

MARK TWAIN, FINANCIER

THESIS

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PREFACE

The recent publication Mark Twain, Business Man by Samuel Charles Webster has brought to light the controversy which existed between Samuel Langhorne Clemens, the writer, and Charles L. Webster, his business partner, over the failure of the firm of Charles L. Webster and Company. Being an outstanding figure in the field of letters, Clemens has led the world to know him as a great business man. This title, no doubt, he may well claim; but one needs to bear in mind that he also made many financial investments from which he never received a penny; and it is to these business ventures of Clemens that this thesis is devoted.

In the presentation of the material that has been gathered from Mark Twain, Business Man; Mark Twain in Eruption; Mark Twain's Letters; Mark Twain, An Autobiography; Mark Twain, A Biography; An American Portrait; and numerous magazines and newspapers, the controversy between Samuel Langhorne Clemens and the Charles L. Webster and Company concerning the failure of the business, Twain's business operations with other publishers, Clemens' venture with the Paige typesetting machine, Twain's lecture returns, and Twain's other business enterprises have been discussed.

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CHAPTER I

MARK TWAIN AND CHARLES L. WEBSTER AND COMPANY

Mark Twain, even as a boy, was always on the lookout for sources of financial gain. Bradford, a banker and capitalist, says that Clemens was no born lover of money, and that he was certainly no miser, but that he liked what money brings, and that from childhood Clemens hated debts and would not tolerate them. Twain, a shrewd business man, profited by many of his various financial ventures. What he loved best of all was to take a chance in business affairs. "There are two times in a man's life when he should not speculate," Twain once advised, "when he can't afford it and when he can." This is perhaps good advice, but apparently Mark Twain himself did not heed it. He escaped unscathed from many of the chances he took, but he was not always so fortunate.¹

Unfortunately, success in life is measured by many people in terms of a man's financial standing. The greater his accumulation of wealth, the greater is his success in life. Twain devoted many valuable years of his life to the making of money in order that he might prove to the world he was a success. He was temperamentally one of those who "do," not one of those who "do not"; and he found himself unable to resist successfully the challenge of the age to speculate. He speculated and oftentimes he regretted.²

¹Gamaliel Bradford, American Portrait, pp. 6-7.

²John Albert Macy, Writers on American Literature, pp. 277-278.

Mark Twain had always felt that his publishers were getting the better of him. He was eager to publish his own books and to reap his own profits. To this end he made Charles L. Webster, a nephew by marriage, president and general manager of his publishing company, established in 1884 in New York City. Thus Clemens became his own publisher by putting money into the firm of Charles L. Webster and Company, which prospered for a time but which later failed disastrously, with its liabilities exceeding its assets by 66 per cent. There can be no doubt that the affairs of the Webster company were badly mismanaged, as Clemens believed them to have been, for if the firm had been managed with ordinary practical judgment, it need not have failed. In Mark Twain, Business Man, Samuel Charles Webster, son of Clemens' manager, produces his Uncle Sam's letters of the eighties to refute the charges Clemens made in 1906 against Charles L. Webster. Samuel Webster says that throughout Clemens' story of the publishing venture, he either states or implies that his financial failure resulted from the inefficiency of Charles L. Webster, who in reality had done the spadework in starting the publishing house and who was responsible for directing it through its most successful years. The younger Webster maintains that the firm was in good shape when Charles L. Webster retired; but that after he left, its business operations went steadily downhill.³

Charles L. Webster and Company were not only publishers for Clemens, but, according to Samuel Webster, also his bankers. Clemens

³Samuel Charles Webster, Mark Twain, Business Man, p. 398.

was continually writing the Webster company to send out checks to the typesetter, to relatives, and to various other places. These items were charged to Twain's account; but in any calculation of the profits the Webster company made for Clemens, these large sums must be remembered. Twain probably forgot the figures entirely. Many authors have the habit of forgetting them. They think only of the checks they receive from their publishers as royalties, and forget the money value of the many books they as authors have given to their relatives and friends as gift copies.

The business and family letters, which make up a unique document, and the last large collection of unpublished Mark Twain material show the outrageous assortment of tasks which Clemens assigned his business partner.⁴ Webster kept three or four lawsuits juggled in mid-air, ran the publishing business, supervised the remodeling of Mark Twain's house, meddled in patents, and ran menial errands—all the while under a barrage of fantastic instructions: "Watch out for Canadian pirates!" "Watch out for the Alabama pirates." "Have you inquired into the Hand-Grenade Stock?" "Your Aunt Livy bought a small water heater in Broadway. Please send and hunt up that place right away ... she don't know the name or the address of the store." "Procure and send to me four acting copies of Hamlet." "Find an unbound copy of Faust to be bound in many small volumes for convenience in reading in bed." "See to it that

⁴"Dear Charley," Time, XLVIII (February 11, 1946), 100.

the Portfolio people stop sending the Portfolio after the subscription had expired." "Look up certain anti-Clemens squibs said to have appeared in the Tribune." "Order personal envelopes and special sleeping car." "Attend to the matter of Livy's table, her bureau, her sofa, the fender for Mrs. Langdon." "Go to Tiffany's about the clock or buy from the peddlers in front of Schwarz's toy store one of those cheap watches for Jean." "Send the special ink for the autographs and the brushes for the furnace."⁵

Mark Twain was a man of quick and sudden wishes, and Webster was handy for any number of these personal services; consequently Clemens asked Webster to do these little errands even at a time when the firm that bore his name was known over the country as the publisher of the fabulously successful Memoirs of General Grant. All told, more than three hundred thousand sets of two volumes each were sold, and between \$420,000 and \$450,000 was paid to Mrs. Grant. The physical strain of all these personal services, together with his obligations to the publishing firm of which he was president, proved so great for Webster that his health began to fail.

Clemens, realizing that a change in the management of the firm was necessary, consulted Dan Whitford, director of a bank in New York, about this matter. Whitford advised Clemens to get rid of Webster by buying his interest in the publishing firm. But what was there to buy? Webster had always promptly collected any money

⁵Lionel Trilling, "Mark Twain—A Dominant Genius," The New York Times, Book Review (February 3, 1946), Section F, p. 1.

that was due him. Twain felt that he had squandered any profits made from books the firm published. "The business was gasping, dying. The whole of it was not worth a dollar and a half," Clemens declared. "Then what would be a fair price for me to pay for a tenth interest in it?"⁶ After much consultation and voluminous correspondence, it developed that Webster was willing to accept \$12,000 and to step out of the publishing business. Clemens gladly paid the \$12,000.⁷

Could it have been that Clemens shared with the inefficient management he hired the responsibility for the commercial stupidity that wrecked the Webster firm? None of his managers appear to have treated Twain dishonestly. In Mark Twain in Eruption Clemens says in regard to Webster's inefficiency:

Webster was the victim of a cruel neuralgia in the head. He eased his pain with the new German drug, phenacetine. The physicians limited his use of it but he found a way to get it in quantity: Under our free institutions anybody can poison himself that wants to and will pay the price. He took this drug with increasing quantity in increasing frequency. It stupified him and he went about as one in a dream. He ceased from coming to the office except at intervals, and when he came was pretty sure to exercise his authority in ways perilous for the business. In his condition, he was not responsible for his acts.⁸

After Webster's health failed, Clemens put the publishing house in charge of Fred Hall, a friend whom Twain later described

⁶Samuel L. Clemens, Mark Twain in Eruption, p. 190.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., p. 191.

as a person meaning well but as being wholly incompetent as manager of the publishing house. Yet Twain himself went to Europe to live during these trying days of the company. In letters written to Hall, during the time Twain lived in Europe and Hall had charge of the business, Clemens praised Hall. "You have done magnificently with the business," Clemens wrote Hall on one occasion. The author further praised Hall for "being able to keep the ship afloat in the storm that has seen fleets and fleets go down."⁹ The truth is, however, that Hall struggled along with the business and got to borrowing money from a bank in which Whitford was a director.

In the early days, when the general Western agents of the Webster company were being chosen, Webster conferred one of the best Western general agencies upon an ex-preacher from Iowa. Other candidates for agencies of the Webster company warned Webster to keep out of this man's hands because Webster would be unable to cope with the cupidity of the man from Iowa. Not heeding their warnings, Webster gave him the agency. According to Clemens, the newly-chosen agent did a thriving business and collected \$36,000 of which the Webster company never got a cent. In Mark Twain, Business Man the younger Webster states:

I never heard of this and I can find no record of it. I think Uncle Sam mixed it up with the bookkeeper's defalcation, which he doesn't mention.¹⁰

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 378.

In a letter to Orion Twain treats this defalcation as relatively unimportant, but evinces his enthusiasm for the books Webster had contracted to publish. Yet Clemens said later that Webster was not able to obtain a single book which would have realized a big fortune, and failed to recall Webster's successful books. He does say, however, that Webster had several worthless books on hand at that time which he had accepted because the books had been offered to him instead of to Clemens.¹¹ The evidence indicates that the only books that did not pay were the books that Clemens wanted to publish because they were written by his friends, like the Daggett book, for example, or books that were accepted by Twain after Charles Webster had left the publishing company. Daggett, an old friend of Clemens, had been one of the Virginia City Enterprise group; and later when he was in Congress, he coöperated with Twain in copyright matters. Naturally Clemens liked Daggett's book. It was published by the Webster company, but it was not a success; consequently Clemens ignored it in Mark Twain in Eruption. Clemens says:

One of the things which poisoned Webster's days and nights was the aggravating circumstances that whereas he, Charles L. Webster, was the great publisher—the greatest of publishers—and my name did not even appear anywhere as a member of the firm, the public persisted in regarding me as the substance of that firm and Webster the shadow. Everyone who had a book to publish offered it to me, not to Webster. I accepted several excellent books but Webster

¹¹Samuel L. Clemens, op. cit., p. 187.

declined them every time, and he was master. But if anyone offered him a book, he was so charmed with the compliment that he took the book without examining it. He was not able to get hold of one that could make its living.¹²

Among other charges, Twain accused Webster of having kept a Twain production from being published. In one of his books Twain says:

Webster kept back a book of mine, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, as long as he could, and finally published it so surreptitiously that it took two or three years to find out that there was any such book.¹³

The following comment of Samuel Charles Webster in defense of his father gives an opposite view on Twain's book:

On October 5, 1888, nearly a year after my father had completely broken down, severed all connections with the Company and retired to Fredonia, Uncle Sam says in a letter (printed in Paine's Biography on page 874) that he meant to finish The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court the day the Paige machine was finished, and "the closest calculation for that" indicated October 22. Mr. Paine adds: Neither the "Yankee nor the machine was completed that fall, though returns from both were beginning to be badly needed."¹⁴

In other words, Webster emphasizes the point that Clemens accused Charles L. Webster of holding back, and finally publishing surreptitiously, a book that was not even written until more than a year after Webster left the company.

¹²Ibid., p. 356.

¹³Ibid., p. 189.

¹⁴Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 356.

Turning next to Joe Jefferson's experience with the Webster company, one finds that Jefferson, who had completed his autobiography, had requested Clemens to be his publisher. Clemens, wanting the book, sent Jefferson's letter to Webster, asking him to arrange for the publication. Webster did not decline the book outright; he simply ignored it and brushed the matter out of his mind.¹⁵ Webster did accept and publish, however, two or three war books that did not show any profit. Twain makes reference to still another book that Webster accepted and agreed to have ready within two or three months. When Clemens went to New York to visit the office a few weeks later and inquired about the book, he learned that Webster himself did not know how many words it contained. Twain said he then asked Webster to count the words by rough estimate. Counting the words as Twain suggested, he found that the book did not contain enough material for the projected price and dimensions. Furthermore, Twain learned that Webster had several worthless books on hand which he had accepted because they had been offered to him instead of to Twain. About Webster's ability as a publisher, Clemens remarked that Webster was a good general agent but knew nothing about publishing, and that he was incapable of learning anything about it.¹⁶ The author became aware that Webster never counted the number of words in any of the books, but

¹⁵Samuel L. Clemens, op. cit., p. 188.

¹⁶Ibid.

that he had accepted them all without examining them.¹⁷

There was much discussion and misunderstanding concerning the publication of an elaborate catalogue in color of the extensive art collection owned by William Thompson Walters. William M. Laffan of the Sun was going to publish it, that is, he was going to arrange to have it published. According to Mark Twain's statement in one of his books, Walters was willing to spend as much as \$250,000 on the art collection. From a letter Clemens wrote to Charles Webster on January 13, 1887, it seems that Webster and Company was to get its profits after Walters had received his money back. Before the Webster company got anything but a headache out of it, something like twenty-five thousand copies would have to be sold at ten dollars apiece, or ten thousand copies at twenty-five dollars apiece.¹⁸

Clemens seems to have been completely sold on the idea. The reason was perhaps that he was also interested in color printing. According to Samuel Webster, Twain frequently called on Mrs. Webster to get her interested in this art collection project. It was through her that Clemens hoped to get her husband interested in this work. When she was asked why her husband did not care for the book, Mrs. Webster said that he did not think it would pay.¹⁹ The question which comes to one's mind at this point is how could Twain

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 374.

¹⁹Ibid.

give this book as one of the chief reasons for the failure of the firm? The younger Webster has this to say:

If, as Uncle Sam claims in Eruption, one of the chief reasons for the failure of Webster and Company was Webster's lack of enterprise in connection with his book, I can't understand why the company failed three years before the book was even ready for publication. The plan for the catalogue was held up because of new developments in the art field, it was not published until 1897, long after the death of Webster and Mr. Walters too.²⁰

Twain, however, tells this story in another light. He says that William M. Laffan assured him that Walters of the Sun was going to have a sumptuous book published which was to illustrate in great detail the princely art collection; that the collector hoped to bring the best artists from Paris to make the various illustrations; that he hoped to supervise the book himself to see that the collection was made exactly to his taste; that he wanted it issued at a great price, a price consonant with its sumptuous character; and that he was not interested in a penny of the proceeds. Walters assured the publishers that all they would have to do was to distribute the book and take the whole of the profit.²¹ Clemens said that he agreed to send Webster to Baltimore at once to arrange for the publication of the book. Although Twain tried to send Webster, he never succeeded, for Webster did not give the matter another

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Samuel L. Clemens, op. cit., pp. 189-199.

thought. Walters had applied to the wrong man. Webster's pride was hurt, and he would not touch the book in any way whatever. Clemens felt that Webster had immense pride, but that he was short of some other necessary qualities. "If this had been a secondhand dog that Walters wanted published," Clemens remarked, "he would have only needed to apply to Webster. Webster would have broken his neck getting down to Baltimore to annex that dog."²²

According to Samuel Webster, it was to the "Stedman book" that Mark Twain attributed the failure of the publishing house that had at that time just published the biggest seller of the day. Webster declares the book sold very well, in fact, so well that this "Stedman book" needed and should have had a substantial working capital. This work was the Library of American Literature, in ten volumes, compiled by Edmund Clarence Stedman and Ellen Mackay Hutchinson; and it was the kind of book, Webster says, that would sell steadily and indefinitely by subscription in homes all over America.²³ Clemens points out, on the other hand, that a publisher in Cincinnati had tried to make it a success, but that it swallowed up the publisher, his family, and all. Twain says:

If Stedman had offered me the book, I should have said, "Sold by subscription and on the installment plan, there is nothing in this book for us at a royalty above four per cent, but in fact it would swamp us at any kind of royalty, because such a book would require a

²²Ibid., p. 199.

²³Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 377.

cash capital of several hundred thousand dollars, and we haven't a hundred thousand."²⁴

But Stedman did not take the book to Clemens. He took it to Webster, who was delighted and flattered and hence accepted the book on an 8 per cent royalty, and thereby secured the lingering suicide of Charles L. Webster and Company, according to Clemens, who said the Webster company struggled along for two or three years under that deadly load. After Webster's time with the publishing house, Hall kept the company going by borrowing money on notes endorsed by Clemens and renewed by him from time to time. These notes came to him for renewal while Clemens was in Italy. He endorsed them without examining them and sent them back to Hall. After some time Twain found that the loans had been increased, without his knowledge or consent; these changes upset him considerably. He immediately wrote to Hall about this matter, asking the manager to mail him an exhaustive report of the condition of the business. Twain was pleased to find that the next mail brought the report revealing the entire standing of the business, from which it appeared that the concern's assets exceeded its liabilities by \$92,000. Then he felt better about the situation; but really there was not any occasion for him to feel better, for the report should have revealed a deficit of \$92,000. Hall immediately wrote to say that the Webster company needed money and must have it right away or the

²⁴Samuel L. Clemens, op. cit., p. 191.

concern would fail.²⁵ Clemens at once sailed for America to look after the firm; he emptied his money into the business until he had put into it the \$24,000 he had earned with his pen and then looked around to see where he could borrow money to save the business. Since this trouble came in the midst of the fearful panic of 1893, he experienced difficulty in securing a loan. He went to Hartford, where he failed to borrow a penny. Being at a loss as to what to do, he offered to mortgage his house and grounds and furniture for any small loan that he might be able to get. Since this property had cost him \$165,000, he felt sure that it was good for a small loan, at least. Before long he was assured that he could not borrow even \$3,000 on the property.²⁶

At this critical point in Mark Twain's financial operations there came to his rescue a financier and publicist, Henry Rogers, who stepped in to help the humorist manage his affairs and to restore Twain to the stage of comfortable living. Rogers' fondness for Mark Twain's writings led to an acquaintance with the humorist; and finding the latter in difficulties because of his publishers, Rogers practically took charge of Clemens' affairs and remained his business manager and counselor until Twain's death. The valuable advice which the lecturer received from Rogers at this crucial time saved Clemens from complete financial defeat. The writer, in a

²⁵Ibid., p. 190.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 192-193.

letter to his wife during this trying period, had the following to say about Rogers:

Who achieved the miracle for us? Who has saved us from separations, unendurable toil on the platform, and public bankruptcy? Henry Rogers. And he was the only man in America who both could and cheerfully would. His name is music in my ear.²⁷

Rogers knew that Clemens was not a business man. This is clearly seen in the following remark about Mark Twain:

Clemens has a very remarkable business head for large things, but absolutely none for small. He has an eagle-vision for wide business horizons, but he can't take in the details that lie between and it frets him to try. To see his mind go to wreck and ruin over a poor little complexity that wouldn't puzzle a child--why it's pathetic.²⁸

In a letter to his daughter, written during those four years abroad, the traveler evinced his incapability for business. It was in this letter that he clearly revealed that he thoroughly hated two things--money and waiting. He said that he was waiting for people to make up their minds about various business enterprises, that he was waiting for reports on business transactions, and that he was waiting for an offer to be made to him. This is probably the reason he felt confident of Rogers' ability to cope with the financial problems.²⁹

²⁷Clara (Clemens) Gaborlowitsch, My Father, Mark Twain, p. 83.

²⁸Ibid., p. 82.

²⁹Ibid., p. 100.

In addition to the matters regarding the publication of books and financial difficulties, a question arose over Webster's contract with Clemens, who claimed that he had never read the contract made with Webster. Under this contract between Mark Twain and Charles Webster from April 1, 1885, to April 1, 1890, Webster was to have entire charge of the office. Clemens was to get 70 per cent of the profits from his own books, except those already published, on which he was to receive 60 per cent. The rest of the profits were to go to the Webster company. Webster was to get a salary of \$2,500; and as a partner he was to get one-third of the profits until he had received \$20,000, and after that one-tenth; and Mark Twain was to get nine-tenths. There was also a stipulation that Webster was to leave most of his profits in the business for a number of years and that he was responsible for his share of the losses. There were six or seven similar contracts.³⁰

Then, too, there was a dispute some twenty years later concerning Webster's salary. At the time of the question in regard to the profits there was not any suggestion of disagreement over Webster's salary; but this does not seem unreasonable, for Clemens and Webster were inclined to argue upon even more trifling matters. Twain seemed to have been shocked at the fact that Webster should have had any salary at all while learning the printers' trade. But according to the letters the younger Webster included in his publication,

³⁰Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 313.

Webster was busy with other things besides the publishing house. Among these were the engraving business, the lecture business, the book business, and the formulation of plans for Twain's new house. Hence the letters reveal that Webster was doing more than merely learning the trade of a publisher.³¹ Twain stated that he proposed to be his own publisher and to let Webster do the work. Webster thought he was entitled to receive \$2,500 a year while he was learning the book trade. Twain claims that he took a day or two to consider the matter and to study it searchingly. Clemens remembered that on the Mississippi River an apprentice pilot not only received nothing in the way of a salary, but that as an apprentice pilot he had to pay for his instruction. He recalled also that he himself did not have sufficient money to pay his instructor and that he had to borrow it. "I was told by a person who said that he was studying for the ministry," Twain then said, "that even Noah got no salary for the first six months—partly on account of the weather and partly because he was learning navigation."³²

It is surprising that Clemens made any reference to the expense he had met as an apprentice pilot on the Mississippi River, for although he was a man of varied business interests, it is observed that he desired that his financial operations be kept a secret. In examining Twain's letters of the period under discussion, one finds

³¹Ibid., p. 239.

³²Samuel L. Clemens, op. cit., p. 165.

evidence that Clemens did not hesitate to ask that people keep certain business and financial information secret. Many of his letters of the business nature were marked "private." The following letter³³ which Mark Twain wrote to his brother Orion is a good example of what is here emphasized:

April 4 (1880)

My Dear Bro—

Please don't put anything on exhibition that can even remotely suggest me or my affairs or belongings. How could you conceive of such an idea? God knows my privacy is sufficiently invaded without the family helping in the hellish trade.—Keep the cursed portraits at home—Keep everything at home that hints at me in any possible way.

I have stolen part of my Sunday holiday & have read your chapters. I like them very much. I put in a good part of Friday & Saturday hunting for the first chapter, but failed to find it. But I will find it yet. It makes me horribly nervous & uncomfortable to have a man's MS under my care. I am nearly sure to put away so carefully that I cannot find it again. Why don't you send it in large batches that can't be mislaid?

I read before a large here, Friday night, but not until all the newspaper men had sworn that they would say not a single word about it, either before or after the performance. I take every precaution against unnecessary publicity—assist me in it; don't do the opposite thing.

With love to Mollie.

Yr Bro

Sam

³³Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., pp. 145-146.

It would perhaps be wiser to omit reference to letters that are shrouded in mystery but one especially is intriguing. Why should Mark Twain give Webster the odd sum of \$271 and expect George Jones, one of the founders and later the editor of the New York Times, to give him the same amount? Twain writes:

Dear Charley—

Enclosed is \$271. Now go to Jones & ask him for this amount; & take careful note of everything he says (for you are interviewing him—tell him that, if you choose,) for I want you to write out the conversation & send it to me. On it I will build a magazine article & get that money back without any trouble.³⁴

These letters just quoted illustrate Clemens' secretiveness at times in his business operation. Other instances could be cited.

When Clemens put his autobiography into shape for Paine, the author's biographer and first literary executor, it was understood that certain parts of the manuscript were not to be published for many years. Clemens directed that publishing be delayed until long after the death of anyone who knew anything about the facts included in the autobiography. Could it have been possible that Mark Twain knew certain parts of the book contained inaccuracies? It seems possible.³⁵ Perhaps it is well here to quote what DeVoto has to say regarding this material:

³⁴Ibid., p. 229.

³⁵Ibid., Foreword, p. viii.

Finally I have worked over the text of one passage leaving as much of it as I could but trying to reduce its vindictiveness. Here and there the typescript of the Autobiography contains a marginal notation in Mr. Paine's hand that the context was not to be published for a certain number of years. The Mark Twain Estate agrees with me that sufficient time has now passed to fulfill Mark Twain's final intention. (Some of the passages so marked were published in the North American Review during Mark Twain's lifetime and others in Mr. Paine's edition.) In the dictation about the Thomas Bailey Aldrich Memorial Museum, however, a prohibition is made in the text itself. Mark Twain formally directs his heirs and executors not to publish this passage until seventy-five years after its date—not, he says, because it is not true but because he wants to speak freely without "injuring or offending anyone."³⁶

Desiring to publish Mark Twain's accounts of the dedication but believing that certain parts of it would offend persons still living, DeVoto took the matter up with the Mark Twain Estate, whose decisions seemed quite sensible to DeVoto. The Estate agreed to regard the prohibition as no longer operative, provided DeVoto could so edit the passages in question as to remove the offense.³⁷

According to the younger Webster, Paine himself had more than an inkling that the life story was not entirely accurate, for in his biography of Mark Twain Paine says:

He had requested me to interrupt his dictation at any time that I found him repeating or contradicting himself, or misstating some fact known to me. At first I hesitated to do this, and cautiously mentioned the matter when he had finished. Then he was likely to say

³⁶Samuel L. Clemens, op. cit., Introduction, pp. xi-xii.

³⁷Ibid., p. xii.

Why didn't you stop me? Why did you let me go on making a jackass of myself when you could have saved me?

So then I used to take the risk of getting struck by lightning, and nearly always stopped him at the time. But if it happened that I upset him thought the thunderbolt was apt to fly. He would say:

Now you've knocked everything out of my head.³⁸

Near the end of his life, often from his bed, Mark Twain told the story of his business association with Charles L. Webster, his close friend and business associate, to his biographer. In the biography Twain was inclined to lay the full blame for his business failure on the long-suffering Webster. But Twain's memory at the time that he dictated his autobiography was notably inaccurate. Concerning Mark Twain's discrepancies in his biography, DeVoto says:

Some portions of the book (Mark Twain: A Biography) were published in North American Review in 1906-1907, and in Harper's Magazine in 1922. If anyone compares those texts with the ones used here (Mark Twain in Eruption), he will observe a number of discrepancies.³⁹

Webster says that during Paine's lifetime the biographer protected himself by judicious omissions, that he had known Mark Twain well and had real affection for Twain, and that Paine had before him when he wrote the biography both Mark Twain's statements

³⁸Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., Foreword, p. vii.

³⁹Samuel Charles Clemens, op. cit., Introduction, p. xiii.

and the facts.⁴⁰ Perhaps quotations included here will suffice to show that there were inaccuracies and omissions in Clemens' biography.

About the only authentic part of Mark Twain's account of the affairs of the Webster company and of Charles L. Webster himself given in Mark Twain in Exonction, the younger Webster says, is what Twain says about Charles Webster's physical breakdown.⁴¹ Starting a new publishing business on such a large scale had broken the elder Webster's health. His neuralgia at that time was serious. His mother and father were shocked at his condition when they visited him on one occasion, for he was very irritable, and the slightest thing would bring an outburst. His mother was often hurt by Charles Webster's irascibility, but the other members of the family understood the situation. Samuel Webster admitted that at this period the elder Webster gave Twain some good straight talks, as Twain called them, and that he might have been as unjust to Clemens as Clemens was to Webster twenty years later.⁴²

In fact, when Webster died, Clemens wrote Mrs. Webster that the bitterness he had felt toward her husband had long since vanished and that he understood things better now. It seems that none of the Websters realized that Clemens harbored this bitter hatred for

⁴⁰Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., Foreword, p. ix.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 387.

⁴²Ibid.

Webster. The Webster family always found Mark Twain kind and pleasant, they found him to be the most entertaining man they knew or had met, but they had never suspected he had suppressed anything, as he must have done, in regard to this bitter hatred Twain revealed to them later.⁴³

Clemens, in his various reminiscences, had made a number of inaccurate slurring remarks about his former business partner, and these controversial views had been indiscriminately perpetuated by his biographer, Paine.⁴⁴ Mark Twain, Business Man was prepared by Samuel Charles Webster primarily to clear his father of charges which Mark Twain had made against him.⁴⁵

That Webster was responsible for the failure of the publishing house scarcely seems possible on the face of things, since he left the firm six years before its bankruptcy. It is clear that in several detailed accusations of financial ineptitude Mark Twain was inaccurate.⁴⁶ The letters reproduced in Mark Twain, Business Man do not reveal any reason for Mark Twain to dislike Webster, but only that he was unjust to a man he disliked.⁴⁷

⁴³Ibid., p. 390.

⁴⁴Chicago Sun, Book Week, III (February 3, 1946), 1.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷"Saving of Mark Twain," Literary Digest, LV (November 24, 1917), 54-55.

Samuel Webster has added a valuable contribution to the knowledge and lore of Samuel Clemens as a business man. His documentation reveals a truer picture than the public has had, helping the nation realize that "grain of truth" which Webster said could be found in Twain's writings "if diligently searched for."⁴⁸

The publishing house was only one of Clemens' many financial enterprises. The Webster company, contrary to general belief was successful, as Meine points out, and made money to support other less profitable ventures of Twain.⁴⁹ The two sides of the controversy between Twain and Charles L. Webster, the charges Twain made against Webster, and the defenses the younger Webster made in defense of his father have been presented in this chapter. The succeeding chapter will be concerned with Twain's business relations with other publishing houses.

⁴⁸"Saving of Mark Twain," ibid.

⁴⁹Chicago Sun, op. cit., p. 55.

CHAPTER II

MARK TWAIN'S FINANCIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER PUBLISHERS

Mark Twain felt that he was ruined by everyone with whom he did business of any kind--by thieving pirates of his work; by swindlers who sold him stock; by any newspaper rash enough to mention him, his books, or any of his business ventures except to praise; and by any publisher of any of his books.¹

According to Twain, Charles H. Webb, editor of The Californian, who published Clemens' first book, The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches, defrauded Mark Twain for years. Clemens' account of the episode follows:

I reported my adventure to Webb and he bravely said that not all the Carletons in the universe should defeat the book, he would publish it himself on a ten per cent royalty. And so he did. He brought it out in blue and gold, and made a very pretty little book of it. I think he named it The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches, price \$1.25. He made the plates and printed and bound the book through a job printing house and published it through the American News.²

Misunderstanding regarding the author's first book later developed with the same firm. Clemens maintained that he was accused of breaking the terms of the agreement with the publishers by the

¹James Playsted Wood, "All Out of Step but Mark," Saturday Review of Literature, XXIX (March 2, 1946), 16.

²Samuel L. Clemens, Mark Twain in Eruption, p. 146.

continued use of the plates of the book. Clemens relates the story of The Celebrated Frog in Mark Twain in Eruption:

It was my ignorant opinion that I was violating the Bliss contract and that I was in honor bound to suppress The Jumping Frog book and take it permanently out of print. So I went to Webb with the matter. He was willing to accommodate me upon these terms: that I should surrender to him such royalties as might be due me; that I should also surrender to him, free of royalty, all bound and unbound copies which might be in the News Company's hands; also that I should hand him eight hundred dollars cash; also that I should superintend the breaking up of the plates of the book, and for that service should receive such bounty as the type founders should pay for the broken plates as old type metal.

After that Webb passed out of the field of my vision for a long time.³

In the meantime chance threw Twain in the way of the American News, and he inquired about Webb's difficulties with the concern and how they came about. Members of the firm, however, did not know of any difficulties. Twain then told the publishers that Webb had never been able to collect anything from the establishment. The American News had always mailed statements to Webb at the usual intervals and had accompanied them with the News' check to date. By the company records it was proved that Webb had collected both his share of the money from books published and Twain's portion regularly from the beginning and had pocketed the money. Webb and Clemens had settled; Webb wired him \$600 more on royalties.⁴

³Ibid., p. 149.

⁴Ibid., p. 150.

The Innocents Abroad immediately established its author reputation and fortune. The profits from it were \$300,000 and instant and intimate contact with the most distinguished people of America and in particular those connected with The Atlantic Monthly. It brought him offers of political preferment with big pay and an offer from one magazine of \$6000 cash for twelve articles on any subject.⁵

When Mark Twain returned from his excursion tour in the Quaker City, he found a letter awaiting him from Elisha Bliss, of the American Publishing Company of Hartford, offering either 5 per cent royalty or \$10,000 for an account of the excursion. Clemens accepted the royalty offer, wrote the book, and delivered the manuscript in July, 1868.⁶

Some "staid old fossils," as Mark Twain put it, among the directors of the American Publishing Company read the manuscript and were startled to learn that "there were places in it of a humorous character." One of the company's directors begged Twain to release the company from the contract. Refusing to comply with the request of the director, Twain finally threatened a suit for damages if the book was left unpublished. In nine months the book took the publishing house out of debt, advanced its stock from twenty-five to two hundred, and left \$70,000 profit for the author.⁷ It was later

⁵Van Wyck Brooks, The Ordeal of Mark Twain, p. 90.

⁶"Mark Twain's Life of Samuel L. Clemens," Current Literature, XLI (October, 1906), 390.

⁷Ibid., p. 392.

established that the sale of The Innocents Abroad during those earlier years more than doubled those of The Tramp during a similar period, and that later the ratio of popularity was more than three to one.⁸ Only the profits of The Innocents Abroad, Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer, and Roughing It surpassed those of Tramp Abroad, in the order named.

The remarkable success of The Innocents Abroad was probably due to a combination of factors. One of these factors alone would have insured a respectable sale; together they made for an unprecedented success. First, Twain had a most popular subject for The Innocents Abroad. Something new in the way of summer outings, the Quaker City excursion had caused quite a stir over the entire country.⁹ Second, quite as important a factor in the book's wide sale as the attractions of its novel subject was the manner in which it was sold. The books of the American Publishing Company were "Sold by subscription only." Although business in the "regular" book trade was slow in 1869, subscription publishing was thriving.¹⁰

Being perhaps the leading subscription house of the time, the American Publishing Company was, of course, the object of much resentment among the trade. The feeling was apparently quite strong in the fall of 1869, for Eliss wrote to Clemens:

⁸Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain, A Biography, III, 1226, note.

⁹Bibliographical Society of America, XII, 107.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 108.

Book dealers are giving us a fierce fight, but I am enough for them.¹¹

How successful Mark Twain was in marketing his best seller, Innocents Abroad, is revealed by the sales figures; in August, 1869, the first full month after publication, more than 5,000 copies were sold.¹² By December the rate of sale had more than doubled, for 12,000 copies were disposed of in twenty-seven days. Six presses worked on the book day and night, and still the printers could not keep up with the orders for The Innocents. Thirty-one thousand copies had been sold by the end of 1869.¹³ Sixteen months after publication, that number had increased from 31,000 to 85,000; and by July 24, 1871—two years after publication—this number reached 100,000. Subsequent sales, although at a slower rate, brought this figure up to 125,000 at the end of three years.¹⁴ It is, no doubt, the largest sale of a four-dollar book ever achieved in America in so short a time. Clemens well realized his aim of making money from this book. His earnings for the first five years after the publication of The Innocents must have been more than \$28,000.

Clearly to The American Publishing Company goes some of the credit for the prodigious sale of The Innocents Abroad. Nor should

¹¹Quoted from a letter dated Hartford (November 1, 1869), Mark Twain's Papers—DeVoto.

¹²Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., I, 382.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Bibliographical Society of America, op. cit., XLI, 122.

one, in accounting for the book's tremendous sale, overlook the extraordinary zeal and ingenuity displayed by publisher and author.

Having made a magnificent success with the publication of Innocents Abroad, Mark Twain proceeded with another book entitled Roughing It. Proposals for its publication were coming to him from several houses; one offered him 15 per cent royalty, and another proposed to give Clemens all of the profits and the company itself would be content with the advertisement which the book would give the house. The author, after some consideration, drew up a contract with Elisha Bliss of the American Publishing Company at a 7 1/2 per cent royalty.¹⁵

Roughing It was followed in 1873 with The Gilded Age, written in collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner, and in 1876 with The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Most of Mark Twain's books prior to 1890 were sold by subscription. The Gilded Age was one of these subscription books which was published by the American Publishing Company.¹⁶ The firm's records show that the first sixty copies of The Gilded Age which came from the bindery were sent out stitched, without covers, for review purposes, and that the first editions of his books published by the house ran as many as ten thousand copies and were scattered widely over the United States. These facts reveal the successes of these books.¹⁷

¹⁵Samuel L. Clemens, op. cit., p. 155.

¹⁶Bibliographical Society of America, op. cit., XLI, 120.

¹⁷Ibid.

By 1881 Clemens' chief interest lay in publishing rather than in writing. His association with James R. Osgood, acting manager of Osgood and Company, inspired him to embark on new ventures for profit. He planned the Library of American Humor, which his friend Howells, managing editor of the Hartford Courant, was to edit, and which Osgood would publish for subscription sale. Without realizing it, Clemens was taking his first step toward becoming a publisher. Twain's contract with Osgood for the Prince and the Pauper made Clemens essentially his own publisher, for by the terms of it he agreed to supply all the money for the making of the book, and to pay Osgood a royalty of 7.5 per cent for selling it, reversing the usual conditions.¹⁸

The contract for the Library of Humor was to be a similar one, though in this case Osgood was to have a larger royalty return and was to share proportionally in the expense and risk.

Mark Twain carried his next book—Old Times on the Mississippi—to James R. Osgood of Boston, formerly of the firm of Field, Osgood, and Company. Osgood was to manufacture the book at Twain's expense, publish it by subscription, and charge Twain a royalty for this service. The book was under construction a long time. When at last the final draft was made upon Twain's account, he realized that he had paid out \$56,000 upon its structure.¹⁹

¹⁸Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain, A Biography, II, 707.

¹⁹Samuel L. Clemens, op. cit., p. 157.

Pamela Moffett, a niece of Mark Twain, observed that the book business, which Clemens claimed did not "pay salt," was practically the only enterprise her Uncle Sam engaged in that paid well.²⁰ In speaking on this subject, Brooks makes the following comment:

Can we not see what an immense creative force must have been displaced in order to give this "desire," as Paine called it, "to heap up vast and sudden sums, to revel in torrential golden showers"? Mark Twain "boiled over," we are told, with the projects for the distribution of General Grant's book: "his thoughts were far too busy with plans for furthering the sales of the great military memoir to follow literary ventures of his own."²¹

Primarily, he was a business man exploiting his imagination for commercial profit, his objects being precisely those of any other business man—to provide for his family, to gain prestige, to make money because other people made money, and to make more money than other people made.²² Commenting on the writer as a business man, Brooks says:

To shine, meanwhile, to make money, to rival and out-rival those whom the public most admired has become Mark Twain's ruling passion.²³

On the other hand, James R. Osgood, acting as agent for Mark Twain, who supplied the capital, made a botch of publishing Life

²⁰Samuel Charles Webster, Mark Twain, Business Man, p. 231.

²¹Van Wyck Brooks, op. cit., p. 134.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., p. 132.

on the Mississippi and The Prince and the Pauper. Although Osgood was not doing great things with these, Clemens gave him another book for publication presently, namely, a collection of sketches—The Stolen White Elephant.²⁴ Of The Prince and the Pauper this publisher made an extremely beautiful book, but all the profit the writer got out of it was \$17,000.²⁵ Apparently Osgood favored the subscription plan, as did many other publishers. For a while the regular trade deplored subscription business conditions; but although dealers grumbled about subscription houses, the latter continued to do an enormous business.²⁶

The American Publishing Company, the publishers who began to bring out Mark Twain's books, were described by Clemens as "thieves and a den of reptiles."²⁷ There seems to have been a misunderstanding of a contract regarding profits on a book the American Publishing Company had accepted for publication. Mark Twain says in reference to this:

It did not name "half-profits" instead a seven and a half per cent royalty.--It took me nine or ten years to find out that seven and a half per cent did not represent one-fourth of the profits. But in the mean time I had published several books with Eliss on seven and a half and ten per cent royalties, and of course had been handsomely swindled on all of them.

²⁴James Playsted Wood, op. cit., p. 17.

²⁵Samuel L. Clemens, Mark Twain in Eruption, p. 158.

²⁶Bibliographical Society of America, op. cit., XLI, 110.

²⁷James Playsted Wood, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

In 1872 Bliss had made out to me that seven and a half per cent royalty, some trifle over twenty cents a copy, represented one-half of the profit, whereas at that earlier day it hardly represented a sixth of the profit. Times were not good yet, it took all of fifty cents a copy to represent half.²⁸

Again in regard to the American Publishing Company, Mark Twain says:

I had in my mind at that time the American Publishing Company, of Hartford, and, while I suspected that they had been swindling me for ten years, I was well aware that I could arrange the contract in such a way that they could not swindle General Grant.²⁹

If one wished to draw a conclusion from this situation, he might say that it would have been better for the American Publishing Company, knowing Mark Twain, voluntarily to have allowed him half profits, which was the spirit of his old understanding even if not the letter of it, rather than to have waited till he demanded it and then to lose the opportunity to publish Clemens' books.

When Mark Twain thought he had been swindled out of \$2,000 instead of \$5,000 he revealed a bitter disappointment. But generally Twain was not disappointed. This fact is well shown in a letter he wrote to Webster in 1882 from Elmira.³⁰ The letter is, in part, as follows:

²⁸Samuel L. Clemens, Mark Twain in Eruption, pp. 151-152.

²⁹Samuel L. Clemens, Autobiography, p. 27.

³⁰Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 192.

Look here, have the Am. Pub. Co. swindled me out of only \$2,000? I thought it was five. It can't be worth while to sue for \$2,000, can it? If we gain will it pay lawyer's fee?

Some attention should be devoted to another publishing firm with which Twain was involved. Reports were circulated of estrangement between Mark Twain and the Century Company as a result of a decision regarding a book.³¹ It seems that certain newspapers exploited and magnified rumors to the extent of accusing Mark Twain of duplicity, and of charging him with seeking to obtain a vast fortune for himself at the expense of General Grant and his family.³² On the contrary, the Century Company, General Grant, and Twain individually, were all working together; and nothing but the most cordial relations and understanding prevailed. This charge of unfair dealing on the part of Mark Twain was absurd, but this and similar incidents provoked him.

A letter written to Webster from Elmira, August 6, 1886, refers to a suit against John Wanamaker for selling the Grant book below the publisher's price. The booksellers won this suit, but the question of whether Wanamaker had a right to sell below the established price continued to vex the trade for years. Mark Twain's efforts in this direction were long appreciated by the book trade.³³

³¹Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., p. 853.

³²Ibid., II, 812.

³³Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 365.

In a letter written to Charles Webster on June 11, 1886, Twain requested Webster to persuade Wanamaker to see Twain immediately.³⁴

The letter is as follows:

June 11

Dear Charley,

See that you go for Wanamaker--otherwise I will go down there & rise up in his Sunday School & give him hell, in front of his whole 3000 pupils. I certainly will.

Yrs.

SIC

Although The American Publishing Company received most of Clemens' books, the business relations between Clemens and the firm were not always friendly. Clemens on one occasion threatened to remove several of his books from these publishers when he examined the balance sheets. In Mark Twain in Eruption Clemens says:

When the balance sheets exposed to me the rascalities which I had been suffering at the hand of the American Publishing Company I stood up and delivered a lecture to Newton Case and the rest of the conspirators--meaning the rest of the directors.

Perhaps Mark Twain's explanation regarding Newton Case, Twain's neighbor connected with the firm at the time, best enlightens us of his dealings with him.³⁵ Mark Twain says:

³⁴Ibid., p. 361.

³⁵Samuel L. Clemens, Mark Twain in Eruption, p. 156.

I wanted to get my books out of the company's hands and carry them elsewhere. After a time I went to Newton Case—in his house as before—and proposed that the company cancel the contracts and restore my books to me full and unencumbered, the company retaining as a consideration the money it had swindled me out of on Roughing It, The Gilded Age, Sketches New and Old, and Tom Sawyer.

Mr. Case demurred at my language but I told him I was not able to modify it, that I was perfectly satisfied he and the rest of the Bible Class were aware of the fraud practiced on me in 1872 by Bliss—aware of it when it happened and consenting to it by silence.

Finally, I tried to buy my contract but he said it would be impossible for the Board to entertain a proposition to sell, for the reason that nine-tenth of the company's livelihood was drawn from my books and therefore its business would be worth nothing if they were taken away.³⁶

Still another publishing house to which some emphasis should be given is Harper and Brothers, for Clemens as early as October, 1900, proposed to this firm a detailed contract for the publication of his personal memoirs.³⁷ These memoirs were to be published one hundred years from the date the document was signed.³⁸

Two years later Twain had acquired passage on the Princess Irene sailing for Italy later in the month. During the time he was waiting for the vessel to depart for Italy, he concluded his final contract with Harper and Brothers.³⁹ The Harper contract, negotiated for Twain by Rogers, brought all of the writer's books into the

³⁶Ibid., p. 155.

³⁷Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., III, 1266.

³⁸Ibid., II, 1000.

³⁹Ibid., III, 1206.

possession of one publisher, who guaranteed him \$25,000 a year for five years. This contract proved a lucrative one for Clemens, as the books yielded always more than the guaranteed amount; sometimes their yield was twice that amount.⁴⁰

Harpers had also arranged for the serial and the book publication of Joan of Arc.⁴¹ Clemens had confined his work to a few magazines and had completed an arrangement with the management of Harpers which gave the firm exclusive serial privileges to Clemens' works at a fixed rate of twenty cents per word. This rate was increased by a later contract.⁴²

Some mention should be made of Clemens' relationships with his foreign publishers. Seeking some means to outwit the Canadian pirates who were laying hands on things he had written, he delayed the publication of Tom Sawyer. Moncure D. Conway, a casual English acquaintance of Twain's who visited in the Clemens home, had agreed to take the manuscript of Tom Sawyer to London and arrange for its copyright and publication there. He read the manuscript on the ship going back to London. Being greatly interested and excited over the book, Conway some time later lectured on Twain's book, arranging meantime with Chatto and Windus for its publication in London, thus establishing a friendly business relation with that

⁴⁰Ibid., III, 1207.

⁴¹Ibid., II, 1000.

⁴²Ibid., III, 1114.

firm which Mark Twain continued during his lifetime.⁴³

An interesting episode in his relations with his British publishers concerned the imposition of a tax upon his earnings in England. It was one day in 1887 that Twain received from his London publishers a letter with a large printed document explaining the income tax which the Queen's office had levied upon his English royalties as the result of a report that he had taken Buckenham Hall, Norwich, for a year, and that he was to become an English resident. Amused and interested by this matter, Clemens wrote to Chaggo and Windus the following letter, which best tells his reactions to this surprising turn of events:

I will explain that all that about Buckenham Hall was an English newspaper's mistake. I was not in England, and if I had been I wouldn't have been at Buckenham Hall anyway, but Buckingham Palace, or I would have endeavored to have found out the reason why. ...

But we won't resist. We'll pay as if I were really a resident. The country that gives me a copyright has a right to tax me.⁴⁴

Mark Twain, popular as he was with his public, was not popular with the rank and file of American publishers and booksellers. Even forty years after The Gilded Age had been published, there were many oldtimers among the retail bookdealers who could not forget his

⁴³"Prophet, Pedant, and Pioneer," Saturday Review of Literature, XXXV (May 6, 1933), 12.

⁴⁴Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., II, 852.

alliance with their enemy, the subscription publishing houses. The antagonism between the subscription publishing houses and retail booksellers began before Mark Twain's books arrived on the scene, but because of the tremendous popularity of his books the booksellers' wrath focussed on Mark.⁴⁵ Customers came to the retailers asking to buy copies of Innocents Abroad or Roughing It or The Gilded Age; but the booksellers could not make a profitable sale, nor even obtain a copy of many of the books to satisfy their customers. Consequently Mark Twain became a tribulation to the retail booksellers.⁴⁶

Some of Mark's experiences with publishers have been related. Practically all of Mark Twain's Autobiography is colored by events of the 1890's, especially by the failure of Mark Twain's publishing firm and his experiences with other publishers.⁴⁷ Throughout his life he nourished violent animosities against those he thought had taken advantage of him, and often during the disasters of the 90's this trait became obsessive. He began to believe that all his publishers had swindled him. Not all of these accusations Twain made against publishers are to be taken as authentic, for they are crowded with inaccuracies, distortions, and exaggerations. Though the publishers did indeed make a good thing of Twain's books, most

⁴⁵"Mark Twain's Trustees," The Nation, CLXVIII (February 19, 1949), 224.

⁴⁶Frank C. Wilson, "That Gilded Age Again," Bibliographical Society of America, XLI (1947), 149.

⁴⁷James Playsted Wood, op. cit., p. 16.

of them treated him with complete probity and gave him as good terms as any writer could have got from publishers of that day.⁴⁸

⁴⁸Samuel L. Clemens, Mark Twain in Eruption, Introduction, p. ix.

CHAPTER III

MARK TWAIN AND THE PAIGE TYPESETTING MACHINE

Mark Twain's plans eventually turned to the manufacture of a typesetting machine, which he hoped would enable him to profit by everybody's printing, but which was to prove much too complicated and too difficult to keep in order and which proved in the end a complete failure.¹ It is to this phase of Clemens' business operation that this chapter is devoted, for it is a fact of piquant and curious interest that men of great successes sometimes make very conspicuous failures, even in their own line of achievement. It was the great financial disaster of the Paige typesetting machine, which consumed some \$3,000 per month for seven years, with other complications that precipitated Twain's financial failure in 1895.²

The episode of the Paige typesetter covers a considerable period of time in the promoter's life—more than one-fifth of Clemens' eventful years. In his autobiography Clemens relates that Dwight Buell, a jeweler, called at his house wanting Twain to take some stock in the typesetting machine, which was at the time about completed for delivery at the Colt arms factory. After some consideration of the matter, Clemens decided to take \$2,000 of the stock in the patent.³

¹Chicago Sun, Book Week, III (February 3, 1946), 1.

²Ibid.

³Samuel L. Clemens, Autobiography, p. 70.

Some time later he was invited to the factory by James W. Paige, inventor of the typesetter, to see the machine in operation. Clemens said that the performance of the compositor he witnessed at the factory thoroughly amazed him. While he was at the factory, he signed up to invest an additional \$3,000 in the project.⁴ Having believed that a machine cannot be made to think, Twain discovered this one to do just that. He saw to his great amazement that this machine was really setting the type, and that it was doing it with swiftness and accuracy, too, without human aid or suggestion. The machine was a complete compositor lacking but one thing—it did not "justify" the lines; this was done by the operator of the typesetter of 18,000 separate parts.⁵

Pleased by what he saw at the Colt factory, he immediately began to calculate the millions he would be worth presently when the typesetter was completed. Hopefully he left the matter in the hands of Paige, who with persuasive influence had interested Chicago capital to the extent that a company had been formed to manufacture the typesetter in Chicago. Paige reported that he had obtained subscriptions for several million dollars for the construction of a factory, and that he had been placed on a salary as a sort of general consulting omniscient at some \$5,000 a month.⁶ Negotiating with the

⁴Ibid., p. 70.

⁵Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain, A Biography, II, 906.

⁶Ibid., II, 907.

Mallorys of the Churchman, a religious publication, for the disposal of his machine royalties if he found it desirable to do so, Clemens thought it only proper to investigate first as to just what was going on in Chicago concerning Paige and his company. Clemens made a trip to Chicago and found that Paige had a factory started and that he proposed to manufacture fifty machines. Hopeful of its prospects and no longer interested in disposing of any machine royalties, Clemens informed Hall, who was in charge of the Webster company, that a deal by which Clemens was to sell out his own interest in the typesetter to the Mallorys had fallen through.⁷

Immediately after Clemens had set his signature down for the additional \$3,000, he was called on to raise a capital of \$500,000 for the manufacture of the machine. Questioned as to what he would charge to raise this capital, Clemens answered that he would undertake it for \$100,000. He was told to raise \$600,000, and then to take \$100,000 for promoting the venture, a proposition to which he immediately agreed.⁸

Clemens was anxiously awaiting the completion of the typesetter to announce the good news of its perfection to the waiting world. Paine says that the eager promoter declared to Sam Moffett, a nephew of Clemens, that it would take ten men to count the profits from the

⁷Ibid., II, 921.

⁸Samuel L. Clemens, op. cit., p. 71.

typesetting machine.⁹ He also at the time wrote enthusiastic letters revealing evidence of his hope and his belief in Paige and the patent. One of these overflowing letters¹⁰ was addressed to George Strandring, a London printer and publisher:

It was discovered presently that it had the habit of breaking the types. Paige said it was a trifling thing; he could fix it, but it means taking down the machine and that deadly expense of three thousand or four thousand dollars a month for the band of workmen and experts in Pratt & Whitney's machine shops did not close. ... In February the machine was again setting and justifying type "to a hair."

Another letter¹¹ revealing his enthusiasm for the patent was written to Charles Webster:

Hartford, Monday

Dear Charley,

Mr. Wm. Hamersley, our City Attorney, will call on you at your Engraving office at 10 o'clock Thursday morning.

He & I are stockholders in the Pa(i)ge Type-Setting Machine. This company wants to let a contract to somebody with \$300,000 in his pocket, who can clear \$2,000,000 on said contract in four or five years. I said Mr. Whitford, or you & Mr. Whitford between you, could probably find such a man (or men) if it could be made pecuniarily worth your while to do it. Mr. Hamersley will explain the matter to you; & perhaps both of you had better step over & explain it to Mr. Whitford.

⁹Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., II, 906.

¹⁰Ibid., II, 910.

¹¹Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 171.

It seems to me that it is a thing which might be arranged in New York without much difficulty. It ought to be easier than to make capitalists see money in Kaolatype. ...

Yr truly

S L Clemens

Again Clemens wrote Webster:¹²

Oct 25/81

Dear Charley--

How did you know where to look for Hamersley? Did he leave word at your office?

He tells me you & Mr. Whitford are to send an expert to examine the machine, & that if the report is fully favorable the proposed business can be engineered.

Of course the expert's report will be thoroughly favorable; it certainly will be, if he is an old practical typesetter (like myself,) for he will perceive the value of the thing.--

Hammersley said that the foreman of the Herald composing rooms was here last Saturday to examine the machine; was satisfied with it, & said he should advise the Herald to order \$150,000 worth (30 machines.) (More than necessary, I should think, for 30 of them would do the work of 150 men.)

However, my object now in writing, is to say, if you should carry Hamersley's project through, telegraph me when it is actually done, for I shall want to scrape up some money & buy another block of this stock, here, if I can get it. I reckon it will take about a hundred thousand machines to supply the world, & I judge the world has got to buy them--it can't well be helped.

¹²Ibid., pp. 172-173.

How did you find out where Hameraley was?

And how is your brass?

Yr truly

S L C

According to Paine, Paige said that when promoters of the Mergenthaler Linotype offered to exchange half of their interests for a half interest in the Paige Patent, to obtain thereby a wider insurance of success, the action only confirmed Clemens' trust in the machine and caused him to let the opportunity go by.¹³ Clemens was most optimistic about this Paige typesetter, moreover, because he believed in and highly praised Paige, whom he called the Shakespeare of mechanical inventors.¹⁴ Clemens says of Paige:

He is a poet; a most genuine poet, whose subline creations are written in steel.¹⁵

Twain was on the dizziest pinnacle of wordly expectations, Brooks maintains. Calculating what his returns from the Paige machine would be, he had enthusiastically "covered pages with figures that never ran short of millions, and frequently approached the billion mark."¹⁶ According to Webster, Clemens proudly remarked

¹³Albert Bigelow Paine, *op. cit.*, II, 907.

¹⁴Van Wyck Brooks, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, p. 188.

¹⁵Albert Bigelow Paine, *op. cit.*, II, 904.

¹⁶Van Wyck Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

regarding his investment in the typesetting machine, "It is the best investment I have ever had."¹⁷ Clemens wrote:¹⁸

Hartford, Oct. 26/81

Dear Charley—

... I don't need to do anything to protect the \$5000 invested in that machine; it is safe, there, & is very much the best investment I have ever had. I want an opportunity to add to it—that is how I feel about it. And this is why I say that if Hameraley's project should be accomplished, I want to know it by telegraph, so that I can go out & try to buy some more stock. ...

Yr truly

S L Clemens

The typesetter, which Clemens regarded the chief invention of the age, seemed to promise Twain certain wealth. The machine, in fact, had become the principal hope of his financial salvation.¹⁹ The Paige company appeared to be getting ahead and was said to have some fifty compositors well under way. Clemens, who was in Europe at the time, packed up his manuscripts and mailed them to America; a week later he himself sailed for America to assist in securing the new fortune believed in store for him.²⁰

For several reasons the typesetter, nevertheless, furnished but a questionable outlook. By this time Twain's finances were entirely

¹⁷Samuel Charles Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹⁹Albert Bigelow Paine, *op. cit.*, II, 829.

²⁰Samuel Charles Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

exhausted.²¹ Charles Webster, a nephew of Mark Twain, makes the following statement about his Uncle Sam:

Uncle Sam was always finishing that typesetter in a very satisfactory fashion.²²

On December 18, 1887, Clemens wrote Pamela, his sister:

We go on and on, but the typesetter goes on forever—at \$3,000 a month; which is much more unsatisfactory than was the case of first seventeen months, when the bills only averaged \$2,000, and promised to take a thousand years. We'll be through now, in 3 or 4 months, I reckon, and then the strain will let up and we can breathe freely once more, whether success ensues or failure.²³

The typesetter seemed to require only one more thing—the justifier, which would save the labor of an extra man. No typesetter invented to that day could match it for accuracy and precision when it was perfected, Clemens believed. Consequently a contract had been made with Paige to add this new attachment to the machine.²⁴ Paige could not be satisfied with anything less than perfection—his machine must do it all, and meantime five precious years had slipped away. Straight through still another year the \$3,000 a month continued; and then in January, 1889, there came what seemed to Clemens to be the long sought typesetter. The machine, with the

²¹Van Wyck Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

²²Samuel Charles Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 399.

²⁴Albert Bigelow Paine, *op. cit.*, II, 905.

justifier, was complete. In his notebook Mark Twain set down the following memorandum:

Saturday, January 5, 1889—12:20 P. M. At this moment I have seen a line of movable type spaced and justified by machinery. This is the first time in the history of the world that this amazing thing has ever been done.²⁵

One might say that it was optimism that ruined Clemens. When he took \$2,000 of stock in the Paige typesetting machine, he remarked,

I was always taking little chances like that—and almost always losing by it, too—a thing which I did not greatly mind, because I was always careful to risk only such amounts as I could easily afford to lose.²⁶

Its point of perfection, however, was apparently a vanishing point. It seems that at times it would nearly be reached when it would suddenly disappear.²⁷ Once when it was apparently complete as to every detail, Paige discovered that it needed some kind of an air-blast, and he took it all down again to add the air-blast.²⁸ This operation required months to invent and perfect. The machine needed corrections continuously. The steady expense went on through another year, obviously increasing instead of diminishing, until the beginning of 1890.

²⁵Ibid., II, 908.

²⁶Ibid., II, 906.

²⁷Ibid., II, 907.

²⁸Ibid., II, 911.

Clemens was finding it almost impossible to supply funds to continue this work. Struggling on, he never entirely lost faith in the final outcome; and he believed strongly that if he and Paige could build their own factory, the delays and imperfections of construction would be avoided.

The story might have been a different one if Paige could have put the machine on the market without waiting to devise improvement. Paige did not require much money at first, and on the capital which had been invested he experimented with his improvements for something like four or five years.²⁹

Finally, Clemens had to face the facts. There was no longer anything promising concerning the Paige machine. The fifty machines which the company had started to build had dwindled to two machines. The chances were that then the two would dwindle to none.³⁰ The time had come when Clemens at last realized that there was not any hope for the machine to be completed and that he had met defeat. He wrote a tragic letter to Henry Rogers accepting the final verdict of the impracticability of the Paige typesetting machine. At last the once determined man had to admit the failure to himself and to others.³¹

²⁹"Capitalizing Mark Twain," Literary Digest, LIII (October 14, 1916), 959-960.

³⁰Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., II, 969.

³¹"Mark Twain at Seventy," Outlook, LXXXI (December 14, 1905), 808.

The bloody machine offers but a doubtless outlook--& will still offer nothing much better for a long time to come; for when the "three weeks" are up, there will be three months' tinkering to follow, I guess. There is unquestionably the boss machine of the world, but is the toughest one on prophets when it is in an incomplete state that has ever seen the light.³²

Clemens also knew by this time something of the delays of completing a typesetting machine; therefore he had little faith in any relief from that source. He wrote Hall:

I am terribly tired of business. I am by nature and disposition unfit for it, & I want to get out of it. I am standing on Mount Morris volcano with help from the machine a long way off--& doubtless a long way further off than the Connecticut company imagines.

Get me out of business.³³

The effect that the failure of the typesetter had upon the enthusiastic Twain is worthy of note. When the Webster publishing house failed in April, 1894, Mark Twain took its failure calmly; but when the typesetter failed, he almost went out of his mind. "It hit me like a thunder-clap," he wrote from Europe; "I went flying here and there and yonder, not knowing what I was doing, and only one clearly defined thought standing up visible and substantial out of the crazy storm-drift--that my dream of ten years was in desperate peril. Have you ever been like that? There was another

³²Albert Bigelow Paine, *op. cit.*, II, 967.

³³*Ibid.*, II, 966.

clearly defined idea--I must be there and see it die. That is, if it must die."³⁴

He was like the Lord, said the younger Webster, caring only for the sheep that was lost.³⁵ Twenty years later Twain looked at things through an even more distorted glass--and knew it. He seemed to have lost his buoyancy.

The following incident is of interest here as an early example of the fatal fascination that the Paige machine held for Mark Twain. Some thirty years after he had lost a large fortune in the unsuccessful promotion of the Paige typesetter, he had less enthusiasm, and in answer to the request of an author for endorsement of a book for the guidance of inventors and patentees, Twain wrote:

I have, as you say, been interested in patents and patentees. If your books tell how to exterminate inventors, send me nine editions. Send them by express.³⁶

It is evident that although he advised others against speculation, Clemens invested heavily in various speculative schemes, usually with disastrous results. He had not only wasted a fortune in money on the typesetting machine before the venture was abandoned; but he had also wasted, what was more valuable to an artist, time, energy, and peace of mind. The failure of the Paige typesetter proved to be one of the

³⁴Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 396.

³⁵Ibid., p. 397.

³⁶Mark Twain, Mark Twain's Travels with Mr. Brown, p. 285.

major tragedies of Mark Twain's life. Its failure made him frantic. When his publishing firm failed and closed its doors on April 18, 1894, the man took defeat calmly; but when the typesetter neared its end, Clemens almost went out of his mind. So greatly did it affect him that he seemed to have lost much of his usual energy and enthusiasm.

CHAPTER IV

MARK TWAIN'S LECTURE RETURNS

As a number of important things happened to Mark Twain during the years under consideration, among them his business failures, which left him with a load of debt, dependent entirely upon authorship and the lecture platform for rehabilitation and support, some attention should be devoted to Mark Twain's earnings as a lecturer. Clemens, chiefly concerned with making money, frequently turned to lecturing to provide quick funds, for whenever and wherever Twain appeared before an audience, the returns were more than worthwhile. Finding lecture accumulations moderately attractive, surprisingly enough Twain also found much satisfaction in entertaining an audience.

Twain was always in great demand as a lecturer and as an after-dinner speaker. His remarks about New England weather are a favorite example of his humor and his power of poetic description. As a lecturer, as a teller of stories, and as a delineator of character, he had scarcely a rival in his ability to draw and entertain vast audiences. It was with these assets that Twain made a large income from his lectures in America, in England, and elsewhere around the world.¹

¹Library of the World's Best Literature, 1896-1902, edited by Charles Dudley Warner, IX, 3788.

That his lectures affected his financial problems may be shown by brief accounts of some of his most characteristic lectures. Twain's first lecture in New York, on "Kanakadom, or the Sandwich Islands," was delivered at Cooper Institute, May 6, 1867.² It was arranged and promoted by Frank Fuller, former acting governor of Utah, and Twain's friend of the Comstock days. James W. Nye, former governor of Nevada and then United States senator, had agreed to introduce Twain at his first lecture; but Nye did not show up, and Mark Twain made humorous capital of his absence by introducing himself, a device that he employed occasionally thereafter.³

The Sandwich Islands lecture was not necessarily a financial success, but Fuller managed for a packed hall by distributing complimentary tickets to the city schoolteachers and thereby accomplished the object of giving Mark Twain a responsive audience and a favorable presentation to the Eastern public. This experience was more important to Twain than great financial returns from his first lecture would have been.⁴

The story of that first lecture is an interesting one, and is thus summarized by Paine:

Expecting to find the house empty, Twain found it packed from the footlights to the walls. Sidling out

²Van Wyck Brooks, The Ordeal of Mark Twain, p. 98.

³Ibid.

⁴Mark Twain, Mark Twain's Travels with Mr. Brown, p. 291.

from the wings—wobbly-kneed and dry of tongue—he (Twain), was greeted by a murmur, a roar, a very crash of applause that frightened away his remaining vestiges, and he began to talk to them. Fear melted away, and as tide after tide of applause rose and billowed and came breaking at his feet, he knew something of the exaltation of Monte Christo when he declared "The World is Mine!"⁵

The Sandwich Island lecture, the product of Twain's trip to Hawaii in 1866, was not only his first, but also his surest standby and chief reliance for many years. Twain used it for his debut in New York, May 6, 1867.⁶ It was repeated at Brooklyn Athenaeum, May 10, and in New York, at Irving Hall, May 15, 1867.⁷ On October 7, 1873, he again used it in London.

Upon another occasion there was an entertainment on a ship, one of those performances given for the benefit of the Seaman's Orphanage—this popular lecturer was repeatedly called upon to appear upon benefit entertainments. As a special number on the program one of Twain's adopted granddaughters—"Charley" as he called her—played a violin solo and Clemens made a speech.⁸

Clemens wrote to Bliss of the American Publishing Company regarding a lecture delivered with the Quaker City excursion as his subject. He wrote:

⁵Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain, A Biography, I, 293.

⁶Mark Twain's Letters, edited by G. E. Dane, pp. 218-222.

⁷Mark Twain, Mark Twain's Travels with Mr. Brown, p. 291.

⁸Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., III, 1381.

I lectured here on the trip the other night; over \$1,600 in gold in the house; every seat taken and paid for before night.⁹

An account of Clemens' platform experiences would not be complete without some note of his lecture appearances with James R. Redpath, Chairman of the Lyceum Committee in Boston and Mark Twain's lecture agent. Redpath was eager to have Clemens a member of his lyceum committee;¹⁰ in the winter of 1867 he wrote to Twain, who did not go on the reading tour circuit that winter:

Will you? Won't you? We have seven thousand to eight thousand dollars in engagements recorded for you.¹¹

Redpath named a list of towns ranging geographically from Boston to St. Paul, but Clemens had no intention then of ever appearing on the platform again.¹² Later Mark Twain wrote Redpath from London:

When I yell again for less than \$500.00, I'll be pretty hungry, but I haven't any intentions of yelling at any price.¹³

Redpath pursued Clemens and in January, 1868, proposed \$400 for a single night in Philadelphia, but without result. Clemens did,

⁹Ibid., I, 363.

¹⁰Mark Twain's Letters, I, 220.

¹¹Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., I, 473.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., I, 474.

however, appear two nights in Steinway Hall for the Mercantile Library on a basis of half profits, netting \$1,300 for the two nights as his share; and he spoke one night in Hartford, at a profit of \$1,500 for charity. Father Hawley of Hartford had announced that his missionary work there was suffering from a lack of funds. He added that no one ever responded to an appeal like that more quickly than did Samuel Clemens, who offered to deliver a lecture free, and to bear an equal proportion of whatever expenses were incurred by the committee of eight who agreed to join in forwarding the project.¹⁴

Later that year, after Clemens had delivered addresses upon several occasions for the benefit of charities of one or another, Redpath induced Clemens to sign a contract. Delivering the lecture "The American Vandal Abroad," Twain was soon earning a hundred dollars a night, and as Paine remarks, "making most of the nights count." This lecture dealt, moreover, with the subject to be treated in his forthcoming book, and hence provided the people with a foretaste of what was to come in Twain's new book.¹⁵

Of this lecture tour Clemens wrote to his mother and his family:

Dear Father,---I played against the Eastern favorite, Fanny Kemble, in Pittsburgh, last night. She had 200 in her house and I had upwards of 1,500. All the seats were sold (in a driving rain storm, 3 days ago) as reserved seats at

¹⁴Mark Twain's Letters, I, 73.

¹⁵Bibliographical Society of America, XLI, 117.

25 cents extra, even those in the second and third tiers—and when the last seat was gone the box office had not been open more than 2 hours. When I reached the theatre they were turning people away and the house was crammed, 150 or 200 stood up all evening.

I go to Elmira tonight. I am simply lecturing for societies at \$100 a pop.¹⁶

And to his sister he wrote:

... I get just about five hundred more applications to lecture than I can possibly fill—and in the West they say "Charge all you please, but come."¹⁷

With eager crowds like these it is not surprising that Mark Twain could depend upon the platform as a means to provide him with necessary funds. One night, after making an appearance, he wrote Redpath:

... You are the last on my list. Shall begin to pay you in a few days ...¹⁸

About the same time he wrote to his wife:

I have been figuring my lecture business up to the end of January, yields about \$10,000—Yet when I preach Jan. 30, it is well I am so close to Hartford, for I would not have money enough to get home on. It is all gone and is going, for those necessities of life—debts. Every night the question is, "Well, who does this day's earnings belong to?"—And away it goes.¹⁹

¹⁶Mark Twain's Letters, I, 155-156.

¹⁷Ibid., I, 168.

¹⁸Ibid., I, 194.

¹⁹Clara (Clemens) Gabrilowitsch, My Father, Mark Twain, p. 46.

By the time the season closed in Elmira, Twain had lectured between fifty and sixty times with a return of more than \$8,000, a gratifying sum for a first season on the circuit.²⁰

When Clemens' wedding date had been set, it was again necessary for him to turn to the lecture platform to accumulate a bank account. This time he went out on an entertaining circuit in New England and the Middle West. While on this tour he spoke almost every night in hopes of saving at least \$2,000 for the anticipated occasion.²¹

In 1869, after his engagement to Olivia Langdon, Clemens wrote the following letter²² to his sister, in which he reveals his concern about saving money in view of his future responsibilities:

Davenport, Iowa
Jan. 14

My Dear Sister:

I lectured here tonight—& have lately lectured in several Michigan towns, & in Akron, Ohio, Fort Wayne, Ind., Indianapolis, Rockford, Monmouth, Galesburg, Chicago, Peoria, Decature, & Ottawa, Ill—a lecture every night—& now have to talk in Iowa City, Sparta, Wis., Toledo, Ohio, Norwalk, Cleveland, & a lot of places in Illinois, Michigan, & New York City & New York State, & am getting awfully tired of it. I spend about half as much money as I make, I think, though I have managed to save about a thousand dollars so far—don't think I shall save more than a thousand more.

²⁰Albert Bigelow Paine, *op. cit.*, I, 379.

²¹*Ibid.*, II, 389.

²²Samuel Charles Webster, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.

One of Mrs. Povey's daughters (she married a doctor & is living in an Illinois town & has sons longer than I am,) was in the audience at Peoria. Had a long talk with her. She came many miles to be there. Saw a nephew of Tom Collins in Decatur.

The Societies all want to engage me to lecture for them next year, but ...

I think it will exactly suit you. You can run to New York or visit the sea-side whenever you please, from there.

No, you can't board & lodge in New York City in any sort of respectable & comfortable style for less than \$25 to \$35 a week apiece.

In the spring go yourself, or send Orion—or both of you go—to Norwich, & you will rent or buy a house & be delighted. I only wish I could live there.—I am to lecture every night till Feb. 2. Shall be in Cleveland, Ohio, one day only—Jan. 22.

Love to all.

Affectionately

Sam

In 1871 the speaker again resorted to the reading circuit to pay off his debts and to raise money to purchase a third interest in the Buffalo Express for the sum of \$25,000. Before Clemens had earned the necessary money for the purchase, Jervis Langdon, his future father-in-law, insisted on providing Twain the money.²³

In regard to another engagement for which Clemens was booked, he wrote to Fall, a member of the Lyceum Committee, in July 1871:

²³ Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., I, 399.

Friend Fall,—Redpath tells me to blow up. Here goes! I wanted you to scare Ronbort with a big price. \$125 ain't big. I got \$100 the first time I ever talked there and now they have a much larger hall. It is a hard town to get to—I run a chance of getting caught by ice and missing the next engagement. Make the price \$150 and let them draw out.²⁴

Still another excursion to which some emphasis should be given is Twain's reading tour made in 1888. Major J. B. Pond was exploiting Bill Nye and James Riley, an entertainment combination, when he proposed to Clemens a regular lecture tour with Nye and Riley.²⁵ But Clemens, as badly as he was in need of money, put this temptation behind him, for his chief diversion these days was in gratuitous appearances. Twain had made up his mind not to appear to read or lecture again for pay, but still he seemed to take a peculiar enjoyment in doing these things as a benefactor. Unable to resist the financial return offer by this proposal, however, Clemens went on the tour with Major Pond as his manager.²⁶ It must have been a great financial success, for Clemens paid George W. Cable, a friend of his whom he met in New Orleans and who was making the tour with Clemens and Pond, \$450 a week, besides paying a commission to Pond.²⁷

²⁴Mark Twain's Letters, I, 189-190.

²⁵Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., III, 876-877.

²⁶Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 268.

²⁷Ibid., p. 269.

Major Pond later offered Clemens \$50,000 for a series of one hundred and twenty-five lectures. The offer was turned down by Mark Twain at the time because of his failing health.²⁸ The knowledge of such facts makes it easily understandable how the man could depend upon his lecturing as a paying proposition.

Undoubtedly Clemens reveled in the triumphs of lectures he made, though at no time did he regard lecturing as a pleasure altogether. After having made a platform appearance one night, he said:

Had a splendid time with a splendid audience in Indianapolis last night; a perfectly jammed house, just as I have all the time out here. ... I don't care now to have any appointments canceled. I'll even "fetch" those Dutch Pennsylvanians with this lecture.

Have paid up \$4,000 indebtedness ... then I shall be a free man again.²⁹

Another lecture tour from which the lecturer realized big returns was the lecture tour he made with Denis McCarthy, late of the Enterprise, who was in San Francisco at the time and who was willing to become his capable manager. They planned a tour of the nearby towns, beginning with Sacramento, extending it later even to the mining camps, and also across into Nevada. Success traveled with McCarthy and Mark Twain on this lecture tour. Whatever the occasion or the building, the house was packed and the returns were maximum.³⁰

²⁸Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., II, 1044.

²⁹Ibid., I, 444.

³⁰Ibid., I, 294.

There was a gross return from the Twain-McCarthy tour of more than \$1,200; but with his usual lack of business insight, Twain made an arrangement by which after paying bills and dividing with his manager McCarthy, he had only about one-third of this sum left. Even this was prosperity, and he felt that he was on the highroad to success at last, as the papers recognized Twain as the most humorous lecturer on the coast.³¹

Thus it is evident that early in Mark Twain's great career as a public speaker there were favorable financial returns whenever he lectured. Knowing this fact makes it understandable why Clemens, when he was a bankrupt at the age of sixty, again resorted to the lecture platform. Clemens had to make a heart-breaking effort to pay off his debts in his world toppled in ruins around him. As a result Clemens poured out his strength in numerous lectures. Refusing to take bankruptcy, he assumed all obligations and paid his creditors from the proceeds of a lecture tour in 1895-1896. Regarding the tour Clemens says:

That was in '94, I believe—though it may have been the beginning of '95. However, Mrs. Clemens and Clara and I started, on the 15th of July, 1895, on our lecturing raid around the world. We lectured and robbed and raided for thirteen months. I wrote a book and published it. I sent the book money and lecture money to Mr. Rogers as fast as we captured it. He banked it and saved it up for the creditors. We implored him to pay off the smaller creditors straightway, for they needed the money, but he wouldn't do it. He said that when I had milked the world dry we would take the result and distribute it pro rata among the Webster people.³²

³¹Ibid.

³²Samuel L. Clemens, Mark Twain in Eruption, p. 194.

Now after the failure of the Webster Company, the failure of the Paige Machine, and the failure of varied other enterprises, in which Twain had invested all his money, one finds Mark Twain returning to lecturing and counting up his "assets," as if his literary life were indeed a business enterprise. To Mark Twain it was exactly that, for as stated earlier he found the business of lecturing a quick means of obtaining the funds he needed. He had used up the most of his lecture accumulations and was moderately in debt. He was in demand at good rates, for those days; and with working opportunities he could presently dispose of his financial problems since various lecture bureaus pursued him; his outlook was bright.³³ In a post-script to a letter to Mr. Rogers, dated Cleveland, July 16, 1894, Clemens wrote:

Had a satisfactory time at Petaskey. Crammed the house and turned away a crowd. We had \$548 in the house, which was \$300 more than it had ever had in it before. I believe I don't care to have a talk go off better than that one did.³⁴

In 1895 Clemens started this lecture tour of the globe, speaking in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and India, and everywhere received an ovation because of his commanding reputation. For thirteen months, Clemens, accompanied by his wife and daughter Clara, continued this lecture tour started on July 15, 1895.³⁵

³³Van Wyck Brooks, op. cit., p. 96.

³⁴"Saving of Mark Twain," op. cit., p. 55.

³⁵Library of the World's Best Literature, op. cit., IX, 3789.

As he was leaving on this extended lecture to aid in recovering from his financial ruin, he gave the following statement to the press:

... It has been reported that I am sacrificed for the benefit of the creditors the property of the publishing firm whose financial backer I was and that I am now lecturing for my own benefit. This is an error. I intend the lectures as well as the property for the creditor. The law recognized not mortgage on a man's brain, and a merchant who has the insolvency and start free again for himself. But I am not a business man, and honor is a harder master than the law. I cannot compromise for less than 100 per cent on the dollar and its debts never outlaw. From my reception thus far on my lecturing I am confident that if I live I can pay off the last debt within four years, after which, at the age of sixty four, I can make a fresh start in life. I am going to Australia, India, and South Africa, and next year I hope to make a tour of the great cities of the United States. I meant, when I began to give my creditors all the benefit of this, but I am beginning to feel that I am not gaining something from it, too, and that my dividends, if not available for banking purposes, may be even more satisfactory than this.³⁶

It was not easy for Clemens to take the daily struggle involved in lecturing, but it was necessary. When the undertaking was begun by the sixty-four year old lecturer, it was with resolution to clear up the debts in three years. Allowing for the unexpected, Twain feared it would take four. It took two years and a half to pay the debts, for he began the effort in the latter part of 1895.³⁷

³⁶Albert Bigelow Paine, *op. cit.*, p. 1006.

³⁷Frederick A. King, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

This lecture tour of the world, taking Clemens through the Great Lakes Region, the Middle West and throughout the Northwest to Vancouver and Australia, began in Elmira, July 14, 1895. Success immediately traveled with Clemens. Of the first two platform appearances, Clemens wrote to Henry Rogers, his financial advisor, on July 16, 1895:

... It was 20 minutes before nine before I got the platform in front of those 2,600 people who had paid a dollar apiece.³⁸

With the glory of having won his financial fight singlehanded Clemens closed his lecture tour in March, 1898. Lecturing was always a temptation to him because of its quick and abundant return, but still because of the many hardships connected with traveling and making arrangements it was none the less distasteful.

Edgar Lee Master says of Mark Twain when he gives his portrait of the lecturer:

Mark Twain lived no life of hard work and privation; he spent no fortune on schemes for the betterment of society, he did not die in great poverty. He died worth \$600,000 made by writing and lecturing in a way that he made his countrymen laugh, and very probably from profitable speculation at the instance of Rogers.³⁹

Worthy of note is Twain's Farewell Lecture given April 14, 1906, at Carnegie Hall, for the benefit of the Robert Fulton Memorial

³⁸ Mark Twain's Letters, II, 627.

³⁹ Edgar Lee Masters, Mark Twain a Portrait, p. 194.

Association.⁴⁰ Some weeks earlier General Frederick D. Grant, president of the association, had proposed to pay \$1,000 for a Mark Twain lecture; but Clemens had replied that he was permanently out of the lecture field and would never address any audience that had to pay to hear him.⁴¹

The story of his splendid victory, the payment to the last dollar of his indebtedness, has been widely told. He was in Vienna when he completed this triumph; and whatever he had been before, he was now unquestionably a world figure with a recognized place in history. Realization of this may have prompted him to begin during those busy Vienna winters (1897-1899) something in the nature of an autobiography.⁴²

When Samuel Clemens paid two thousand dollars within two weeks after his arrival in Australia, an apparent impossibility was turned into a reality. The debts he had set out to pay amounted to \$100,000, a sum which he paid in full two years sooner than he had expected. The accomplishment reveals that his lectures were responsible for much of his revenues. Mark Twain, a great lecturer of all times, poured out his strength in numerous lectures he delivered in all parts of the world despite the fact that he hated lecturing with all the distaste of a man who, at odds with the human race, was obliged

⁴⁰"Saving of Mark Twain," Literary Digest, LV (November 24, 1917), 55.

⁴¹Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., III, 1287.

⁴²Samuel L. Clemens, Autobiography, p. viii.

to live by making it laugh. Advancing years did little toward destroying Mark Twain's interest in business affairs. Determined to pay his many debts, he set off on a tour around the world, to lecture as he went, even though by this time he hated the drudgeries that accompany lecturing. The year 1898, in which Mark Twain finished paying off his debts, was nevertheless the darkest year of his life, if his writings may be allowed to furnish the evidence.

CHAPTER V

MARK TWAIN'S MISCELLANEOUS BUSINESS VENTURES

Mark Twain resorted to varied business ventures to establish his prestige in a world of commercial values. Unable to resist the fantastic profits which his manifold speculative schemes promised, Clemens was constantly discovering something which he believed would make him a millionaire. Lionel Trilling maintains that Mark Twain, being an incorrigible experimenter with get-rich-quick schemes, displayed in high degree America's spirit of trial and error--that he was a democrat who strove mightily to become a plutocrat and that he had above all else America's pragmatic experimentalism.¹ This pilot, printer, newspaperman, lecturer, and author was ready to invest in everything from publishing schemes to "the watch-making scheme" and an Austrian carpet-design machine.² Only a few of the many ventures which attracted him can be included in this discussion of his numerous and varied successful and unsuccessful business undertakings.

Mark Twain's well-known passion for new business ventures seems never to have led him, however, to find any pleasure in the details

¹Lionel Trilling, "Mark Twain--A Dominant Genius (His Varied Business Ventures)," The New York Times, Book Review (February 3, 1946), Section 7, p. 1.

²Ibid.

of business; and according to Trilling he shrank nervously from business and most things connected with business.³ The following letter⁴ to Webster well reveals how Clemens felt about business:

Dear Charley—

No, it is business—& so I don't want anything to do with it. You are there to take care of my business, not make business for me to take care of. Your security is perfect, but I want no business that I must look personally after. That is my objection—I have no other.

I don't wish to buy Osgood out, but you might, if you want to. It might possibly be a better thing than buying the 3-story house, good as that doubtless is. ...

Yrs.

S L C

As mentioned in a preceding chapter, Webster, who was so convenient to help Twain meet many of his business difficulties and oversee his uncle's complex publishing quarrels, the production and distribution of his publications, his dramatic enterprises, his royalties from books, and his banking, also oversaw his various money-making ventures.

Mark Twain's inherited interest for speculation was so fostered and stimulated by his environment that he directed it in many inventive schemes. It has been observed that he invested heavily in varied speculative activities with little success. His income first

³Ibid.

⁴Samuel Charles Webster, Mark Twain, Business Man, pp. 293-294.

and last from his books and articles and lectures, mentioned earlier in this discussion, was sensationally large. "The Jumping Frog" brought him more gold than he ever dreamed of in the Nevada mountains, as did The Innocents Abroad. He did not confess his Humboldt failure, an early investment, to his family; he had not yet confessed it to himself; his avowed purpose was to return to Humboldt after a brief investigation of the Esmeralda mines. Twain had been paying heavy assessments on his holdings there; and with a knowledge of mining gained at Unionville, another mining city, he felt that his personal attention at these mines might be important.⁵

He had about exhausted his own funds by this time; and it was necessary that Orion, the oldest brother of Samuel Clemens, should become the financier. The brothers owned their Esmeralda claims in partnership; and it was agreed that Orion, out of his modest depleted pay, should furnish the means, while the other would go actively into the field and develop their riches. Neither had the slightest doubt that they would be millionaires presently, and both were willing to struggle and starve for the few intervening weeks.⁶ Paine affirms that in reality the close of Clemens' mining career was not sudden and spectacular; but that it was a lingering close, a reluctant and gradual surrender.⁷

⁵Fred Lewis Pattee, "On the Rating of Mark Twain," The American Mercury, edited by H. L. Mencken, XIV (June, 1928), 183-191.

⁶Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain, A Biography, I, 189.

⁷Ibid., I, 196.

It was only a few months after his marriage to Olivia Langdon in 1870 that Mark Twain became intensely interested in inventions and patents, as his father had earlier worked on a perpetual motion machine and Orion always was inventing things. His interest was aroused whenever something new was offered, and Clemens began to offer his service to Orion.⁸

It is to the phase of Mark Twain's miscellaneous business ventures, which may properly be referred to as his inventions and his patents, that some attention now should be given. With the ever-increasing need for funds to meet the higher cost of living, Clemens turned to inventing and became greatly interested in a steam generator which he believed would save 90 per cent of the fuel energy. He thought that an invention of this nature would revolutionize the factories of the world. Consequently he put into this patent whatever bank surplus—a sum of \$5,000—he had at the time, but later he bade it a permanent goodbye.⁹

Following his experiment with the steam generator, which proved in the end a complete failure, came his experience with the steam pulley, which was a rather small contrivance that Clemens hoped to design to aid in transmitting power. It was a venture which turned out to be a costly one, for in a period of sixteen months the steam

⁸Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 115.

⁹Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., II, 725.

pulley succeeded in extracting \$32,000 from Twain's bank account.¹⁰

By the time Clemens had accumulated another bank balance, a new method of marine telegraphy was created and was shown to him. Being unable to resist the promising fortune of the marine project, he used up \$25,000 on this adventure.¹¹

Still another time the fortune-seeker felt certain that he was on the right track of a splendid thing in electricity. It seems that this investment would cost but a trifle—possibly \$200 for some experiments. Twain was asked to provide the money for these experiments and to take half of the returns from the completed project. Regarding this "marvelous invention" he writes Pamela.¹²

Saturday

My Dear Sister:

I've got another telephone wire up, now, all to myself—from the house to the Western Union telegraph office—so one of my cussedest aggravations is at an end. It is like adding a hundred servants to one's staff for a cent apiece per week.

I got up a kind of marvelous invention the other day, & I could make a mighty fortune out of it but for the fact that anyone can infringe the patent that wants to & I shan't be able to catch them at it. ...

Yrs

Sam

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 137.

In his autobiography Twain says:

I furnished money until the sum had grown to about a thousand dollars, and everything was pronounced ready for the grand exposition. The electric current was turned on—the thing declined to go.¹³

Although this experiment required, according to Clemens about \$1,000, there again were no profits to share.

A number of other fabulous business schemes during this time with which the inventor is credited of which little has been learned include a British milk compound, a waistcoat enabling the wearer to dispense with suspenders, a shirt requiring no studs, a perpetual calendar watch charm, a method of casting dies for stamping book-covers and wall paper, and a postal-check to supplant the money-order that was at that time in common use.¹⁴

The failure of these earlier investments in the several patents seemingly did not discourage Clemens, for he was soon interested in Kaolatype, an ingenious chalk-plate process designed for engraving illustrations¹⁵ which he obtained from Dan Slate, his old friend who had been his roommate on the voyage to the Holy Land.¹⁶ Twain was hopelessly in the clutches of this patent before he realized it; but

¹³Samuel L. Clemens, Autobiography, p. 73.

¹⁴Van Wyck Brooks, The Ordeal of Mark Twain, p. 132.

¹⁵Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., II, 726.

¹⁶"Mark Twain, Business Man," The Atlantic Monthly, CLXXIV (June, 1944), 74.

he thought it could be used in engraving in various ways. This enterprise struggled nobly for a considerable period; but the end of each month showed a deficiency in operations until Clemens was from \$40,000 to \$50,000 out of pocket in his efforts to save the "chalk-plate" process which was to revolutionize the world of illustrations.¹⁷ Even though Clemens did not perfect the process, Kaolatype was never the drain on the inventor's profits that the Paige typesetter had proved to be.

"The Mark Twain Scrapbook" was still another money-making scheme in which Clemens invested to obtain royalty and to which he frequently referred in his letters to his business partner, Webster. He writes:¹⁸

Dear Charley---

Have read the letter.--Things appear to be going well. That man is frightened, & he has good reason to be, I think. I want that firm to either restore my 10 per cent royalty on Scrap Books or do something which shall come nearer the equivalent of it than the present royalty does, which was obtained by lying assertions.

However, I do not wish to offer too many suggestions--these matters are in wise hands.

Yrs truly

S. L. Clemens

¹⁷Albert Bigelow Paine, *op. cit.*, II, 727.

¹⁸Samuel Charles Webster, *op. cit.*, pp. 159-160.

In another letter¹⁹ regarding "The Mark Twain Scrapbook" he says:

The Scrap Book gravels me because while they are paying me about \$1800 or \$2000 a year I judge it ought to have been 3 times as much. The scrapbook idea was good. The mucilage was spread in columns down the pages and all you did was moisten it.

Clemens worked hard to complete the scrap book and later to sell it, and for some time revealed great enthusiasm in the project. It was one of his paying investments; consequently he took great pride in it.

While he was working on the scrap book, he made an investment in some bank notes about which he seems to have said little. In a letter to Mr. Webster regarding these bank notes with the American Bank Note Company Clemens says:²⁰

Hartford, May 31/81

Dear Charley---

Mr. Howells says Mr. Shepard will get Am. Bank-Note stock for me \$7 cheaper than Bissell charges here. Bissell's price is \$55 for \$50 worth of stock. You may go to him & expend the enclosed \$1000 in that way, if you think it will interest them to send you work. Otherwise, return the check. You can say, if you choose, that I don't want more stock now, as I am projecting some heavy expenditures.

Yr Truly

S L Clemens

¹⁹Ibid., p. 191.

²⁰Ibid., p. 159.

Some four years later Clemens says in a letter that he knows nothing whatever about the Bank Note Company, that he never did know anything about it; but that he bought \$4,000 or \$5,000 worth of stocks at \$110 from Bissell, a Hartford stockbroker; that he still has these stocks, and that he believes them to be a good buy.²¹ Reference has been made to these American Bank Note stocks to point out that Clemens repeatedly made investments in various business enterprises which he publicized little, if any.

Clemens also acquired an interest in "the watch-making scheme," a Fredonia enterprise which sold stock in and around that town, either by taking over his sister's stock or by investing in some stock himself. This watch company in Western New York was ready to sell Clemens a block of shares by the time he had made his first investment, Webster maintains, but the company went out of existence before it was ready to declare the first dividend on Clemens' investment.²² Webster in Mark Twain, Business Man, says:

In looking back on these days, it always seems to us as if our ancestors had had wonderful opportunities to make us rich if they'd only shown a little sense. I often think of the fine stocks I could have picked out for my father. But there seem to have been hundreds of concerns that had bright prospects that were never realized. This watch company was one of them. Uncle Sam seemed to have pulled out suckers while others were landing the trout.²³

²¹Samuel L. Clemens, Letters, p. 452.

²²Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., II, 725.

²³Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 191.

Webster further said that his Uncle Sam was saved from losses at this time at the hands of some people to whom Twain refers as the "watch thieves." These were not pickpockets, but two Fredonia men who had started a watch company, Webster added. Clemens did not desire to keep his stocks in the watch company any longer. Consequently he sent the following statement to his partner, Webster, with the brief note: "Put this, 1 time, in Buffalo Courier, Express, & Censor, & Advertiser & Union, also in posters in Fredonia":

\$5,000 Watch Stock For Sale

I desire to sell \$5,000 of stock in the Independent Watch Co., of Fredonia, N. Y. Lest the possible purchaser pay too much & afterward upbraid me, I will lay the facts bare before him; then he can buy wittingly. ...²⁴

The lengthy advertisement continues by giving all the facts concerning the watch-manufacturing company and Twain's reason for desiring to withdraw from the company.

Still inclined to make money by business enterprises, Clemens again invested some \$50,000 of his capital in the Knickerbocker Trust Company, and later wondered how many were trusting in God for the return of these invested sums. Paine further relates that Clemens himself did not expect to make an astounding sum from this investment. Although the smaller things of life often irritated Clemens, he often met large calamities with a serenity which almost resembled

²⁴Ibid., p. 198.

indifference. In the Knickerbocker Trust Company's suspension Clemens found humor, even though the situation was dark and uncertain; the end brought no loss to any of the Knickerbocker depositors. Fortunately Clemens was able to list this investment²⁵ as one of his successful business ventures.

Insurance may be considered as another of Twain's investments. He had been invited by Senator John P. Jones to join in the organization of an accident insurance company, and such was Jones' confidence in the venture that he guaranteed Clemens against loss.²⁶ Mark Twain's only profit from this source was in the delivery of a speech made by him at the dinner given to Cornelius Walford, a London insurance author of repute. The story goes that Jones was paying back the money, which he had guaranteed Mark Twain in the insurance; and at about that time a young inventor named Graham Bell came offering stock in a contrivance for carrying the human voice on an electric wire. At almost any other time Clemens would have welcomed this great opportunity which Bell had given him; but, Clemens was so gratified at having received his money out of the insurance venture that he refused to respond to the call of fortune.²⁷

Before Huckleberry Finn was completed, Clemens became interested in a history game to entertain and instruct children in English

²⁵Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., III, 1445.

²⁶Ibid., II, 725.

²⁷Ibid., II, 726.

history. His imagination caught fire whenever something new was offered. Samuel Webster says that Clemens was taking some interest in Huckleberry Finn, but that the literary work did not switch him away from the history game.²⁸ In a letter addressed to Webster he says:

I wanted a long delay, you know, in order, mainly, to try the game & to satisfy myself that it is worth patenting. But I see, without all that bother that it is worth it—so, patent it in 3 countries.²⁹

Clemens' plans at the time were to take out patents for the educational game in the United States, Canada, and England. These original plans were changed, however, when the history game, like Kaolatype and the typesetter, defied perfection. Webster maintains that in the end Clemens found the game impractical because he could not explain it to the players in person;³⁰ consequently Twain dismissed the scheme from his mind after having invested in it much time and money.

Having disposed of the scheme for the history game, Clemens went to work to create a "perpetual calendar," which evidently was not a success. His financial records indicate that it did not pay him anything. Webster, in making his report to Clemens, stated:³¹

²⁸Samuel Charles Webster, op. cit., p. 222.

²⁹Ibid., p. 219.

³⁰Ibid., p. 227.

³¹Ibid., pp. 303-304.

Feb. 14. 5

Dear Uncle Sam:

I have been driven hard this week; but here's the report.

1. Perpetual Calendar:—Nothing.
2. Historical Game: I haven't been able to get a competent man to perfect it yet.
3. Bed clamps: Nothing. ...

Yours Truly

Chas L. Webster

Another "great" invention—the patented baby-bedding clamp to keep children from kicking off the cover—was nipped in the bud. "There was nothing wrong with the bed-clamp—it was either the baby or the way it was hitched on," Samuel Webster ironically commented regarding the patent.³² It seems that Clemens had mailed Mrs. Webster one of these bed-clamps to try on Samuel's baby bed; evidently it did not prove to be very successful, for to Samuel's father Clemens later wrote:³³

Dear Charley--

How in the nation can the thing tear, when it has got a couple of coverlets in its grip, and when the elastics give, & won't let it tear?

³² Ibid., p. 266.

³³ Ibid., p. 284.

You want to experiment more carefully.

Yrs

S L C

Clemens still had not realized his defeat by the bed-clamp patent.

He wrote a letter³⁴ to Webster saying:

Dear Charley:

Your letter is very blind. Bed-clamp man's "estimate of expense" is \$1200 for year exclusive of advertising; "a salary" for him of \$1000 & expenses." Now who can guess what you mean by that. Do you mean that the first year will cost \$2200 & a double bill of "Expenses" added? ...

Also have some arrangement in the contract (if one is made.) whereby we may name the price the things are to be sold at; or in lieu of this, that the present retail price should be doubled; otherwise there is no profit possible on the business.

Try again.

Samuel Webster said he believed that \$3 was too much for the patent bed-clamp and that safety pins were much better and would not tear the sheets any worse.³⁵ Seemingly the proud inventor of the patent disagreed with the people who had the idea of making their products cheap so that people could buy them; but Clemens obviously rectified this false reasoning. A letter³⁶ of October 31, 1884, regarding the price of the patent reads:

³⁴Ibid., p. 291.

³⁵Ibid., p. 297.

³⁶Ibid., p. 279.

Dear Charley:--

I've got (for 3 months) the refusal of a half interest in a patent for keeping children from kicking the clothes off or rolling out of bed; & the only fault it has is that it is too cheap--90 cents to \$1.15. We use it all the time, now, on three beds, & it works all right. But I have invented a more expensive & more convenient one, & presently when I see you we will talk about it. ...

In January of 1885 he again wrote Charles Webster:³⁷

Dear Charley--

Even \$2 is too low for the bed-clamp.--If I go into it eventually, it must be at \$2.25 each for small size, & \$3 for the large. There is no money in the thing at any cheaper rate. ...

Yrs.

S. L. Clemens

Webster ironically says regarding the bed-clamp that Mark Twain had probably figured out how many babies were born every year and put down each one at \$3 for his bed-clamp, and that his figures revealed large profits.³⁸

Another quite interesting experience of the inventor was the one which involved him with Gerhardt, a sculptor. Gerhardt wrote to Clemens asking that he persuade the Grant family to allow the sculptor to take a death mask of the General. Upon Grant's death the mask was made. Later the question arose of the ownership of the mask. Twain

³⁷Ibid., p. 296.

³⁸Ibid., p. 297.

estimated his loss at \$100,000, but Clemens liked to overestimate financial losses. The writer undoubtedly did blame himself for not having made the proper and necessary negotiations for the death mask, and it worried him to lose the money that he could have had if he had undertaken the business.³⁹

Although Mark Twain's golden age began to dawn in the seventies, he was always hard at work on one or more of his long steady series of inventions, each of which had him for a while wildly enthusiastic even in the early nineties. In the beginning of 1902, still desiring riches, Twain was promoting with his capital and enthusiasm the plasmon, an albuminate interest in America. Twain had plenty of money again by this time, and he liked to find dazzlingly new ways for investing his money. As in old days, he was always putting "twenty-five or forty thousand dollars," as he said, into something that promised multiplied returns. Paine says in the biography:

I did not immediately understand that plasmon was one of those investments which he had made from "the substance of things hoped for," and in the destiny of a disastrous disappointment. But after paying off the creditors of his late publishing firm, he had to do something with his money, and it was not his fault if he did not make a fortune out of plasmon.⁴⁰

Within one month after the happy conclusion of those agonizing years of struggle to avert bankruptcy, Twain, the would-be inventor,

³⁹"Mark Twain, Business Man," op. cit., CLXXIV (June, 1944), 74.

⁴⁰Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., III, 1150.

was negotiating with an Austrian inventor for a machine used to control the carpet-weaving industry of the world, and was planning a company to be capitalized at \$15,000.⁴¹

Much more could be said of these several ventures, and others which are dismissed here in only a few brief paragraphs. The history of these ventures would alone make a volume not without interest and humor. At still another time Mark Twain put \$25,000--"the usual sum"--in a patent cash register which proved to be a promise rather than a completed patent.⁴²

His next venture was to capitalize a patented spiral hat-pin, a device apparently effective and beautiful enough but one which failed to secure his invested thousands. The hat-pin was designed to hold the hat on in any kind of weather. For the purpose of advertisement Clemens had a large number of these spiral pins attractively made to present to all lady visitors. In this he invested and lost again "the usual sum"--\$25,000.⁴³

Clemens, in his next venture, hoped to revolutionize the reading world by investing a lesser amount of money in shares of the Book-lover's Library. This venture was different from most of his others in that it at least paid a few dividends.⁴⁴

⁴¹Van Wyck Brooks, op. cit., p. 133.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Albert Bigelow Paine, op. cit., III, 1151.

⁴⁴Ibid., III, 1151-1152.

Mark Twain made at this time another substantial investment when he invested \$50,000 in Redding, a vacant old house with a few acres of land on the Hudson River with easy access to New York City. He first bought a tract of seventy-five acres, to which he presently added another tract of one hundred and ten acres to complete the ownership of the entire hilltop.⁴⁵ The price of the house with its grounds made it an attractive purchase.

After Clemens purchased the house and grounds in Redding and located himself and his family there, he became interested in the people of Redding. Immediately he decided to establish something that would benefit his neighbors. Since he had in his possession many books by authors and publishers, he resolved to establish a library for those neighbors who did not have access to much reading matter. Consequently the Mark Twain Library of Redding was founded.⁴⁶

The younger Webster says:

Mark Twain was a devil to do business with, but you can't help loving the man. The scoundrel Raymond had turned down his play. I know just how Uncle Sam feels.

Nobody seems to have appreciated the fact that Mark Twain was an inventive genius. Except Mark Twain.⁴⁷

Clemens experienced heavy financial losses because of his intense desire for wealth in order to gain prestige in the commercial world.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, III, 1293-1294.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, III, 1471-1472.

⁴⁷Samuel Charles Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

He invested in numerous speculative schemes even though he advised others against speculation. Although he was a foremost financier as well as a foremost man of letters, Clemens lost money, big sums in patents and experiments in which he invested his earnings in the hope of obtaining even more money.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

When his books began to sell, Clemens believed he could make more money from them by setting up his own publishing house, as he felt that his publishers were taking advantage of him. Consequently he established a firm in New York City, choosing Charles L. Webster, the husband of his favorite niece, as manager of the business. As things developed, he chose Webster also as personal representative in more than a dozen other enterprises, as confidential secretary, as general factotum, and as an outlet for his strong emotion. Some of the things Webster was asked to look after are all but unbelievable. Among them was the steady series of Clemens' own inventions, each of which had him for a while highly enthusiastic. Clemens was continually ordering the manager to sue somebody, breathing brimstone against some piracy of his work—imagined or real. Webster was "the tiller head" of Mark Twain's great publishing firm and, according to the autobiographer, the cause of its smashing bankruptcy. Webster was never accused of dishonesty but was represented by Twain as incompetent, resentful, and self-important; therefore, his deficiencies of character were blamed for bringing on the failure of Charles L. Webster and Company. Ill health, however, forced Webster's retirement from the firm six years before its collapse in 1894.

Twenty years later Clemens, ill and nearing the end of his life, wrote or dictated an unfair and distorted account of his partnership

with Webster, which was recently brought to light in Mark Twain in Eruption. The true story, according to critics, is now told almost completely in Clemens' own words, in the form of hundreds of hitherto unpublished letters collected in the book Mark Twain, Business Man, edited by Samuel Charles Webster, a nephew of Clemens. The degree to which Mark Twain really belonged to the "Gilded Age" he sometimes ridiculed is also made clear in Webster's book.

Although he established his own publishing house, Twain experienced both friendly and unfriendly relationships with other book establishments. Popular as he was with the American public, he was not popular with many of the publishers and booksellers of America, who even after forty years could not forget his alliance with the subscription publishing houses. Even though antagonism between the subscription publishing houses and the retail booksellers began before Mark Twain's books arrived on the scene, the booksellers' wrath focused on him because of the tremendous popularity of his books. Mark Twain's Autobiography is colored with experiences which indicate that he believed his publishers had swindled him. It is obvious, however, that not all accusations Clemens made against his publishers are to be taken as authentic, for it seems they treated him with complete rectitude.

In the true temperament of his time, Clemens could not be satisfied with moderate or even excellent profits, but believed they must be fantastic. Consequently he was constantly discovering something which was going to make him a millionaire. The Paige typesetting

machine was the most costly of a long series of speculations. The typesetter, a venture which cost Clemens many years of valuable time in addition to a fortune in money, was abandoned at the end of 1894, after many years of hope and enthusiasm. During the years while he was awaiting its completion, Clemens invested a fortune in the typesetter in hope of great gain upon its perfection. So great was the man's enthusiasm in it at the time that he wrote many letters revealing his optimism in the future of the typesetting machine.

When Clemens, determined to pay in full within four years his many debts to his creditors, set off on a lecture tour around the world, an apparent impossibility was made a reality when Mark Twain paid \$2,000 within two weeks after he arrived in Australia. His debts amounted to \$100,000, a sum which he paid in full within two years; that was two years sooner than he expected to pay the debts. He delivered speeches on varied occasions; and wherever and whenever he spoke, he always had a full house and something worthwhile to say. Although Clemens found pleasure in the art of making an audience laugh, he developed after a period of time a distaste for the drudgeries that he found in making a lecture tour. Clemens repeatedly reported to the lecture platform as a means to provide quick funds when needed. Twain's lectures provided much of his revenue during his later years and saved him from bankruptcy. When he returned from the world tour, Clemens had been placed upon a pedestal. He was acclaimed all over the United States. It is evident that the financial returns from Clemens' lecture career were a definite measure of outstanding success.

Samuel Clemens was caught in a part of that period of booming expansion and frantic speculations of the 1870's and '80's. Any business proposition that seemed to offer possible millions appealed to him, for in his imagination he could see even billions streaming in. Frequently having been faced with the need for money to meet the increased scale of living and his mounting debts, the former river pilot became of necessity an inventor, who devised among other things a waistcoat enabling the wearer to dispense with suspenders, a shirt requiring no studs, a perpetual calendar watch charm, a method of casting dies for stamping book covers and wall paper, a postal-check to supplant the money-order that was at the time in common use, a scrap-book, a baby-bed clamp to keep children from kicking off the covers, and a history game to teach as well as entertain children.

With disastrous results Clemens invested heavily in and experimented with a steam generator, a steam pulley, a new method of marine telegraphy, an ingenious chalk-plate process, an albuminate interest, a British milk compound, and an Austrian carpet-design machine.

Still another quite costly experience of Twain was the one which involved him with Karl Gerhardt, a sculptor, in obtaining a death mask of General Grant. Twain's estimated loss in this venture was \$17,000 or \$18,000.

From a statement made on January 1, 1882, of Twain's disbursement for the preceding year, it is evident that more than \$100,000 had been expended during the twelve months—a large sum for an author to pay out. Of this amount expended \$46,000 represented

investments; the rest had gone into the "ventures" from whose bourne no dollar would ever return.

It is conclusive that the business man experienced many fascinating moments in the financial world and that he invested more heavily and widely and handled larger sums of money than did most literary figures.

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