

The First Writing-machines

Mark Twain

From My Unpublished Autobiography

Some days ago a correspondent sent in an old typewritten sheet, faded by age, containing the following letter over the signature of Mark Twain:

"Hartford, March 10, 1875.

"Please do not use my name in any way. Please do not even divulge that fact that I own a machine. I have entirely stopped using the typewriter, for the reason that I never could write a letter with it to anybody without receiving a request by return mail that I would not only describe the machine, but state what progress I had made in the use of it, etc., etc. I don't like to write letters, and so I don't want people to know I own this curiosity-breeding little joker."

A note was sent to Mr. Clemens asking him if the letter was genuine and whether he really had a typewriter as long ago as that. Mr. Clemens replied that his best answer is the following chapter from his unpublished autobiography:

1904. VILLA QUARTO, FLORENCE, JANUARY.

Dictating autobiography to a typewriter is a new experience for me, but it goes very well, and is going to save time and "language"-- the kind of language that soothes vexation.

I have dictated to a typewriter before--but not autobiography. Between that experience and the present one there lies a mighty gap-- more than thirty years! It is sort of lifetime. In that wide interval much has happened--to the type-machine as well as to the rest of us. At the beginning of that interval a type-machine was a curiosity. The person who owned one was a curiosity, too. But now it is the other way about: the person who doesn't own one is a curiosity. I saw a type-machine for the first time in--what year? I suppose it was 1873--because Nasby was with me at the time, and it was in Boston. We must have been lecturing, or we could not have been in Boston, I take it. I quitted the platform that season.

But never mind about that, it is no matter. Nasby and I saw the machine through a window, and went in to look at it. The salesman explained it to us, showed us samples of its work, and said it could do fifty-seven words a minute--a statement which we frankly confessed that we did not believe. So he put his type-girl to work, and we timed her by the watch. She actually did the fifty-seven in sixty seconds. We were partly convinced, but said it probably couldn't happen again. But it did. We timed the girl over and over again--with the same result always: she won out. She did her work on narrow slips of paper, and we pocketed them as fast as she turned them out, to show as curiosities. The price of the machine was one hundred and twenty-five dollars. I bought one, and we went away very much excited.

At the hotel we got out our slips and were a little disappointed to find that they contained the same words. The girl had economized time and labor by using a formula which she

knew by heart. However, we argued--safely enough--that the first type-girl must naturally take rank with the first billiard-player: neither of them could be expected to get out of the game any more than a third or a half of what was in it. If the machine survived--if it survived-- experts would come to the front, by and by, who would double the girl's output without a doubt. They would do one hundred words a minute-- my talking speed on the platform. That score has long ago been beaten.

At home I played with the toy, repeated and repeating and repeated "The Boy stood on the Burning Deck," until I could turn that boy's adventure out at the rate of twelve words a minute; then I resumed the pen, for business, and only worked the machine to astonish inquiring visitors. They carried off many reams of the boy and his burning deck.

By and by I hired a young woman, and did my first dictating (letters, merely), and my last until now. The machine did not do both capitals and lower case (as now), but only capitals. Gothic capitals they were, and sufficiently ugly. I remember the first letter I dictated. it was to Edward Bok, who was a boy then. I was not acquainted with him at that time. His present enterprising spirit is not new-- he had it in that early day. He was accumulating autographs, and was not content with mere signatures, he wanted a whole autograph letter. I furnished it--in type-written capitals, signature and all. It was long; it was a sermon; it contained advice; also reproaches. I said writing was my trade, my bread-and-butter; I said it was not fair to ask a man to give away samples of his trade; would he ask the blacksmith for a horseshoe? would he ask the doctor for a corpse?

Now I come to an important matter--as I regard it. In the year '74 the young woman copied a considerable part of a book of mine on the machine. In a previous chapter of this Autobiography I have claimed that I was the first person in the world that ever had a telephone in the house for practical purposes; I will now claim-- until dispossession--that I was the first person in the world to apply the type-machine to literature. That book must have been The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. I wrote the first half of it in '72, the rest of it in '74. My machinist type-copied a book for me in '74, so I concluded it was that one.

That early machine was full of caprices, full of defects--devilish ones. It had as many immoralities as the machine of today has virtues. After a year or two I found that it was degrading my character, so I thought I would give it to Howells. He was reluctant, for he was suspicious of novelties and unfriendly toward them, and he remains so to this day. But I persuaded him. He had great confidence in me, and I got him to believe things about the machine that I did not believe myself. He took it home to Boston, and my morals began to improve, but his have never recovered.

He kept it six months, and then returned it to me. I gave it away twice after that, but it wouldn't stay; it came back. Then I gave it to our coachman, Patrick McAleer, who was very grateful, because he did not know the animal, and thought I was trying to make him wiser and better. As soon as he got wiser and better he traded it to a heretic for a side-saddle which he could not use, and there my knowledge of its history ends.