almost every community had its blazing guns and dangling ropes. Yet, as history goes, the transition from the bloody tomahawk of the painted savage to the polished gavel of the black-robed judge came with abounding speed."²⁷

The six-gun, hemp rope, and Indian period of the frontier was savage but fascinating. The stories that have been told are incredible but apparently true. The law of the early West consisted of vigilante groups formed where officials and courts were not available. An incident in Aurora in 1864 provided a good example of the Nevada vigilante's work. A certain W. R. Johnson who kept a station on the Carson Road had angered a group of criminals because he refused to divulge the whereabouts of a "respectable" citizen who had killed a horse thief, one of the gang's cohorts. The victim came to town to sell potatoes, and the criminals ambushed and killed him, leaving the body where it fell. The Aurora people were aroused since they had lost approximately thirty people by similar violence in the last three

²⁷ Wayne Gard, Frontier Justice, p. v.

years. They formed the Citizens Protective Union and began rounding up the outlaws. When the vigilantes began building the scaffold, Governor James Nye was notified in Carson City. Nye wired the United States Marshall, Bob Howland. Howland wired back: "Everything quiet in Aurora. Four men to be hanged in fifteen minutes."²⁸ Gard continued:

Nevada had several other informal executions that year. On August 10, about three o'clock in the morning, members of the Dayton vigilance committee bound and gagged the sheriff, took from one of the cells a man accused of killing in a bloody fight on the Truckee River, and hanged him in the jail yard. Later in the year a killer was caught and hanged near the sink of the Carson. In July of the next year a horse thief who was accused of murder was taken from the sheriff of Lincoln County, was quickly tried by his captors, and was dangled from the upper window of a building. At Virginia City and elsewhere in Nevada, sudden deaths from hemp fever continued on occasions for another ten or twelve years.²⁹

Another author described the situation in Virginia City more picturesquely:

It was celebrated for its desperadoes. No twenty-four hours passed without its contribution to Boots Hill (the cemetery whose every occupant was buried in his boots).³⁰

One of the more notable desperadoes was Jack Slade, an agent at Fort Kearney for the Pony Express. Usually the employees of the Pony Express were fine, upstanding men, but Slade was an exception.

²⁸Ibid., p. 212.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Paxson, op. cit., p. 182.

The number of men he killed in cold blood would probably aggregate more than a score. One of his most disgraceful acts of violence concerned an old French Canadian trapper named Jules who lived on a ranch on the Colorado River. Jules quarreled with Slade, who swore to kill him on sight. He waited five years for the opportunity, then ambushed him with twenty-five men. Slade carried Jules back to the ranch, tied him to a box, then used him for target practice. After the rest of the gang had emptied their revolvers in Jules, Slade cut off his ears. He nailed one to the door of the Pony Express station and wore the other for several weeks as a watch-charm. Later Slade drifted to Montana and was hanged by the vigilantes in 1865 on suspicion of robbery.³¹

The history of the West is flavored with the heroic deeds of such men as Christopher (Kit) Carson and William Cody (Buffalo Bill). Kit Carson was renowned for his explorations in the West and invaluable efforts as an Indian scout during and after the Civil War. The harrowing escapades, narrow escapes, and magnificent darings of Buffalo Bill as a Pony Express rider, stage driver, and buffalo hunter have composed many a book in themselves. The West was fortunate to have such men as Bill Cody and Kit Carson to offset the Jack Slades of the country.

Another problem the frontiersmen faced was Indians. "Before the Anglo-Americans came there were 150,000 nude and semi-nude

³¹Inman and Cody, op. cit., pp. 205-207.

aboriginals, the lowest in the scale of civilization of all American Indians."³² Scientifically, this group of Indians was divided into seven families, but the Americans never bothered to distinguish between the groups and called them all the "Digger" Indians, probably because they spent so much time digging for food. There were many other tribes of Indians in the West, but the "Digger" Indians were the ones most noticed and recorded by the people. Their utter lack of sanitation shocked even the rough men of the frontier.

The Ute Indians, located in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and Utah, the northwestern part of the Colorado Plateau, and the Great Basin, also played an important role in the early days of the West. These Indians were not large in number, probably never exceeded ten thousand, but their roaming nature and destructive habits made them feared by the frontiersmen. From all accounts, it seems that they rode, hunted, fought, and marauded like the tribes of the Great Plains. Throughout the pre-reservation period, they caused much annoyance. The Mormons were friendly with the Utes until the forty-niners came and began crossing their hunting grounds and killing their game. In revenge, the Indians began intermittent warfare which lasted for more than two decades. In 1878 the Utes were sent to a southern Colorado reservation.³³

³²Richardson, op. cit., p. 35.

³³Ibid.

From all accounts, our treatment of the Western Indians was not a proud chapter in our history.

Many of the half-starved creatures were shot down for little or no reason by our more undesirable characters. Many of the honorable white men had an altogether indifferent attitude toward the rights of the Indians.³⁴

The Indians tried to seek revenge in harmony with their "blood for blood" belief. Sporadic wars usually followed these outbreaks and from 1848 to 1860 many of these uprisings occurred along the frontier. One historian stated that in spite of these frequent outbursts, California could not "grace her annals with a single Indian war bordering on respectability."³⁵ Another author described this period as "one of the last human hunts of civilization, and the basest and most brutal of them all."³⁶

When Mark Twain arrived in 1861, he found Carson City and Virginia City still rough and lawless mining communities. The silver boom from the Comstock Lode was in full swing, making Virginia City a loud, boisterous, and uninhibited town with the miners furnishing whatever laws were necessary. These Westerners were characteristically sturdy, resolute, brave, and fast with a gun when the occasion warranted. The West as Mark Twain knew it contrasted vividly with

³⁴ Bancroft, op. cit., p. 477.

³⁵ Richardson, op. cit., p. 272.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 273.

the peaceful life of a printer in Missouri and the gay life of a steam-
boat pilot on the Mississippi.

CHAPTER II

MARK TWAIN IN THE WEST

The Civil War cut Mark Twain's career as a steamboat pilot rather short since there was no demand for pleasure cruises during this period. Mark and a few other young enthusiasts quickly joined the Confederate forces. The facts are rather vague concerning this episode in Twain's life. Some authors contend that he tired of the issue, and the West offered the desired change. Others have glorified his efforts, saying he was a lieutenant and had been captured twice by Grant. When Mark escaped the second time, he felt it wise to leave the vicinity.¹

At any rate, when Lincoln became President, Mark's brother, Orion, had been named Secretary of the Territory of Nevada through his friend Judge Bates of St. Louis. Orion did not have the necessary funds to get to Nevada so Sam offered to pay his brother's way provided Orion would take him along and give him a job upon their arrival in Nevada. Orion agreed and the brothers were off seeking new adventures.² They left St. Louis on July 18, 1861, on the river steamer,

¹Will Clemens, Mark Twain, p. 40.

²Henry Seidel Canby, Turn West, Turn East, pp. 27-28.

Sioux City, for St. Joseph, Missouri.³ It took the boat six days to get over the reefs, snags, and sand bars. "In fact," Sam said, "the boat might almost as well have gone to St. Joe by land, for she was walking most of the time anyhow."⁴ Upon arrival in St. Joseph, Sam and Orion found that the Overland Mail stage, which had been running only a short time, restricted baggage to twenty-five pounds per person. This new development presented a problem since both men had with them nearly everything they possessed. Their fine clothes were sent home when the brothers decided on the minimum essentials to be carried: water canteens, guns, a few clothes, and a Webster's unabridged dictionary, which proved to be a nuisance.

It weighed about a thousand pounds and was a ruinous expense, because the stage coach company charged for extra baggage by the ounce. We could have kept a family for a time for what that dictionary cost in the way of extra freight—and it wasn't a good dictionary anyway . . .⁵

The Overland Mail stage followed the central route west which left from St. Joseph, Missouri, and cut across northwestern Kansas, and into the Nebraska Territory to the Platte, which it followed to the crossing at Julesburg; then on to Fort Laramie, where the horses were changed for mules to pull the passengers up the Rocky Mountain slopes to South Pass. Beyond this point the road turned southwest to

³Effie Mona Mack, Mark Twain in Nevada, p. 67.

⁴Samuel L. Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, Vol. III, p. 3. (Hereafter referred to simply as Works.)

⁵Mack, op. cit., p. 67.

Fort Bridger and on down through Echo Canyon. Late in the afternoon of the twelfth day they reached Salt Lake City, and there they stayed for two days. After many interesting experiences with the Mormons, Sam climbed back into the stage for a three-day stretch across the Great Salt Desert. On the twentieth day out from St. Joe the stage pulled into Carson City.⁶

Originally, Sam intended to spend two or three months in Nevada. He planned to "get rich quick" and then go back to Missouri; but circumstances decreed otherwise and three months became six years.

Twain's first impression of Nevada had, no doubt, been one of uncertainty as to the pleasure or advisability of living in this rough Western land. Gradually, there developed in him the feeling that there was a bravado in mingling with these bearded men and living in a frame shack papered inside with flour sacks. Then the desert began to exert its influence. The mountains became an acceptable substitute for the Mississippi. Soon he climbed to Lake Tahoe, which "throws Como in the shade". Thereafter one hears no more about desolation.⁷

Upon his arrival in Virginia City, Twain began almost immediately to seek easy wealth. First, he had a timber claim on Lake Tahoe which would have been very valuable some day, if he had not burned most of it by careless camping and then lost the rest. Next came Twain's mining or speculating days. He was never a real miner since he believed the amount of gold derived from the amount of effort put

⁶Ibid., pp. 69-70.

⁷Bernard DeVoto, Mark Twain's America, p. 117.

forth was not worth it. However, Mark did take a pick-and-shovel job once to get pocket money.⁸ He was easily excited over gold and silver streaks, but his findings were usually the only ones on otherwise valueless hills. In spite of his poor luck as a miner and prospector, Mark dreamed of being wealthy, and Calvin Higbie, his friend and partner, has described as follows a scene which took place one night when they believed they had "struck it rich":

He was determined . . . to have a marble mansion several stories high with ample grounds, fine horses, and carriages, and a pack of hounds. He was very emphatic about the hounds and a steam yacht he could steer himself. We talked all night long on this strain.⁹

These pipe dreams were soon dissolved when Mark realized that he was broke. In a letter to Orion in 1862, Mark said that his debts were larger than he had expected and he did not see "how in the hell" he was going to live on a little over a hundred dollars until October or November. He needed work soon.¹⁰ Earlier the same year Mark had written Orion and asked him if he had seen his (Sam's) letters in the Enterprise.¹¹ Evidently the urge to write was beginning to stir in Sam, and on rainy days in the mining camp he wrote burlesque sketches

⁸Canby, op. cit., pp. 30-31.

⁹Edward Wagenknecht, Mark Twain, the Man and His Works, p. 164.

¹⁰Works, Vol. XXX, p. 82.

¹¹Ivan Benson, Mark Twain's Western Years, p. 48.

and sent them to the Territorial Enterprise of Virginia City. He signed these sketches "Josh."

The "Josh" letters are not extant, but it is understood that they were crude burlesques, written in a manner designed to meet the requirements of frontier humor. One was a take-off on a speech delivered by an egotistical lecturer who was given the name "Professor Personal Pronoun." The report ended with the statement that the lecture could not be printed in full, as the printer had run out of capital I's.¹²

The "Josh" letters were fine for the Enterprise. They had the type of humor that was popular in the silver-boom town of Virginia City. Joe Goodman, editor of the paper, urged Sam to join the staff. Sam wrote to Orion on July 30, 1862, that he had been offered the post of local reporter on the Enterprise at a salary of twenty-five dollars a week. Sam accepted the position and thus began a new career. Several different points of view have been advanced as to why Sam decided on newspaper work. Some have contended that he needed the money, which he did. Others have said that he wanted the inside information on speculation which was available to newspaper men in return for publicity. Still others have believed that the artist in Sam was demanding a hearing. Regardless of his reason, Sam joined the force in Virginia City and immediately made some lasting friends from his fellow associates. Don McQuill, another humorist of some repute and a fellow

¹²Ibid.

reporter, became one of Twain's intimates. Steve Gillis, the printer of the Enterprise, also became a close friend and was to influence Mark's life a few years later by sending him to Jackass Hill. Joe Goodman was a good editor and an easy man to work for. Under Goodman's guiding influence Sam was to develop from a burlesque storyteller to a social and political critic within a few short years. His trend toward satire was seen as early as October 12, 1862, when he published "The Petrified Man" in the Enterprise. In this sketch Sam chose Judge G. T. Sewall, Justice of the Peace and ex-coroner, as his object of ridicule.¹³

Late in 1862, Sam persuaded Joseph Goodman to let him cover the forthcoming proceedings of the Territorial Legislature at Carson City. Sam knew little about parliamentary procedure when he began this assignment, but with the help of William Gillespie, former court reporter, he learned quickly. Jack Simmons, Speaker of the House, and Billy Clagget, the Humboldt delegate, were two of Twain's special friends, and they managed to keep him informed on all of the undercover dealings of the politicians. Sam not only satirized the tedious proceedings of the legislature but also the delegates, who feared his pen. No one was better aware of his envious position at this time than Sam himself, and cleverly he chose this date, February,

¹³Mack, op. cit., p. 213.

1863, to sign his nom de plume, Mark Twain, for the first time. His pen name was as individual as Sam himself and added spice to an already colorful personality. Mark reveled in the fact that he, and not Orion, exercised the authority and received the attention. Later he described the situation as follows:

Orion was soon very popular with the members of the legislature, because they found that whereas they couldn't usually trust each other, nor anybody else, they could trust him. He easily held the belt for honesty in that country, but it didn't do him any good in a pecuniary way, because he had no talent for either persuading or scaring legislators. But I was differently situated. I was there every day in the legislature to distribute compliment and censure with evenly balanced justice and spread the same over half a page of the Enterprise every morning; consequently, I was an influence.¹⁴

In 1864, Twain left Virginia City to take a position on the Morning Call in San Francisco. There are varying accounts concerning Twain's abrupt leave from Virginia City. One author stated that Mark exercised his yen for practical jokes on Sam Leonard, the editor of a rival newspaper. Leonard, lacking a sense of humor, challenged Twain to a duel. Mark left town immediately.¹⁵ Another writer claimed that Mark was tired of Leonard's bragging about his family tree, and in his inimitable way Mark "took him down a notch." Leonard challenged Mark, and he accepted, knowing that their friends had filled the guns with powder

¹⁴Works, XXXVII, 307-308.

¹⁵Clemens, op. cit., p. 42. ✓

and paper wads. There were no casualties. This author believed that Mark was lonesome for Steve Gillis, who had gone to California to work on the Call, and that was his reason for going to California.¹⁶

The Mark Twain who left the Enterprise in 1864 was a far different man than the Sam Clemens who began on the same paper a scant two years before. The paper had definitely contributed to Mark Twain's development as a writer. On the Enterprise Mark Twain first took up writing as a career. On the Enterprise he adopted the pen name that was to become famous the world over. On the Enterprise he first attracted a reading public beyond his own locality; and his work was gaining the notice of even Eastern publications. "Before coming to the Comstock Lode, Samuel Clemens had served three apprenticeships, with none of them resulting in the choice of a life work. When Mark Twain left the Comstock Lode, he had served his final apprenticeship; he had made writing his career."¹⁷

Twain's stay in California was not as happy as his Virginia City life had been. His job on the Morning Call did not offer the easy friendliness or the complete freedom that he had been accustomed to on the Enterprise.

In the spring of 1865, Mark became interested, with Bret Harte, in the Californian. While sub-editor of that magazine he produced

¹⁶William Gillis, Gold Rush Days with Mark Twain, pp. 135-143.

¹⁷Benson, op. cit., p. 113.

many sketches of merit which were widely copied in the Eastern press. "A Notable Conundrum" was Twain's first contribution to the Californian on October 1, 1864. He contributed every week for several months, then quit for a year.¹⁸

During his stay in California, Twain began contributing to the Golden Era. On September 20, 1863, he contributed "How to Cure a Cold" and on October 11, 1863, "The Great Prize Fight."

As the years progressed, Twain developed as a satirist. ✓ On October 28, 1863, he wrote a sketch rebuking the practices of California speculators entitled "Empire City Massacre" and sent it to the Enterprise. This story provoked a storm of controversy and much anger on the part of those who took the sketch seriously, and especially loud were the protests uttered by those persons who lost financially.

In 1864 Twain left San Francisco to visit Jim and William Gillis at Jackass Hill. Again a dispute as to why he left San Francisco arose. Billy Gillis's account was that his brother, Steve, had been in a fight in San Francisco and, having injured his opponent seriously, was thrown in jail. Twain signed the five hundred dollar bond for bail. Steve decided to skip California for Nevada, fearing he was in for a murder charge. Twain did not want to pay the bail, naturally, so Steve suggested that he visit Jim Gillis at Jackass Hill.¹⁹ Another

¹⁸Clemens, op. cit., p. 155. ✓

¹⁹Gillis, op. cit., p. 59.

author stated that Mark lashed so furiously and accurately at the political corruption in San Francisco that, after a while, the city ring, by skillful planning, got him out of town.²⁰

Twain left for Jackass Hill in September, 1866, and stayed for five months. It was a period of quiet in the life of Twain and it came at a time when he sorely needed a rest from his active occupation. Jim Gillis, his host, was a well-read, philosophical, old gentleman who loved to spin yarns. Most of the yarns concerned Dick Stoker and his cat, Tom Quartz, both of whom lived with Jim. Twain found Jim Gillis stimulating and, during his stay, collected much valuable material which he was to use at a later date.

Leaving Jackass Hill for a few days, Twain had the good fortune to visit Angel's Camp in Calaveras County, where he gathered the biggest scoop of his career. There he heard Ben Coon tell a story about a jumping frog. Mark wrote the story, and it became the foundation of his literary fame. "The Jumping Frog" was published by the New York Saturday Press, November 18, 1865.²¹

When Twain went back to California, he wrote Orion that he wanted to write to please himself and also that he wanted a change. Soon after this letter to Orion in 1866, Mark left for the Sandwich

²⁰ Canby, op. cit., p. 32.

²¹ Benson, op. cit., p. 129.

Islands with a party of United States surveyors as a correspondent for the Sacramento Union.²² While in Honolulu, Mark wrote about the sugar plantations and descriptions of life and characters on the islands. His letters were very readable, and the public received them well.

Sam returned from Hawaii late in 1866 and, with a group of bright journalists, managed to eke out a miserable existence in San Francisco during that winter. Among the young men in this group were Charles Stoddard, Bret Harte, Charles Webb, and Prentice Mulford. However, none of these struggling writers was quite so needy as Mark. One day a local comedian approached Mark on the street and told him he would give him five dollars for about half a dozen good jokes. Twain replied that it would never work, and when the comedian asked why, Twain answered:

Well, the fact is, I'm so d—d poor, if I was found with five dollars on my person people would say I stole them; on the other hand, if you got off any decent jokes, people would say you stole them.²³

After a winter of near starvation, Mark decided to capitalize on his trip to the Islands by lecturing. Speaking to groups and telling stories was not new to Mark. His exaggerated drawl and dead-pan humor plus being a superb actor assured Mark of a huge success with any audience. Drawing the audience proved no problem in San

²²Gillis, op. cit., p. 60.

²³Clemens, op. cit., p. 68.✓

Francisco, where he was well known as a columnist and writer. The crowd who had admired him as a writer loved him as a lecturer.

Following a tremendously successful lecture tour of the West, Mark made a deal with the Alta Californian to finance a trip around the world, during which he was to write for the paper letters about places of interest which he visited.²⁴ Thus, the innocent went abroad. He had come west as an adventurer; he left the West as a famous writer.

²⁴Benson, op. cit., pp. 153-154.

CHAPTER III

TWAIN'S DESCRIPTION OF THE WEST

Many disputes have arisen as to the authenticity of Roughing It, Twain's travelogue of the West. The mere mention of the name, Mark Twain, immediately suggests exaggeration and humor at the expense of fact, if necessary. However, Mark had his serious moments, and Roughing It, minus the humorous sketches, presented a fairly accurate picture of the early West. Twain, in the preface to Roughing It, stated that the book "is merely a personal narrative and not a pretentious history or philosophical dissertation."¹ "However," he continued, "there is information in the volume: information concerning an interesting episode in the history of the Far West . . . the rise, growth, and culmination of the silver mining fever in Nevada . . ." ²

Mark was eagerness personified in his hurry to get to "the wide open spaces," and he chafed at the six-day trip by boat from St. Louis to St. Joseph, Missouri, due largely to the boat's inability to manipulate sand bars. The captain kept saying she was a "bully" boat, and all she

¹Samuel L. Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, Vol. III, Preface. (Hereafter referred to simply as Works.)

²Ibid.

needed was more "shear" and a bigger wheel. Twain "thought she needed a pair of stilts, but had the deep sagacity not to say so."³

Twain thoroughly enjoyed his twenty-day stage trip from St. Joe to Carson City.

Our coach was a great swinging and swaying stage, of the most sumptuous description—an imposing cradle on wheels. It was drawn by six handsome horses. . . . We changed horses every ten miles, all day long, and fairly flew over the hard, level road.⁴

There were only three passengers on the stage, including Sam and Orion. All other available area was utilized in carrying the mail. "Almost touching our knees, a perpendicular wall of mail rose up to the roof." As long as the stage traveled over the plains, this situation was tolerable, but when they began flying down and scrambling up the steep banks of streams, "Our party inside got mixed somewhat."⁵

While wheeling through Nebraska, Mark saw his "first specimen of an animal known familiarly . . . as the 'jackass rabbit'."⁶ Twain commented that the animal was well named. The rabbit, as described by Mark, looked very much like any other rabbit except that it was larger, with longer legs, "and had the most preposterous ears that were ever mounted on any creature but a jackass."⁷ This common

³Ibid., p. 3.

⁴Ibid., pp. 7-8.

⁵Ibid., p. 7.

⁶Ibid., p. 13.

⁷Ibid., p. 14.

little animal fascinated Mark, especially its springing leaps "that would make a horse envious." Underestimating the "jackass rabbit," the boys mistook it as an easy target and began firing. "He dropped his ears, set up his tail, and left for San Francisco at a speed which can only be described as a flash and a vanish!"⁸

The station buildings where the stage stopped for food were long, low buildings with thatch roofs patterned after the Spanish adobe. There were no windows but only square holes cut in the walls. The floors consisted of hard, packed dirt, and the fireplace served as a stove. The table was "a greasy board on stilts."

The station keeper prepared their meager meal by "carving slabs" from last week's bread which were "as good as Nicolson's pavement, and tenderer." Next he sliced off a strip of condemned army bacon for each passenger, "but only the experienced old hands made out to eat it." Then he poured for them a beverage which he called "Slumgullion," and "it was hard to think he was not inspired when he named it."⁹

Mark was not impressed with the station managers, and disagreed emphatically with the historian's viewpoint, as described in Chapter I, that the majority of men who served in this capacity were fine, courageous, and upstanding.

⁸Ibid., p. 15.

⁹Ibid., p. 26.

The station-keepers, hostlers, etc., were low, rough characters . . . and from western Nebraska to Nevada a considerable sprinkling of them might be fairly set down as outlaws—fugitives from justice, criminals whose best security was a section of country which was without law and without even pretense of it.¹⁰

Further along the road the passengers spent hours searching for the "pony rider," a fleet messenger who sped across the continent from St. Joseph to Sacramento, nineteen hundred miles, in eight days. The rider's clothes were thin and fitted closely to the body. He wore a skull cap and carried no arms. His horse wore a little wafer of a racing saddle with no visible blanket. The stage traveled about a hundred miles a day; the pony rider raced two hundred and fifty miles each day. Sam had had a "consuming desire" to see one of the pony riders since they left St. Joseph, but had always missed them because of darkness. Then one day the driver startled them with "here he comes!"

Away across the endless dead level of the prairie a black speck appears against the sky, and it is plain that it moves. Well, I should think so! In a second or two it becomes a horse and rider, rising and falling, rising and falling—sweeping toward us nearer and nearer—growing more and more distinct, more and more sharply defined—nearer and still nearer, and the flutter of the hoofs comes faintly to the ear—another instant a whoop and a hurrah from our upper deck, a wave of the rider's hand, but no reply, and man and horse burst past our excited faces, and go swinging away like a belated fragment of a storm!¹¹

¹⁰Ibid., p. 40.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 53-54.

Not long after this incident, they were forced to change stage drivers since the original driver had been murdered. It seemed the driver had been voicing disparaging opinions concerning some desperadoes in that vicinity, and had been simple enough to come into their presence unprepared to "back his judgment." The conductor and new driver had no sympathy for him since he ought to have "drove up there with his pistol cocked . . . and begun business himself, because any softy would know they'd be laying for him."¹²

The next day the stage reached Salt Lake City, where it remained for two days. Twain devoted several pages in Roughing It to this Mormon city. It fascinated him with its busy hum of activity and its clean, broad streets.

We strolled about everywhere through the broad, straight, level streets, and enjoyed the pleasant strangeness of a city of fifteen thousand inhabitants with no loafers perceptible in it; and no visible drunkards or noisy people, a limpid stream—rippling and dancing through every street in place of a filthy gutter; block after block of trim dwellings built of "frame" and sunburned brick—a great thriving orchard and garden behind every one of them apparently . . . a grand general air of neatness, repair thrift, and comfort . . . and everywhere were workshops, factories, and all manners of industries; and intent faces and busy hands were to be seen wherever one looked.¹³

This beautiful city which had been so carefully developed and so well preserved was like a mirage in the uncouth Western land, and was to contrast strangely with Twain's destination, Carson City. As much

¹²Ibid., p. 40.

¹³Ibid., p. 95.

as Mark obviously admired Salt Lake City, it was a little tame for a young man who had come to the West seeking adventure.

Mark related that, having only two days in Salt Lake City, he had no time to make the customary inquiry into the workings of polygamy. However, he would like to have undertaken the task and created a complete reform—that was until he saw the Mormon women.

My heart warmed toward these poor, ungainly, and pathetically homely creatures, and I thought that the man who marries one of them has done an act of Christian charity which entitles him to the kindly applause of mankind—and the man who marries sixty of them has done a deed of open-handed generosity so sublime that nations should stand uncovered in his presence and worship in silence.¹⁴

Twain described the Mormon religion at some length and concluded that the Mormon Bible was "smouched" from the New Testament with no credit given. Upon leaving Salt Lake City, Twain said they were no wiser concerning the "Mormon question" than they had been before they arrived. They did gain much information, but had little way of knowing how much of it was reliable.

About two hundred and fifty miles out of Salt Lake at the entrance of Rocky Canyon, Mark saw the "Digger" Indians for the first time. His account agreed with that of the historian who called them "the lowest form of humanity." Mark described them as:

. . . the wretchedest type of mankind I have ever seen . . . such of the tribes as we saw were small, lean, scrawny creatures, in complexion a dull black like the ordinary

¹⁴Ibid., p. 101.

American negro, their faces and hands bearing dirt which they had been hoarding and accumulating for months, years, and even generations . . . a silent, sneaking, treacherous-looking race . . . who ate jackass rabbits, crickets, and grasshoppers. ¹⁵

He said that upon searching he had found only one other people who even came close to such a verdict, and those were the Bushmen of South Africa.

On the nineteenth day, Twain crossed the Great American Desert. It was "forty memorable miles . . . for we worked our passage most of the way across. That is to say we got out and walked." The "bottomless sand" made it a dreary pull, and the sight of hundreds of bones did not make the journey more pleasant. "The desert was one prodigious grave-yard!"¹⁶

Mark condescendingly described the rivers in Nevada as "sickly rivulets" which looked very much like the Erie Canal only the canal was deeper and longer. He concluded that anyone who had ever seen the Mississippi would be very disappointed in the Humboldt or the Carson. Mark, though fascinated with the frontier, had not forgotten the majestic river which would later become the setting for Huckleberry Finn.

When the stage finally pulled into Carson City, Twain was sorry to see the trip end. Never had twenty days been crowded with more

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 136.

¹⁶ Ibid.

varied or interesting diversions. A whole new life had opened up to Mark in that brief trip, and he felt that the adventure had just begun. His spirit sagged in a few brief moments when he first glimpsed Carson City.

Visibly our new home was a desert, walled in by barren, snow-clad mountains. There was not a tree in sight. There was no vegetation but the endless sagebrush . . . alkali dust rose in thick clouds and floated across the plain like smoke from a burning house.¹⁷

Carson City boasted of a population exceeding two thousand people. The main street of four or five blocks of white frame stores was crowded together "as if room were scarce in that mighty plain."

The people of the Territory of Nevada were glad to have a legitimately constituted government, but they did not appreciate having outsiders put in authority, "which was natural enough." They felt that the political offices should have gone to their own outstanding citizens rather than the "foreign men" some Washington politicians felt obligated to provide a job for. Therefore, the people were not too cordial toward these "emigrants" and extended them no credit.

Twain became much perturbed with Washington over some minor money matters. It seemed that Orion was known for his frugality, but the government did not appreciate his efforts. After securing a free auditorium for the convening legislature to meet in, Orion purchased

¹⁷Ibid., p. 101.

a partitioning cloth for the chamber which the government deducted from his salary. Another time he purchased one more pen-knife than was needed by the legislature and again the cost of the knife was deducted from his salary. Still another incident occurred with the Indian who brought Orion wood for half the regular price, but, because the Indian bringing the wood could not sign the voucher, the government again let Orion purchase the wood from his own pay check. Mark observed:

The government of my country snubs honest simplicity, but fondles artistic villainy and I think I might have developed into a very capable pickpocket if I had remained in the public service for a year or two. ¹⁸

The meeting of the new legislature amused Twain because "there is something solemnly funny about the struggles of a new-born territorial government to get a start in the world." ¹⁹ The legislature sat sixty days and passed private toll-road franchises all of that time. Twain said that by the end of the session every citizen had at least three franchises, and that unless Congress extended the boundary of Nevada, there would not be room enough to accommodate all of the toll-roads. "The ends of them were hanging over the boundary line everywhere like a fringe." ²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 181.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 177.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 182.

Tiring of the legal procedures, Twain decided to see Lake Tahoe, which was the scenic wonder of the vicinity. He and a friend began the eleven-mile hike, so the townspeople said, to the lake. They walked and walked, expecting to find the lake at any turn, but they were repeatedly disappointed. Finally, the two young men sat down tired, irritated, and perspiring and "hired a couple of Chinamen to curse these people who beguiled us."²¹ After that they felt better and continued their journey. Twain was spellbound at the splendor of Lake Tahoe when he finally came within view.

—a noble sheet of blue water lifted six thousand three hundred feet above the level of the sea, and walled in by a rim of snow-clad mountain peaks that towered aloft a full three thousand feet higher still! It was a vast oval, and . . . as it lay there with the shadows of the mountains brilliantly photographed upon its still surface, I thought it must surely be the fairest picture the whole earth afforded.²²

Mark was so enchanted by the place that he decided to stake a timber claim on the banks and camp there for several weeks. In order to stake a claim one had to post "notices" on the trees and fence the property. "That is to say, it was necessary to cut down trees and make them fall in such a way as to form a sort of inclosure." The boys cut down three trees apiece and decided that it was such "heartbreaking" work that they would have to "rest their case" on those. If it held,

²¹Ibid., p. 156.

²²Ibid.

well and good; if not, the property would just have to go. A house on the land was another provision of the law. At first, Mark desired a nice log cabin, but cutting and stripping one log convinced him that a sapling cabin would be just as comfortable. By the process of rationalization, Mark ended by having a poorly constructed brush house. This aversion to physical labor was to seriously impair Mark's ability as a miner a few months later.

Twain decided to get the feel of being a "man of property" by camping on his estate. After two weeks of this solitary life Mark said: "If there is any life that is happier than the life we led on our timber ranch . . . it must be a sort of life I have not read of in books."²³ One night they were bringing provisions from town in order to extend their camping expedition. Mark built a fire and went back to the boat for another load. Hearing a shout from his friend, he turned and "saw that my fire was galloping all over the premises!" They watched the fire burn for four hours from a canoe in the lake.

Every feature of the spectacle was repeated in the glowing mirror of the lake! Both pictures were sublime; both were beautiful.²⁴

After the fire was out of their vision, they began rowing across the lake toward Carson City, "homeless wanderers again, without any property."

²³Ibid., p. 101.

²⁴Ibid., p. 165.

By and by Mark was smitten with silver fever. Prospecting parties were leaving for the mountains every day, and they were discovering and taking possession of rich silver-bearing lodes. Each day the stories increased with regard to finds. Beggars were made rich overnight. Cart-loads of solid silver bricks, "as large as pigs of lead," were arriving from the mills every day. The newspapers added to the frenzy. One article, published when the Esmeralda had just had a run, and the Humboldt was beginning to demand attention, read as follows:

. . . Humboldt County is the richest mineral region upon God's footstool. Each mountain range is gorged with precious ores. Humboldt is the true Golconda . . . ²⁵

The article continued along these lines for two columns. Twain said he "would have been more or less than human if I had not gone mad like the rest." This was the easy way to fortune, Mark believed, and, certainly, all evidence pointed to the fact that great wealth was there for the taking. Mark "succumbed and grew as frenzied as the craziest."

Thus, Mark, Clagget, and Oliver—two young lawyer associates—and Mr. Tillou, an elderly man who appeared to know something about mining, set out for the mountains. It took the party fifteen days to get to the Humboldt mining region. Mark confessed to disappointment

²⁵Ibid., p. 185.

upon their arrival since he had expected to see great masses of silver lying around on the ground. After days and days of wearying search, Mr. Tillon found a quartz rock with silver and gold deposits. He informed them that the streak would become larger as it progressed into the mountain, and in order to really "strike it rich" they would have to dig a shaft through the mountain. Mark worked a week at this hard task before his allergy to hard work asserted itself. He quit.

Meanwhile, the camp was filling up with other miners who had been lured by visions of wealth. By this time the selling of "feet" had become the most frenzied occupation of all.

We fell victims to the epidemic and strained every nerve to acquire more "feet." We traded our "feet" for "feet" in other people's claims . . . we had more than thirty thousand "feet" apiece in the "richest mines on earth" as the frenzied cant phrased it—and were in debt to the butcher.²⁶

Sam's spending reached the point where he could borrow no more money so he abandoned mining and went to milling. That is to say, he "went to work as a common laborer in a quartz-mill at ten dollars a week and board."

Not long after this incident, Mark went into the field of journalism. He wrote that the "grand flush times" of Silverland had reached their peak, and they continued with "unabated splendor" for three years. Virginia City had become the "liveliest" town for its age and

²⁶ Ibid., p. 205.

population "that America had ever produced." The streets and sidewalks swarmed with people.

Money is as plenty as dust . . . there were military companies, fire companies, brass bands, banks, hotels, theaters, wide-open gambling palaces, street fights, murders, inquests, riots, a whiskey-mill every fifteen steps, a dozen breweries and half a dozen jails and station-houses in full operation and some talk of building a church.²⁷

Virginia City claimed a population of 15,000 to 18,000 during this period. Twain said half of this "little army" swarmed the streets and the other half swarmed the tunnels of the Comstock hundreds of feet beneath the street. Often they felt their chairs jar and heard the faint boom of a blast under the office. Virginia City was situated about half way up the steep side of Mt. Davidson; therefore, the streets were terraces, and the descent from one street to the next was about forty or fifty feet. Twain said that it was difficult to climb from D street up to A street, but that you could descend from A street to D street "like a house afire."

The chief item of concern in Virginia City at this time was how to get rid of all the money. The men squandered it in every possible way, and still it was plentiful. Mark said it was a "happy thing" that just at this time the news came over the telegraph that the United States Sanitary Commission had been formed, and money was needed

²⁷Works, IV, 11-12.

for the wounded men. A few minutes later another bulletin came over the wire saying that San Francisco had given generously. Twain reported that "Virginia City rose as one man!" Everyone began throwing silver and gold pieces into the cart. Even the Indians and Chinese were affected by the excitement and contributed their share. People actually fought to get close enough to throw their money into the cart.

It was the wildest riot Virginia had ever seen and the most determined and ungovernable; and when at last it abated its fury and dispersed, it had not a penny in its pocket . . . it came there "flush" and went away "busted."²⁸

Mark and the historians agreed that crime and violence were two of the main ingredients in making the Western frontier what it was. Covering murders was almost routine for the reporters on the Enterprise. This might sound like another tall tale, but one has only to look in the Washoe newspaper files of the sixties to verify the statement.

One night Mark was writing to his mother when he heard five pistol shots. Since that was in his line, he investigated. A few minutes later he returned and wrote that the two men had done their work well—both died instantly.²⁹ Twain said that a person was not respected until he had "killed his man," and it was a tedious climb to a place of affluence with "bloodless hands"; but, when a man came with "the blood

²⁸Ibid., pp. 25-26.

²⁹Works, XXXIV, 89.

of half a dozen men on his soul, his worth was recognized at once and his acquaintance sought . . ." This crime and violence was such an integral part of Virginia City life that Twain explained: "To attempt a portrayal of that 'flush time' era in Nevada and leave out the blood and carnage would be like portraying Mormonism and leaving out polygamy."³⁰

The desperadoes of that time swaggered down the streets and were afforded every possible courtesy and even received the best tables in restaurants. People moved to make room for them in every public place. The common population bowed and scraped to their every wish. Mark said the bankers and the governor enjoyed some prestige, but the best known names in the Territory of Nevada were those belonging to desperadoes.

As would be expected, vice flourished in Virginia City during the "hey day of the flush times." "The saloons were overburdened with custom; so were the police courts, the gambling dens, the brothels, and the jails."³¹ Twain expressed concern over these lamentable conditions in Roughing It; however, one must remember that his travelogue of the West was written several years after he left the West, and after he had become a family man. Perhaps he reviewed the panorama of the colorful but rough life with different standards

³⁰ Works, IV, 58.

³¹ Ibid., p. 76.

than those practiced by the young man who had come West for adventure. Mark was never one to go in for delicate refinements and in Virginia City, as throughout his entire life, Twain could withstand a remarkable amount of roughness without condemnation. In fact, some have said that he enjoyed it!

By reviewing the West as Mark Twain saw and recorded it, the present writer has attempted to show that his descriptions of the West, though more readable, are basically similar to those of the historians as recorded in the first chapter of this work. Twain's primary purpose in writing Roughing It was to present the West as he saw it. Anyone who reads the book would have to say that Twain accomplished his goal. Roughing It painted a series of pictures of the West—the little, detailed pictures which a historian has neither the time nor inclination to discuss. For example, the inside viewpoint on the feelings of the Nevadans toward their "emigrant" government, or the food served on the Overland Express—the little intimate details which delight a reader. In spite of these details, Mark managed to give historical data, too—the grand era of silver mining, the laws pertaining to timber claims, the Mormons, and the desperadoes, to name a few instances which he described as accurately as the historian. In fact, there were few actual descriptions, not counting his character sketches, in Roughing It which one could say were absolutely wrong. Mark was far

more interested in giving his readers a clear picture of the West than he was in reciting the exact dates of this or that happening; yet, with Orion's help, he produced a remarkably accurate account of the history of the West for a young man interested primarily in humorous satire.

CHAPTER IV

TWAIN'S WESTERN CHARACTERS

Most of Twain's western characters were based upon real people, just as his descriptive passages were based upon historical fact. However, Mark's talent for satire and exaggeration was given far more play in describing characters than was evidenced in the preceding chapter. This conclusion might be difficult to prove, since historians have not furnished us with biographical sketches of all the miners, desperadoes, saloon keepers, etc., with whom Mark came in contact during his western career. Still, one feels that Roughing It was written with a twofold purpose. First, Mark felt that he was in a position to write a really first-hand account of the West as he saw it, and the present writer believes that primarily he did paint an accurate picture of what he saw. Perhaps, his was not an unbiased viewpoint, but nevertheless, he recorded a clear over-all view of the West in the 1860's. Secondly, people interested Mark, and he enjoyed writing about them. The western characters were unique in Mark's experience, and their pronounced characteristics lent themselves naturally to the humorous satire of Mark's pen. Thus, Mark used his character

sketches to make Roughing It more suitable for the masses because, after all, his living depended upon the number of copies that were sold. However, Twain's characters were an integral part of Twain's West, but he did not feel obligated to portray each character individually; therefore, he took the more writable traits of each group of westerners such as miners, outlaws, etc., and all or some of these characteristics were given to each of his characters in a particular category. Roughing It was written several years after Mark left the West. In fact, it was written after Twain had traveled around the world and had published The Innocents Abroad. With so many new personalities before him, it was not probable that Mark remembered each of his western acquaintances individually unless he had kept an extremely accurate notebook which, from all indications, he did not do. Thus, each type of western character was synonymous with certain outstanding characteristics in Twain's mind, and that was the way he recorded it in his travelogue of the West.

When Twain's western characters have been divided into their respective categories, the cast will read like the standard western movie of today. The most important character of all is naturally the "bad man" because without him the show would have no plot. The notorious desperado of Roughing It was Jack Slade, and every western villain from that time to this has been a stereotype of the famous outlaw.

Mark said that they had been hearing about Slade for days before they reached his division (he was a division agent for the Overland). The stage drivers discussed only three topics, "Californy," the Nevada silver mines, and this desperado, Slade; and most of the tales concerned Slade.

We had gradually come to have a realizing sense of the fact that Slade was a man whose heart and hands and soul were steeped in the blood of offenders against his dignity; a man who awfully avenged all injuries, affronts, insults or slights, of whatever kind—on the spot if he could, years afterward if lack of earlier opportunity compelled it; a man whose hate tortured him day and night till vengeance appeased it—and not an ordinary vengeance either, but his enemy's absolute death—nothing less; a man whose face would light up with a terrible joy when he surprised a foe and had him at a disadvantage. A high and efficient servant of the Overland, an outlaw among outlaws and yet their relentless scourge, Slade was at once the most bloody, the most dangerous, and the most valuable citizen that inhabited the savage mountains.¹

Slade even possessed the right psychological background, for the villain of a really "bad man." It was his chosen occupation. His parents were fine people who had given Slade a comfortable life. In spite of these desirable circumstances, Slade killed a man and fled the country in a caravan of emigrants who were going to California. During his trip, Slade and a wagon-driver quarreled, and both drew their revolvers. The driver was faster, and had his weapon cocked first. Whereupon, Slade smiled and said it was silly to become so drastic over a minor

¹Samuel L. Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, Vol. III, p. 62. (Hereafter referred to as Works.)

disagreement. The driver agreed and threw away his guns. Slade laughed at his innocence and shot him dead!

Escaping again, Slade lived a wild life for several years, killing Indians and avoiding an Illinois sheriff who had been sent after him. Eventually, Slade was hired by the Overland in hopes that a man of his calibre could stop the thieving of outlaws in the vicinity who were stealing the company's horses.

He made short work of the offenders. The result was that delays ceased, the company's property was let alone, and, no matter what happened or who suffered, Slade's coaches went through, every time! True, in order to bring about this wholesome change, Slade had to kill several men—but the world was the richer for their loss.²

In the first chapter of this paper, the bloody incident between Jules and Slade was related as the historians had recorded it. Mark added a few details which cast a new light upon the subject. Rather than Slade being drunk and looking for a victim, Mark said that Slade had supplanted Jules as the agent for Overland. Jules hated Slade for this and was looking for a chance to even the score. Several other incidents occurred between the two men until war was declared, and they both roamed the street armed. One day, according to Twain, Slade walked into a store, and Jules emptied his shotgun into him from behind the door. Slade returned the assault and both men were bed-ridden for months. The rest of the sordid story has been told and will

²Ibid., p. 64.

not be repeated. The historian's version was written just as Jules' wife told it. Of course, her report could have been prejudiced, but Twain's account was a tale passed on by stage drivers who gloried in the story and likely exaggerated it at every opportunity. Then, too, Slade was somewhat of a hero to them, and they would have liked his murders to look as nice as possible.

Having "cleaned up" the outlaws at Julesburg, Slade was transferred to Rocky Ridge in the Rocky Mountains. This settlement was known for its outlaws, horsethieves, desperadoes, etc. Slade took up his residence quietly, but made himself known by killing the first desperado who appeared insolent to him. Soon he had Rocky Ridge under perfect control.

There have naturally been many stories about this colorful figure in the early West. He was known as a matchless marksman.

The legends say that one morning at Rocky Ridge, when he was feeling comfortable, he saw a man approaching who had offended him some days before—observe the fine memory he had for matters like that—and, "Gentlemen," said Slade, drawing, "it is a good twenty-yard shot—I'll clip the third button on his coat." Which he did. The bystanders all admired it. And they all attended the funeral, too.³

Mark said that one day a man who kept a little whiskey-shelf at the station did something which angered Slade. He went and made his will.

³Ibid., p. 67.

Eventually, and quite unwittingly, Mark came face to face with Slade. He said that in due time they rode up to a stage-station and sat down to breakfast.

The most gentlemanly-appearing, quiet, and affable officer we had yet found along the road in the Overland Company's service was the person who sat at the head of the table, at my elbow. Never youth stared and shivered as I did when I heard them call him SLADE!⁴

Besides the feeling of fear, Mark felt pride in hobnobbing, as it were, with the actual "ogre who, in fights and brawls had taken the lives of twenty-six human beings, or all men lied about him!" Mark found him to be a very pleasant and gentle man in spite of his awful history. Still, when Slade politely offered to fill Mark's cup with the last of the coffee, Mark declined because "I was afraid he had not killed anybody that morning, and might be needing diversion." Slade, however, insisted on giving Mark the coffee, but Mark remarked that he did not enjoy it "for I could not feel sure that he would not be sorry, presently, that he had given it away, and proceed to kill me to distract his thoughts from the loss."⁵ Mark escaped unscathed and lived to devote nearly three chapters of Roughing It to this desperado whose life has, directly or indirectly, inspired innumerable script writers, as well as every author of western fiction in our literature.

⁴Ibid., p. 70.

⁵Ibid., p. 71.

If a story has a villain, it must also have a hero, typically a United States marshall representing all the manly virtues. This character has become synonymous with such names as Gary Cooper and Randolph Scott. However, Twain decided to be different and, with such excellent specimens to choose from as Buffalo Bill, Kit Carson, and Bob Howland, Mark chose another villain, Jack Williams, for the deputy marshall role. Williams became newspaper-worthy when he was in a "shooting affray" with William Brown, and the latter was killed instantly. The story made good copy, but most people thought the killing was done in self-defense. Four months later another article appeared in the Enterprise involving Williams, who was still deputy marshall.

. . . Charles Hurtzal, engineer in a mill at Silver City, came to this place, and visited the hurdy-gurdy house in B Street. The music, dancing, and Teutonic maidens awakened memories of Faderland until our German friend was carried away with rapture. He evidently had money and was spending it freely. Late in the evening Jack Williams . . . invited him downstairs to take a cup of coffee. . . . On the stairway Williams . . . knocked the German down and rifled his pockets of some seventy dollars. Hurtzal dared give no alarm, as he was told, with a pistol at his head, if he made any noise or exposed them, they would blow his brains out.⁶

A warrant was issued, but the culprits escaped. Mark said this efficient officer, Williams, had the reputation for being a burgler, a highwayman, and a desperado. "It was said that he had several times

⁶Ibid., IV, 63.

drawn his revolver and levied money contributions on citizens at dead of night in the public streets of Virginia."⁷ Five months later, Williams was assassinated while playing cards one night. He was not missed in his capacity of law officer.

Another notable character of this time was United States Marshall, Bob Howland, whose telegram, quoted in the first chapter, to Governor Nye describing the impending hanging of several men in Aurora has made him a colorful character. Howland was more the Gary Cooper type hero. He believed in keeping law and order even if it cost a few lives in the process. Howland and Slade both attained their goals by similar methods, but Howland was hired by the United States to protect the citizens, whereas Slade killed to protect himself. Such a comparison should not really be drawn between such diverse characters—Howland, the "good man," and Slade, the "bad man." Still, they were typical western characters and represented their individual categories well.

The miner presented another truly western character. Mark's pen was unusually kind to these men. Taken as a group, they were older and kinder than the average Nevada citizen. The miners had their eccentricities, but basically they were "good fellows" with plenty of common sense and everyday philosophy. Certainly, they had

⁷Ibid.

their faults and limitations, but they "had some uncommonly valuable ones to offset them with."⁸

Twain's first contact with a representative of the miner category came when he planned an expedition to the Humboldt Mountains. He was joined by Mr. Ballou (Tillou), a sixty-year-old man whose original trade had been blacksmithing. Ballou was a valuable asset to Twain and his two young companions because he furnished amusement on the journey and knowledge of mining when they reached the mountains. Mr. Ballou had an unusual vocabulary, or rather he had an unusual way of using his vocabulary. "What Mr. Ballou customarily meant, when he used a long word, was a secret between himself and his Maker." For example, Ballou insisted that their horses were "bituminous from long deprivation."

If a word was long and grand and resonant, that was sufficient to win the old man's love, and he would drop that word into the most out-of-the-way place in a sentence or a subject, and be as pleased with it as if it were perfectly luminous with meaning.⁹

Thus, picturesque language was the peculiarity of Mr. Ballou. Naturally, Twain was amused and, just as naturally, he laughed, but it was kindly laughter because he respected and liked the old gentleman. In fact, Mark praised him highly, endowing him with the basic characteristics which are found in the miners of novels and movies today.

⁸Ibid., III, 242.

⁹Ibid., p. 191.

He was one of the best and kindest-hearted men that ever graced a humble sphere of life. He was gentleness and simplicity itself—and unselfishness, too. Although he was more than twice as old as the eldest of us, he never gave himself any airs, privileges, or exemptions on that account.¹⁰

When they reached the mining area, it was Mr. Ballou who searched tirelessly for a silver deposit, and it was he who found it. He worked as hard as the younger men trying to dig a suitable shaft into the streak and he would have continued to dig until the job was finished, but the young men quit. Mark Twain developed Mr. Ballou into a typical western character—one that has been handed down to present generations and will be passed on to future generations.

Mark was associated with several miners during his stay in Nevada and California, and they all appealed to him. While visiting in Tuolumne County (Jackass Hill), Twain became good friends with Dick Baker (Dick Stoker).

. . . grave and simple Dick Baker, a pocket-miner of Dead-Horse Gulch. He was forty-six, gray as a rat, earnest, thoughtful, slenderly educated, slouchily dressed, and clay-soiled, but his heart was finer metal than any gold his shovel ever brought to light—than any, indeed, that ever was mined or minted.¹¹

Dick Baker's personality quirk was his cat, Tom Quartz, and he told many classic stories about the sagacity of this remarkable cat which

¹⁰Ibid., p. 191.

¹¹Ibid., IV, 158.

knew more about pocket mining than all the miners put together, or so said Dick Baker.

Another memorable friendship was made while Twain visited at Jackass Hill. Jim Gillis, elder brother of Steve Gillis who worked with Mark on the Enterprise in Virginia City and later on the Call in San Francisco, was Twain's host, companion, and inspirer. Jim was well educated, had read widely, and had long since given up the active world for the seclusion and peace of his mining cabin in the deserted Tuolumne Hills. He loved to spin yarns about Dick Stoker and Tom Quartz, and is credited with having supplied the stories which Mark later published concerning the two. Yet, there was pathos in Jim Gillis, and Mark was perceptive enough to record it.

. . . for eighteen years he had decayed there by inches, a bearded, rough clad, clay-stained miner, and at times, among his sighings and soliloquizing, he unconsciously interjected vaguely remembered Latin and Greek sentences—dead and musty tongues, meet vehicles for the thoughts of one whose dreams were all of the past, whose life was a failure; a tired man, burdened with the present, and indifferent to the future; a man without ties, hopes, interests, waiting for rest and the end.¹²

This passage sounds like a verdict on the man, but actually, the present writer believes that Twain was expressing an opinion on all the miners of his acquaintance. He liked them; he admired them; he appreciated their honesty and simplicity; he was fascinated by this

¹²Ibid., p. 154.

wholesome western character; yet, he felt sorry for them and vowed never to become one of them. It was pathetic to Twain that men who possessed so many sterling qualities had allowed themselves to grow old without having love, homes, or great accomplishments to their credit.

Thus, the characteristics of the classic western miner have been established. He had to be elderly, honest, simple but noble, and lonely enough to be a philosopher.

The next character to take his place in the Western Hall of Fame was the typical loud-mouthed rough usually dressed as a cowboy, but rarely seen working cattle. The natural habitat for this species was a reclining position over a bar in some saloon. He was always spoiling for a fight and usually found one. Twain had slighted this category by merely mentioning them here and there through Roughing It. However, his enforced stay at Honey Lake Smith's Inn gave him time to fully appreciate this particular type of rough, since he had an excellent example always before him.

The man was a stalwart ruffian called "Arkansas," who carried two revolvers in his belt and a bowie knife projecting from his coat, and who was always drunk and always suffering for a fight, but nobody would accommodate him. He would try all manner of little wary ruses to entrap somebody into an offensive remark, and his face would light up now and then when he fancied he was fairly on the scent of a fight, but invariably his victim would

elude his toils and then he would show a disappointment that was almost pathetic.¹³

It took a woman to put this western bully in his place, and many a novel and movie heroine has laudably handled the "rough" characters in the same manner since that time.

A variation of the mean western rough was the humorous western rough. Scotty Briggs, the friend of Buck Fanshaw, fell into the latter group. His visit to the minister to formulate the plans for Buck Fanshaw's funeral was one of the highlights of Roughing It. The story, too long to relate here, concerned the language barrier between the precise Eastern minister with his perfect English, and Scotty Briggs with his language of western colloquialisms. The result was hilarious. Fanshaw was a saloon-keeper, and Scotty was his henchman and best friend.

Scotty was a stalwart rough, whose customary suit, when on weighty official business . . . was a fire-helmet, flaming red flannel shirt, patent-leather belt with spanner and revolver attached, coat hung over arm, and pants stuffed into boot-tops.¹⁴

Mark said that it would not be fair to describe Scotty without saying he had a "warm heart" and a "strong love" for his friends. Whenever his murders were investigated, it usually turned out that the affair was not Scotty's, but one he had stepped into out of the kindness of his

¹³Ibid., III, 213.

¹⁴Ibid., IV, 44.

heart in order to help the underdog. Thus, another character type originated in the West.

Women are next on the agenda of characters. Twain had very little to say about these western characters. Perhaps the "little woman" was as scarce as Mark pictured her. According to Twain, he stood in line for half an hour one evening while in the Humboldt Mountains patiently waiting for a "sight of the splendid new sensation—a genuine, live woman!"¹⁵ However, Mark did give his reader a glimpse, now and then, of the western woman. She was not the dainty, feminine creature of the East and she was about as helpless as a rattlesnake. Mark's first contact with this type of woman was an unforgettable experience. Her characteristics were later to be made famous by the "Ma Kettle" movies. The woman traveled fifty miles on the stage with Mark and Orion when they were going to Nevada. Mark decided that she was not a talkative person.

She would sit there in the gathering twilight and fasten her steadfast eyes on a mosquito rooting into her arm, and slowly she would raise her other hand till she had got his range and then she would launch a slap at him that would have jolted a cow; and after that she would sit and contemplate the corpse with tranquil satisfaction—for she never missed her mosquito; she was a dead shot at short range. She never removed a carcass, but left them there for bait.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁶ Ibid., III, 8.

Mark said he waited and waited for her to say something, then decided to open the conversation himself. "The Sphinx was a Sphinx no more!" She talked incessantly for the remainder of the trip. Mark said they really suffered. Finally, she stirred to leave with the parting remarks:

Now you git out at Cottonwood, you fellers, and lay over a couple o' days, and I'll be along some time tonight, and if I can do ye any good by edgin' in a word now and then, I'm right thar. Folks'll tell you't I've always ben kind o' offish and partic'lar for a gal that's raised in the woods, and I am, with the ragtag and bobtail, and a gal has to be, if she wants to be anything, but when people comes along which is my equals, I reckon I'm a pretty sociable heifer after all. ¹⁷

Mark said they resolved not to lay over at Cottonwood!

All the women were not fashioned along this line, but the western woman as a type was an aggressive, brave, hardworking woman. Most of them had to be made of stern stuff in order to withstand the hardships of the frontier. One of these women was Mrs. Johnson, wife of the innkeeper at Honey Lake Smith's. The character, Arkansas, has already been mentioned as a rough, uncouth person who delighted in scaring the landlord, Mr. Johnson. One morning Arkansas was threatening to kill Johnson.

The landlord's wife suddenly appeared in the doorway and confronted the desperado with a pair of scissors! Her fury was magnificent. With head erect and flashing eye she

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

stood a moment and then advanced with her weapon raised. The astonished ruffian . . . fell back a step. She followed. She backed him step by step into the middle of the barroom, and then, while the wondering crowd closed up and gazed, she gave him such another tongue-lashing as never a cowed and shamefaced braggart got before!¹⁸

Another western woman who took Twain's fancy was Jack Slade's wife. Mark related that one time Slade had been put in jail by a vigilante committee which intended to hang him. Slade begged for a last word with his wife. One of the men rode out and brought her back. She entered the jail, leveled her six-shooter at the jailers, freed her husband, and together they rode off amid a blaze of bullets, but neither was hurt.

Mark was amused by these anecdotes, and perhaps he admired the capable women of the West. Certainly, he presented a new type of heroine to American literature, one that has remained with us for three quarters of a century.

The preceding paragraphs described the "good women" of the West. Twain had far less to say about the "bad women." Even historians have conceded that the "loose women" were in Virginia City by the time the miners arrived. For a long time they were the women of the town. Practically every book concerning the West has mentioned the prostitute population of the mining city. Yet, Mark said almost nothing about these people. He occasionally mentioned a "brothel" or a "hurdy gurdy" house, but never elaborated on these places. When

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 218.

he described Buck Fanshaw, Mark said "he had been the proprietor of a dashing helpmeet whom he could have discarded without the formality of a divorce."¹⁹ Except for these few meager passages, Mark seemingly ignored the existence of this typical western character. Again, the present writer imagines that Mark was seeing the West as Olivia would have seen it, and that he wrote Roughing It accordingly. Mark, the husband, was more refined in his reminiscences than Mark, the adventurer, had been while enjoying the full flavor of the West. Perhaps his reticence may also have been recognition of the tastes of the reading public of his time.

Briefly summarizing Mark's western characters, we have found that his pen depicted these people as fit inhabitants of the country which is described in Chapter III. They were strong enough to conquer the country; brave enough to face its perils, and uninhibited enough to enjoy its wildness. Mark exaggerated the picturesque qualities of these western people for the sake of humor; yet, he left them human beings who had their hopes, fears, and troubles just as other people. Unwittingly perhaps, Mark created an ever-flowing fountain of information on western life with Roughing It. Screen writers, playwrights, novelists, artists, and short-story writers have been drawing on Mark's supply of information and character sketches for years,

¹⁹Ibid.

probably without realizing it. The miner, for instance, has become a standard western character, and he always has had the same characteristics—the characteristics Twain gave him. One can read down the list—desperado, frontier woman, cowboy, western heroine, United States marshall, dance hall girl—and find in Roughing It a basic character for every standard part in today's literature of the West. Mark enjoyed his western associates, and his pleasure showed in his character sketches. The reader of Roughing It becomes enthralled even with the most despicable of Twain's characters, and wishes that he had been granted the experience of knowing these rare people. Less well known than some of his later characters, they nevertheless deserve to rank among his most successful characterizations. Together they constitute a significant contribution to our range of American characters. They are still being reproduced by writers who represent the West, and they will probably continue to be copied for a long time.

CHAPTER V

TWAIN'S WESTERN THEMES

While in the West, Mark Twain developed rapidly from a burlesque humorist to a satirical humorist. His satire was sometimes as crude as his previous burlesques had been, but each additional year added its share of finesse to his writings. Although Twain was a humorist by nature, he was a reformer at heart. The longer he wrote, the harder he found it to obscure his rectifying ideas in humor. This was true not only of his later pessimistic writings, but it was also evidenced at times in his early Western writings. Mark was fortunate in that he associated himself with the Enterprise during his beginning years as an author. The caliber of his associates on the Enterprise added incentive to his satiric turn of mind, and Joe Goodman, the editor, conducted his paper sincerely and courageously; therefore, it was as rugged and individual as the West itself. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for Mark to have found more freedom anywhere in voicing his opinions of society. Because of his unusual and lenient associates, Mark was able to give free rein to his hatred of hypocrisy and sham. Surely, the frequent murders without punishments, varied crimes of violence overlooked, and suicides prompted

by a miner's fallen dreams sharpened Mark's social consciousness. Perhaps, here was created the social awareness which would later create Huckleberry Finn and Pudd'nhead Wilson. Here, also, was probably sown the seed of the idea that greed is a prime force in human life, a seed which would later produce The Gilded Age and eventually The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg.¹

The first evidence seen of Twain's social criticism was completely imbedded in a hoax story, a very popular type sketch in Virginia City, "The Petrified Man," a story which told of the discovery of a man turned to stone. Scholars came from all around to view the marvel and decided that it had taken at least three hundred years to reach its present state. Thereupon the Humboldt coroner convoked his jury which decided that "the deceased came to his death from protracted exposure." The jury decided to bury the discovery but found that it could not be dislodged from its place without blasting, which the coroner "with that delicacy so characteristic of him, forbade."²

While writing a humorous sketch which the population enjoyed immensely, Twain had also ridiculed the pompous coroner, Sewell, and made a slam at the intelligence of most juries. Twain was not always to waste his satire on such unimportant figures as Coroner Sewell.

¹Gladys Carmen Bellamy, Mark Twain As a Literary Artist, p. 81.

²Samuel L. Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, Vol. VII, p. 289. (Hereafter referred to as Works.)

The jury system was one of the first institutions to receive a blasting from Mark's pen. In Roughing It, Twain, describing the exaggerated death of Buck Fanshaw, gave one of his mildest comments on juries.

On the inquest it was shown that Buck Fanshaw, in the delirium of a wasting typhoid fever, had taken arsenic, shot himself through the body, cut his throat, and jumped out of a four-story window and broken his neck—and after due deliberation, the jury, sad and tearful, but with intelligence unbided by its sorrow, brought in a verdict of death "by the visitation of God." What would the world do without juries?³

This description literally drips sarcasm, but Mark was just beginning. Soon he dropped all pretense of satire, and stated that the trial by jury was a wonderful institution back in the day of Alfred the Great, but that it was sadly outmoded today. However, it looked as if Alfred would have to return from the grave and change his system, if it were going to be accomplished. Twain contended that in Alfred's time the system had no doubt meted out justice because, without the benefit of newspapers and telegraphs, news spread slowly, and a juror could still be intelligent without having any knowledge concerning the crime he was to judge. However, with the facilities of the nineteenth century, Mark felt that the jury system had become the most "ingenious and infallible agency" for defeating justice that "human wisdom" could contrive because it "compels us to swear injuries composed of fools

³Ibid., IV, 43.

and rascals, because the system rigidly excludes honest men and men of brains."⁴

Mark cited the example of a murder trial in Virginia City. A respectable citizen had been murdered in a particularly cold-blooded way by a desperado. The newspapers were full of the incident, and it was the talk of the town. The jury list included a prominent banker who was a valued citizen, a merchant of high character, a mining superintendent with an unblemished reputation, and a minister who was intelligent, esteemed, and respected. Because they had admitted reading the newspaper and hearing different accounts of the incident, none of these men was allowed on the jury, in spite of the fact that they all felt they could render an unprejudiced opinion based upon the facts presented. "Ignoramuses alone could mete out unsullied justice."

The final jury consisted of:

. . . two desperadoes, two low beer-house politicians, three barkeepers, two ranchmen who could not read, and three dull, stupid human donkeys! It actually came out later that one of these latter thought that incest and arson were the same thing.⁵

The verdict was "not guilty." Twain was furious over the obvious injustice. He felt that the jury system put a ban upon intelligence and honesty, and a premium upon ignorance, stupidity, and perjury.

⁴Ibid., pp. 55-56.

⁵Ibid., pp. 56-57.

Mark thought that an intelligent and qualified man of high social ranking who swore under oath that the testimony given would outweigh all hearsay was worth a hundred jurymen who would swear to their own ignorance and stupidity. "Why could not the jury law be so altered as to give men of brains and honesty an equal chance with fools and miscreants?"⁶ Mark was not through even after that vituperative condemnation. He continued to lacerate the system by sarcastically contending that trial by jury was the palladium of our liberties. He suggested that he did not know what palladium meant, but if it described the jury system, it must be good. In what other country or under what other governing body could so many men, not less than one hundred and probably closer to three hundred, have been ruthlessly murdered and the culprits not have been punished? Twain said that so far as he could tell, only two people had ever suffered the death penalty in Nevada. However, four or five who had no money and no political influence had been punished by imprisonment. One "languished" in prison "as much as eight months, I think. However, I do not desire to be extravagant—it may have been less."⁷

Benson concluded that

. . . while he wrote lightly enough about the doings of desperadoes of Virginia City, he was experiencing a growth of

⁶Ibid., p. 58.

⁷Ibid., p. 67.

resentment against the injustice of certain aspects of the social system, and . . . while on the Comstock little by little he developed the ability to fight these evils with humor, satire, irony, hoax stories, and other manifestations of his growing skill as a writer.⁸

Thus, we see that early in Twain's career he developed into a complex writer who can not be analyzed or regarded under the simple title of humorist. At times his work was representative of a small uninhibited boy having a good time; then it would be as philosophic as old age; later it would flow into light satire deftly turned by the artist's pen; and, then it would suddenly become seething with rage and hatred, tearing down the innocent and guilty alike in its cyclonic hurry to reform the wrongs of humanity.

Another of Twain's favorite themes in both Nevada and California was the discrimination against the Chinese. Mark said that a large part of the population of Virginia City was composed of Chinese. These people interested the reformer instinct in Mark just as slavery had done. He found them likable Americans, and desired that they be treated as other citizens were treated.

They were quiet, peaceable, tractible, free from drunkenness, and they are industrious as the day is long . . . and a lazy one does not exist. . . . He is a great convenience to everybody—even to the worst class of white men, for he bears most of their sins, suffering fines for petty thefts, imprisonment for their robberies, and death for their murders.⁹

⁸Ivan Benson, Mark Twain's Western Years, pp. 74-75.

⁹Ibid., p. 105.

According to Mark, all Chinese could read, write, and cipher with easy facility—"pity but all our petted voters could."¹⁰

Twain was quite concerned over the Eastern feeling that all the people of California mistreated the Chinese. His reply to this sentiment enlightened the East and insulted the political factions of the West.

No California gentleman or lady ever abuses or oppresses a Chinaman, under any circumstances, an explanation that seems to be much needed in the East. Only the scum of the population do it—they and their children; they, and naturally and consistently, the policemen and politicians, likewise, for these are the dust-licking pimps and slaves of the scum, there as well as elsewhere in America.¹¹

In 1863, while spending the summer at the fashionable Tick House in San Francisco, Mark wrote "Those Blasted Children." The story was published in the East and later reprinted in the Golden Era. The story dealt with the children annoying Mark, and he told of several things recommended for childhood ailments; namely, arsenic for measles, removing the brain for brain fever, etc. The people were delighted with the satire, but all of the story was not funny. The first part of the sketch pictured two little girls, one of whom was the daughter of the governor of California and the other the daughter of a Western mine king, arguing over whose father had more money. One little

¹⁰Ibid., p. 107.

¹¹Ibid., p. 112.

girl said that her father could buy her all silver dolls, and naturally, the other little girl said that her father would see that all of her dolls were gold. Mark was deploring the prevalent ideal of both young and old in their greed for money. The second part of the story turned to the little boys and mirrored the resentment of the elders toward the Chinese.

Hi boys! Here comes a Chinaman. (God pity a Chinaman who chances to come in the way of the boys hereabouts, for the eye of the law regardeth him not, and the youth of California in their generation are down upon him.) Now boys! grab his clothes basket—take him by the tail! (There they go now, like a pack of young demons; they have confiscated the basket, and the dismayed Chinaman is towing half the tribe down the hill by his cue. Rejoice, O my soul, for behold, all things are lovely . . .)¹²

Another sketch, "The Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy," was published after the police arrested a boy on his way to Sunday school for stoning a Chinaman. Mark immediately came to the defense of the boy. He contended that the boy was not to blame for his act, but his parents, the newspapers, and the general public attitude toward Chinese. Mark was beginning to take the stand for the Chinese in blunt, straightforward terms rather than merely masking his moral under a superficial cast of humorous anecdote. He wrote a blistering reproof to society based upon the above-mentioned incident, and printed it. Referring to the prejudices of the elders, Mark said:

¹²Bellamy, op. cit., pp. 83-84.

It was this way that the boy found out that the Chinaman had no rights that any man was bound to respect; that he had no sorrows that any man was bound to pity; that neither his wife nor his liberty was worth a penny when a white man needed a scapegoat; that nobody loved Chinamen, nobody befriended them, nobody spared them suffering when it was convenient to inflict it . . . and, therefore, what could have been more natural than for this sunny-hearted boy tripping along to Sunday-school . . . to say to himself: "Ah, there goes a Chinaman! God will not love me if I do not stone him."¹³

Mark Twain's defense of the Chinese continued long after he left the West. By 1870 he was publishing a series of "Chinese Letters" in the Galaxy, describing the unjust treatment the Chinese received when they arrived in America, the land of the free!¹⁴

The most disturbing sketch Mark wrote was "The Empire City Massacre," which was published in 1863. It created a sensation in Virginia City and, when published elsewhere, caused a wild display of emotion over the lamentable death of P. Hopkins. Mark was at his gory best in this hoax story. It seemed that a certain P. Hopkins had been driven insane because he believed the California newspapers which said that certain Virginia mining stock was "rigged." Fearing a heavy loss, Hopkins withdrew his shares and invested them in a California mining company which was "rigged." He lost everything, and, in his insane frenzy, killed seven of his nine children and scalped his

¹³Works, VII, 129.

¹⁴Bellamy, op. cit., p. 99.

wife. After slitting his own throat, he jumped on his horse and, with his wife's head in one hand, galloped into Virginia City, where he died in the street.¹⁵ The bloodiness startled the public, who believed that every word was literal truth. The California paper published an article on the ghastliness of the incident and said it wished to express its sympathy. Some prominent men in mining sold out their interest, believing the "cooked" angle of the story and lost heavily in a financial way. To say the people were dismayed when they learned about the hoax would put it mildly; they were furious. If it had not been for Joe Goodman's staunch stand, Twain would have been minus a job. Mark, nevertheless, was happy with the effect. He had stunned the newspapers by accusing them of allowing the company to extend its credit to the limit and then "cook" up false dividends so the owners could sneak out unhurt. Mark thought the papers owed more responsibility to the people. Also, he left a vivid imprint upon the minds of the speculators and stockholders—one they never quite forgot. Thus, Mark exposed mining frauds, chastised the newspapers, and warned the speculators. All things considered, he thought it a fairly effective story.

One of the fiercest battles Mark fought with his pen concerned the negligence and corruptness of public officials, both in Nevada and California. His first outburst, entitled "On Murders," appeared in the

¹⁵Bernard DeVoto, Mark Twain's America, p. 155.

Enterprise and concerned the notoriously corrupt territorial judges headed by Judge George Turner. Because of their lax treatment of law violators, few gunmen had anything to fear from the law. Objecting to this laxity, Mark satirically stated that a murderer in Nevada was handled "with pitiless severity." That is, he was given some good advice and asked to leave the country. Mark said the killer thought it over and decided to stay. "The murder of Abel, by his brother Cain, would rank as an eminently justifiable homicide up there in Storey county."¹⁶

Not long after the preceding sketch was published, Mark wrote a short article for the Enterprise in which he said:

A teamster was murdered and robbed on the public highways, between Carson and Virginia, today. Our sprightly and efficient officers are on the alert. They calculate to inquire into the thing next week.¹⁷

Certainly, the public officials must have burned under Mark's attack, but, if so, they kept it among themselves. They did not realize at the time that Twain was being gentle with them. They were just beginning to feel the power Mark's pen held, and he was merely practicing on the officials in Nevada. Later, he was to step forth and scandalize the entire police force of California with his most biting satire and condemnation.

¹⁶Bellamy, op. cit., p. 87.

¹⁷Benson, op. cit., p. 178.

In 1865 he sent a series of letters from San Francisco to be published in the Virginia City Enterprise. These letters, which the California paper refused to publish, vehemently attacked the civic corruption in San Francisco and called specific names. The city officials considered these attacks intolerable, and, finally, the chief of police, Martin G. Burke, filed a libel suit against the Enterprise. Mark furiously answered the charge by writing a vituperative letter denouncing the police for openly permitting lechery in San Francisco. The letter began, "The air is full of lechery," and it continued, according to Bellamy, in a vein "which left even the Enterprise printers aghast."¹⁸ However, Joe Goodman was not to be intimidated and published it in full.

About this time, when the fight had reached a fever pitch, Mark published another article in the Enterprise. In it he pretended to take the side of the policemen because they had been criticized unjustly. He said they were all good fellows as far as he could see—they were always "easy and comfortable . . . leaning up against a lamp post in the sun," or parading down the street at the stupendous rate of a block an hour. Then he recorded the case of a poor man who had his skull cracked for stealing "six bits" worth of flour sacks and had been thrown "in jail in the most humorous way." Twain then left all pretense of his ironic defense and raged:

¹⁸Bellamy, op. cit., p. 96.

And why shouldn't they shove that half-senseless wounded man into a cell without getting a doctor to . . . see how badly he was hurt . . . ? And why shouldn't the jailer let him alone when he found him in a dead stupor two hours after . . . sleeping . . . with that calm serenity which is peculiar to men whose heads have been caved in with a club . . . why shouldn't the jailer do so? . . . the man was an infernal stranger. He had no vote. . . . Ah, and if he stole flour sacks, did he not deliberately put himself outside of the pale of humanity and Christian sympathy by that hellish act? I think so. The Department thinks so. Therefore, when the stranger died at seven this morning, after four hours of refreshing slumber in that cell, with his skull actually split . . . what the very devil do you want to go and find fault with the police officers for? . . . Can't you find somebody to pick on besides the police? It takes all of my time to defend them from people's attacks.¹⁹

It was this type of incessant political exposure which made the civic officials of California breathe easier when Mark decided to go to Jackass Hill. He had been a constant source of irritation to the vice-ridden city of San Francisco. The chief wonder was that someone did not permanently still Mark's pen during this period.

Politics was another theme Twain dwelt on while in the West. In 1863, Mark published "The Great Prize Fight" which represented Leland Stanford, governor of California, and F. F. Low, governor-elect, as competing in the prize ring "for a purse of a hundred thousand dollars." In the first five rounds the men "engaged in some beautiful sparring" but after that the rules were forgotten and they slugged it out in true prize fighter tradition. Mark described the incident to the

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 96-97.

bloodiest detail until they were "dyed in their own gore" and "had minced each other into such insignificant odds and ends that neither was able to distinguish his own remains from those of his antagonist."²⁰ This sketch had enough gore in it to please the population and enough truth to delight them.

Twain's opinion on politicians was never to their credit. While serving as a reporter for the Nevada legislature, he became familiar with the politics of that body and was not particularly impressed. On his tour to the Sandwich Islands he visited the Hawaiian Legislature to report his observations to the Sacramento Weekly Union. In one of his letters he wrote:

The mental caliber of the Legislative Assembly is up to the average of such bodies the world over—and I wish that it were a compliment to say it, but it is hardly so. I have seen a number of Legislatures, and there was a comfortable majority in each of them that knew just about enough to come in when it rained, and that was all. Few men of first class ability can afford to let their affairs go to ruin while they fool away their time in Legislatures for months on a stretch. Few such men care a straw for the small-beer distinction one is able to achieve in such a place. But your chattering one-horse village lawyer likes it, and your solemn ass from cow counties, who don't know the Constitution from the Lord's Prayer, enjoys it, and these you will always find in the assembly; . . . ²¹

One incident concerning the Nevada legislature occurred when they restricted the number of notaries public in the territory. At that time

²⁰Ibid., pp. 86-87.

²¹Samuel L. Clemens, Letters from the Sandwich Islands, p. 21.

such an appointment by Governor Nye was a lucrative position. Mark wrote a satirical sketch on conditions with respect to notaries up to that time. The sketch was printed in the Enterprise early in 1864 and was reprinted in the Golden Era later in the year. In "Concerning Notaries" he used a variety of humorous devices to ridicule the numerous applicants besieging Governor Nye of Nevada for commissions as notaries public. He described the voluminous "little petitions" with which each applicant had provided himself; one looked like "a bale of dry goods" and another was so extensive that the county surveyor was "chaining it off." Signs advertised coaches leaving every fifteen minutes for the Governor's Mansion "for the accommodation of Notarial aspirants." The climax came when Mark was seized with the fatal longing to be a notary public!

I wrote a petition with frantic haste, appended a copy of the Directory of Nevada Territory to it and fled down the deserted streets to the Governor's office . . . ²²

This sketch was a vast improvement over any previous Western writing of Mark Twain that is extant. There is more real humor without the coarseness of previous sketches.²³ We see that Twain was developing dexterity in handling his subjects, and was destined to improve his skill with time and practice.

²² Bellamy, op. cit., p. 88.

²³ Benson, op. cit., p. 102.

Briefly summarizing Twain's Western themes, we see that his chief motives for satire were fallacies in the jury system, corruption of public officials, ignorance in politics, (discrimination against the Chinese, selfish ideals of the younger generation, and the ignominy of people seeking favors from public officials. With the exception of notaries public, all these themes were treated with Twain's most biting satire which spared none.

Mark Twain's Western years contributed greatly to his literary genius. Not only did the Western land and people lend themselves easily to Mark's ironical exaggeration, but also the reformer in Twain found ample material upon which to experiment. His satirical talent was given room to develop through the kindness of Joe Goodman, and by the time Mark left the West he was an adept social and political satirist.

Mark's interest in reforming did not end when he left the West, but rather it increased as the years went by. Throughout Twain's later writings the early Western themes are continually present. In fact, these Western themes became the basis for all of the social and political satire which he incessantly fired at all branches of politics, all racial discrimination, and all the ideals and morals of society for the next half-century. Thus, when Mark Twain left the West the course of his life and the course of his writing had been decided.

His life's occupation was to be a literary satirist, and because of the nature of his work he was to be remembered as a humorist, satirist, and reformer. The West had exerted its influence, giving the world another classic character, Mark Twain, the foremost literary artist to come from the frontier.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The preceding five chapters have attempted to describe the West which Mark Twain knew and obviously enjoyed for nearly six years. Fortunately for Twain, his Western years were taken from one of the great heyday decades of the Wild West. A young man seeking adventure could not have chosen a wilder or more masculine environment in which to satisfy his wanderlust. Neither could a potential artist have chosen a more liberal field in which to expand and experiment with his talent. The Comstock Lode was beginning to attract a great deal of attention, and Virginia City was bursting with an overcrowded population. Desperadoes roamed and killed at will without interference except from an occasional vigilante committee. The people were glowing in the warmth of whiskey, gambling, and too much money. Their problem was not how to make money, but how to spend it. They became as uninhibited as the land itself, and vice flourished in Nevada. Many of these westerners were carefree people who had more money than they had ever dreamed possible. The country was geographically isolated from the rest of the United States, and the

Civil War was not particularly important to them. Silver was the magic word and miners were finding rich veins throughout the mountain ranges around Carson City and Virginia City. As more silver was found, more people flocked to the area, and lawlessness increased.

Into this hubbub of confusion came Sam Clemens, a strangely adolescent young man for his twenty-five years, especially considering that he had been his own breadwinner since the age of twelve. However, Sam's boyish exuberance for anything different was extremely advantageous to his advancement in the West. He accepted lawlessness, vice, chaotic confusion, and strange people at their face value without question. Sam would not always be able to adjust so easily. In quick succession he tried working for the United States government, staking a timber claim, mining, and buying stock. Just as quickly as he engaged in different types of work, he lost all his money and went in debt. One boyish dream was about to die— Sam was not destined to "strike it rich" on the Comstock.

Whether or not money or suppressed literary genius prompted Sam to accept a job on the Enterprise seems to be a question. The present writer believes that he was beginning to leave adolescence and realized the impracticality of continuing in the field of mining. Nevertheless, Sam Clemens became a newspaper man and began serving his last apprenticeship. Without realizing it, Sam had struck it

rich, but differently from what he had hoped. His gold mine was to be of longer duration and of greater fame than any strike on the Comstock.

Sam's easy drawl and love of practical jokes made him a natural writer of hoax stories. Quickly he developed from this phase of his career into more artistic humorous satire. By this time, Sam was established and knew wherein his future lay. Thus, Sam Clemens became Mark Twain; an adventurer became a writer. With the change in name, came a change in writing. Mark continued his humorous satire, but his themes had gained a depth they heretofore had not reached. The boy was rapidly becoming a man, and the man, seeing the world through adult eyes, was becoming a reformer. While serving as reporter to the legislature at Carson City, Mark had learned the full power his pen held, and he reveled in using it to ridicule and condemn people and institutions that annoyed him. The jury system, the police force, the discrimination against the Chinese, politics, and public morals were all to feel the anger of Mark's pen while he was in the West.

However, not all of his work concerned either humorous sketches or ironical satire. He described the West of the 1860's in such realistic terms that the reader is able to have a very clear picture of early Nevada and California. In spite of his weakness for exaggeration, he gave in Roughing It approximately the same over-all view of the West

as the historians have given us. Naturally, Twain's book was written with an idea of producing laughter along with presenting a good travelogue. He managed both without veering sharply from the accepted path of truth. Twain's exaggeration was more pronounced in his characterizations of the West; yet, they constitute a significant contribution to our range of American characters. William Dean Howells said of Roughing It:

We can fancy the reader of Mr. Clemens' book finding at the end of it (and its six hundred pages of fun are none too many) that, while he has been merely enjoying himself, as he supposes, he has been surreptitiously acquiring a better idea of the flush times in Nevada, and of the adventurous life generally lived in the recent West than he could possibly have got elsewhere. The grotesque exaggeration and broad irony with which the life is described are conjecturably the truest colors that could have been used, for all existence there must have looked like an extravagant joke, the humor of which was only deepened by its netherside of tragedy.¹

It is difficult to realize that the Mark Twain who left the West in 1866 was the carefree Sam Clemens who had come there five and a half years before. In four brief years, Mark had scaled the heights to fame and fortune. He had developed from an overgrown adolescent into a mature man who wanted not only to make his audience laugh but also to give them something to think about. The Sam Clemens of his early Enterprise days gave his public dessert only, but the Mark Twain who left the West presented a full-course dinner to his readers. Some

¹ My Mark Twain, p. 113.

critics think that his experiences in the West impaired Mark's ability and directed his material along the wrong lines. The present writer believes, however, that Sam Clemens needed the freedom of the West in order to become Mark Twain. The American West was indeed fortunate to have as one of its foremost literary representatives the mischievous Samuel L. Clemens, who through the influence of the West, developed into a great literary artist. Samuel Clemens needed the West, and the West needed Mark Twain; thus was created the union of bolsterous humor and biting satire which is characteristic of the mature literary artistry of Mark Twain.

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