II

Mark Twain's Speeches*

The speeches in this volume are all very short, some of them taking up only two or three pages. Mark Twain seldom sinned against the rule of platform brevity. Short as they are, some of them are distinctly tedious, read apart from their occasion, and are not worth keeping in print. Mr. Howells says he never knew Mark Twain to fail completely in a public speech, which, however it might drag for a time, was invariably redeemed by some sally before the end. His comparative failures occurred, he thinks, on the rare occasions when Mark Twain trusted to the inspiration of the moment. Generally he "mused his words to an imaginary audience," according to Mr. Howells, and studied every word and syllable, committing them to memory by a system of mnemonics peculiar to himself, consisting of an arbitrary arrangement of things on a table—knives, forks, salt-cellars, inkstands, pens, boxes, or whatever was at hand—which stood for points and at clauses and climaxes, and were at once indelible diction and constant suggestion.

*Mark Twain's Speeches. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1910, pp. 434.

The surprise of the audience was carefully planned; surprise was what he aimed at, and when he had attained it he sat down.

Mark Twain's curiously inconsecutive manner of expressing himself, a familiar and delightful quality in his humorous writings, goes so far in his speeches that some of them are unintelligible. He must have carried his audience over these hiatuses by some oratorical or histrionic spell, missed altogether on the printed page where we can but wonder what each sentence has to do with the one before. Mr. Howells calls him a "most consummate actor," and is no doubt right in saying that when not supplemented by this art the effect of the speeches cannot be appreciated.

Nevertheless, much of Mark Twain's true quality will be found in them—especially in the lighter ones. Some of the serious speeches are as dull and ponderous as any that could well be devised for occasions of public somnolence. Here as elsewhere he is, of course, at his best when perfectly irresponsible and preposterous. Take, for example, this absurd play on the theme of the Siamese twins, when he was introducing Bill Nye and James Whitcomb Riley to an audience:

> I am very glad to introduce these young people to you. . . . I saw them first, a great many years ago, when Mr. Barnum had them and they were fresh from Siam. The ligature was their best hold then, the literature became their best hold later, when one of them committed an indiscretion, and they had to cut the old bond to accommodate the sheriff.
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> In that old former time this one was Chang, that one was Eng. The sympathy existing between them was extraordinarily strong, it was so fine, so strong, so subtle, that what the one ate the other digested; when one slept, the other snored; if one sold a thing, the other scooped the usufruct. This independent and yet dependent action was observable in all the details of their daily life—I mean this quaint and arbitrary distribution of originating cause and resulting effect between the two. . . .
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> For instance, in moral matters Mr. Chang Riley was always dynamo, Mr. Eng Nye was always motor; for while Mr. Chang Riley had a high—in fact, an abnormally high—moral sense, he had no machinery to work it with;

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whereas Mr. Eng Nye, who hadn't any moral sense at all, and hasn't yet, was equipped with all the necessary plant for putting a noble deed or thought through, if he could get the inspiration on reasonable terms outside.

In intellectual matters, on the other hand, Mr. Eng Nye was always dynamo, Mr. Chang Riley was always motor; Mr. Eng Nye had a stately intellect, but couldn't make it go; Mr. Chang Riley hadn't, but could. That is to say that while Mr. Chang Riley couldn't think things himself, he had a marvellous natural grace in setting them down and weaving them together when his pal furnished the raw material.

Whatever else may be said of this, it is unmistakably Mark Twain's, but why preserve under his name the following passage on Queen Victoria, which is typical of much in the present volume?

You do me a high honour, indeed, in selecting me to speak of my country in this commemoration of the birthday of that noble lady whose life was consecrated to the virtues and the humanities and to the promotion of lofty ideals, and was a model upon which many a humble life was formed and made beautiful while she lived, and upon which many such lives will still be formed in the generations that are to come—a life which finds its just image in the star which falls out of its place in the sky and out of existence, but whose light still streams with unfaded lustre across the abysses of space long after its fires have been extinguished at their source.

H. B. Smith.

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