MARK TWAIN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By Don C. Seitz

MARK TWAIN contributed from time to time autobiographical notes to various periodicals, principally "Harper's Magazine" and "The North American Review". These were ruminative, anecdotal, and at times savage. Supplemented with much material which Mr. Clemens desired to be withheld until after his death, these now become two volumes of unreserved and decidedly vivid comment and recollection, issued as "Mark Twain's Autobiography", written, as he says in a word of preface, "from the grave". Thus, as he puts it, he could be "as frank and free and unembarrassed" as "in a love letter", knowing that what he wrote "would be exposed to no eyes" until his own were closed, and he himself "unaware and indifferent". So we get some of his life and much more of his view of life.

The arrangement of the book is not chronological but follows the order in which the sections were written. The first item dates back to 1870, and covers the fortunes and misfortunes of his father, with their incidental effect on the family; the last, dated April 11, 1906, tells of his friend, Frank Fuller, who launched him on his first New York lecture course. But after all an autobiography, to be entertaining, is better if a bit desultory and wandering. Mr. Clemens's mind flows at will through these pages, reflecting, observing, condemning. It is a work to be read by opening at any page and picking out plums.

The "autobiography" furnishes us plenty of dates, even if not all are relevant. The most important is November 30, 1835, for on that day Samuel L. Clemens was born "in the almost invisible village of Florida, Monroe County, Missouri", a mud hole bordered with log cabins and embroidered with malaria.

Strong minded, Mark had an opinion about almost everything. Traveling much, he accumulated acquaintances all over the world. Europe and Asia were well trodden paths. But this did not make him cosmopolite; it did not even smooth his corners. He was from Missouri and always had to be shown.

The friendship with H. H. Rogers, Standard Oil magnate, has had much credit for the restoration of Mark Twain's fortune, shattered in backing Charles L. Webster and Company and the Paige typesetting machine. "For eleven years", it is recorded, "he has been my closest and most valued friend . . . his commercial wisdom has protected my pocket ever since in those lucid intervals wherein I have been willing to listen to his counsels and abide by his advice — a thing which I do half the time and half the time I don't." He calls him "the best bred gentleman I have ever met on either side of the ocean, in any rank of life from the Kaiser of Germany down to a boot-black".

The details of Mark's financial salvation follow and are of surpassing interest. He tells of the chill which came upon him when he overheard

conversation between Mr. Rogers and some seasoned business men, in which one of them asked: "How old is Clemens?"

"Fifty eight", was the reply. At which the wise one commented: "Ninety five per cent of men who fail at fifty eight never get up again."

Another wise man made the salvage only two per cent. The sayings haunted their hearer for several days and filled him with melancholy forebodings. His wife figured them all away by showing that four years' earnings would cancel the debts — and they did. Rogers cowed the creditors and made them wait while Mark earned the money. Only three or four were obdurate. Of these he expresses his opinion in a chapter which he is sure "can never wound them", for he has "every confidence they will be in hell before it is printed".

He loves to mock at himself. "I am used to having my statements discounted", he says. "My mother began it before I was seven years old. When a neighbor said to her: 'Do you ever believe anything that boy says?' she rejoined: 'He is a well-spring of truth but you can't bring up the whole well with one bucket.'"

Theodore Roosevelt made small appeal to Twain. Not impulsive himself, he saw the danger of it in others. The President's push calls for some caustic comment. Senator Tillman receives a thrust: "I do not like Tillman. His second cousin killed an editor three years ago without giving the editor a chance to defend himself. I recognize that it is almost always wise and is often in a manner necessary, to kill an editor, but I think when a man is United States Senator he ought to require his second cousin to refrain as long as he can, and then do it in a handsome way, running some personal risk himself." Then he praises Tillman for taking up the case of a Mrs. Morris who had been rudely removed from the White House on the order of a Roosevelt private secretary.

That Twain could play politics in an astute way furnishes a tenderly told tale. His friend Mason, Consul General at Frankfort, was in peril from the Cleveland second administration at its first coming in. Mark would not ask the grim Grover for a favor, so he wrote his plea to Baby Ruth, then in the cradle. Quite naturally the correspondence traveled higher up. Mason was saved and promoted. "Ruth, the child," he writes, "remained not long on earth to help make it beautiful and to bless the home of her parents. But little creature as she was she did high service for her country, as I have shown, and it is right that it should be recorded and remembered."

Twain's acquaintance with Cleveland began while the latter was governor of New York. Mark had lived in Buffalo when the doughty Democrat was sheriff, but as he explained, when calling at the Capitol in company with George W. Cable: "In Buffalo you were nothing but a Sheriff. I was in society. I couldn't afford to associate with Sheriffs. But you are a Governor now, and on your way to the Presidency. It is a great difference, and it makes you worth while."

As he said this Mark had perched himself on the corner of the great square desk that decorates the Executive Chamber in Albany. A crowd of secretaries suddenly poured into the room "with an aspect of respectful expediency in their attitude". This was relieved by Mr. Cleveland. "You are dismissed, gentlemen", he said. "Your services are not required. Mr. Clemens is sitting on the bells."

There are some strange portraits of his schoolmates in Hannibal, whither the family had migrated from Florida. Thus for example:

> Another schoolmate was John Meredith, a boy of a quite uncommonly sweet and gentle disposition. He grew up, and when the Civil War broke out he became a sort of guerrilla chief on the Confederate side, and I was told that in his raids upon Union families in the country parts of Monroe County — in earlier times the friends and familiars of his father — he was remorseless in his devastations and sheddings of blood. It seems almost incredible that this could have been that gentle comrade of my school days; yet it can be true, for Robespierre when he was young was like that.

Sweetly he tells his first love story; how when reaching the impressionable year of nine he became smitten with Mary Miller, aged eighteen. "She was not", he writes "my first sweetheart, but I think she was the first one that furnished me with a broken heart. . . . She scorned me and I recognized that this was a cold world." He had not noticed the temperature before and "was as miserable as a grown man could be". Transferring his wrecked regard to Artemisia Briggs, who was even older than Mary, he was no more successful; but she did not scoff at him; indeed, was kind, though "she was also firm and said she did not want to be pestered by children".

There are some rare tales picked up from conversations on Mr. Rogers's yacht, the "Kanahwa". One by the Reverend Joseph Twitchell describes Boss Richard Croker's father, who was chief teamster of Sickle's brigade, to which Dr. Twitchell was attached as chaplain; who, inside of clothes that were always muddy, was "a whole man" and "highly educated". He could and did read the New Testament in its original Greek.

The chapter dealing with General Grant will make a deep appeal. The General's biography, coming after his downfall with Grant and Ward, redeemed him with his countrymen. Mark Twain never did a more noble act than in securing the publication of this book for his Charles L. Webster firm, and paying what was the first decent compensation ever given an author in America.

It sometimes seems in reading Mark Twain's work that he was far too contemptuous of himself, and this fact the "autobiography" emphasizes. With such a mental attitude he could not perfect, like Stevenson. If he found a pool clear he liked to "rile" it. So one finds frequent offenses in style and taste. That his mind was Rabelaisian and his conversation coarse, does not call for comment. It does explain much that crops out in his text. Yet he is, and long will be, the first American writer of things truly American, with an audience that never ceases to grow and admire.

Albert Bigelow Paine, who has mined and reclaimed so much Mark Twain matter, without becoming a smirking Boswell, supplies the introduction and the editorial arrangement of the volumes.

One thing is missing in this fascinating story of a great life: some detail of the manner in which he placed his copyrights with Harper and Brothers, and so led to the building up of a franchise in his books that probably exceeds in value any ever accorded an American author — even the most dazzling best seller of carload lots in our day.

Mark Twain's Autobiography. With an introduction by Albert Bigelow Paine. Two volumes. Harper and Bros.