

The House That Twain Built

An Interview With Samuel Clemens

By Bryon Cahill, Literary Editor, *READ*

When I found out that READ was planning this special issue, I decided to visit the home of Samuel Clemens in Hartford, Conn., to get a feel for the author's work environment. Better known to the world as Mark Twain, this legendary writer captured a vibrant and changing American culture with his pen. He lived with his family in the Hartford house from 1874 to 1891. Imagine my surprise when I walked up to the red brick mansion, which is now a museum, and Clemens himself answered the door, wearing his trademark white suit and chomping on a cigar.



LEE SNIDER/PHOTO IMAGES/ORBIS

Samuel Clemens: Hello there, friend. Do come in. Just be wary of the cats. For you know, if man could be crossed with a cat, it would improve man, but it would deteriorate the cat.

I decided I must be dreaming or otherwise have been knocked upon the head and traveled back through time, much like the character Hank in Twain's novel A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889). I stepped over one cat, named Pestilence, and petted another, named Satan.

Clemens: Welcome to my house. I spent the happiest and most productive years of my life in this wonderful place. I built it for Olivia and the little ones, you know. To us, our house had a heart, and a soul, and eyes to see us with. We lived in its grace and in the peace of its benediction.

Clemens led me into the library. He walked to the mantelpiece and picked up a dainty vase.

Clemens: My children would insist on hearing me tell a fresh story every night. I would use the objects on this mantel as pieces of my tale. My daughters were keen, though; if I skipped an object

or rehashed bits of a previous story, they would jump on me immediately, and I'd have to start from the beginning again.

He tried to hide his sadness but choked up a bit on the memory. In his lifetime, Clemens buried two of his three daughters, as well as his only son, who died at age 2.

I thought it best to move along and discuss his work.

READ: If you wouldn't mind, sir, I'd love to see where you wrote.

SC: Do you plan on conducting an interview, then? Grand! Get your facts first, and then you can distort them as much as you'd like. But please do not try to write my biography. Biographies are but the clothes and buttons of the man. The biography of the man himself cannot be written. Right this way!

We went up the stairs and passed the bedroom where he and his wife, Olivia, slept. I noted that the pillows were laid at the foot of the bed, facing the headboard, which was adorned with the carven images of angels.

SC: It may seem a bit odd to sleep with your head at the foot of the bed. But I cannot describe to you

how peaceful it is to fall asleep and to awake to the faces of angels.

READ: That, sir, is a heavenly idea.

SC: Very good! You are quick with wit and imagination! You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus. Now, here we are—the writing room.

He opened the door and headed straight for the billiard table in the center of the room.

SC: Do you play?

READ: Occasionally. Although I think it would be hard to get any work done with a pool table in my writing room!

SC: Hogwash! Playing billiards helps the ideas come together inside my head.

READ: Is that your desk over there?

SC: No, that is an elephant's behind. Ask me a question worth answering.

READ: OK. What is the meaning of "Mark Twain"?

SC: Well, that is indeed a loaded question. Very well. ... I was born Samuel Clemens and grew up in the town of Hannibal, Missouri. "Mark twain" is a phrase I lifted from my youthful days as a steamboat pilot on the great Mississippi River. The phrase means "2 fathoms deep" or "safe water." It is at that point that a steamboat can really exercise her sea legs. That's what I did throughout most of my life. I imagine I traveled to just about every place a person can go in this world. Alas, by the time I was an old man, I had known a great many troubles ... but most of them never happened.

READ: You are referring, of course, to your books. They have become classics over the years.

SC: Have they? That is good to hear. I have always tried to write stories that meant something more than the mere words they were composed of. The human spirit cannot be contained; it *must* be free. I have tried to paint that picture as best I could.

READ: Well, people have always thought very highly of you, Mr. Clemens. You were the greatest celebrity of your time. Ever since, authors and readers everywhere have marveled at your work! Ernest Hemingway once said, "All modern Amer-

ican literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. ... There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since."

SC: I have been complimented many times, and compliments embarrass me; I always feel they have not said enough. Ha! This Hemingway sounds like a smart fellow. *Huckleberry Finn* took a great deal of time to write, and I was most pleased with it.

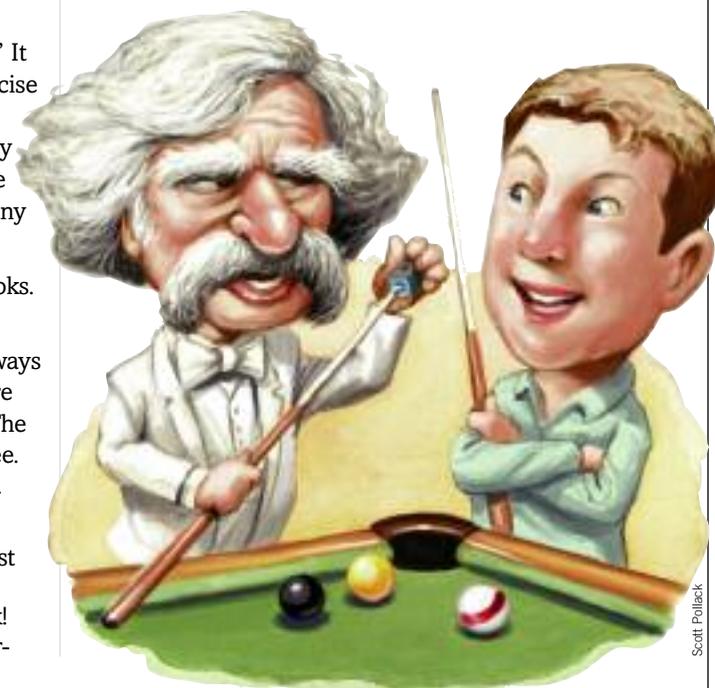
But now if you will excuse me, sir, I'm afraid I must retire. This interview has been quite taxing. It's no wonder that truth is stranger than fiction. Fiction has to make sense.

Oh, I am weary of all this. Of all the things I've lost, I miss my mind the most.

I was hoping Clemens would impart some sage words of wisdom. As I stepped off his front porch and onto the walkway, his voice drifted down through a dreamy haze of cigar smoke and fantasy.

SC: Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

With a fresh spirit, I waved him farewell as he vanished into the starry night. ■



Scott Pollack