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## "Wicked Moments": Mark Twain in Brockville, Ontario, 1885

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American author Mark Twain visited many Canadian cities, mainly to obtain British copyright for his books, and during one such trip, Twain stopped here for the night to entertain the citizens of Brockville. His visit was part of a four-month reading tour in 1884-85, which also included engagements in London, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal.

Accompanying Twain was the southern U.S. novelist George Washington Cable. Modern readers have largely forgotten Cable, but he was as popular as Twain in 1885, and even considered by many to be the more artistic and literary of the pair, who billed themselves as the "Twins of Genius." Although Twain had already published such well known books as *The Innocents Abroad*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, and *Life on the Mississippi*, he was still regarded as a children's author and a mere "funny man." His masterpiece, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, had only been published during the reading tour, and had not yet garnered the scholarly attention it would eventually receive, and that it continues to receive more than a hundred years later.

Little information survives concerning Twain's visit to Brockville, but clearly he enjoyed himself while here, no doubt due to the hospitality of his hosts. Indeed, his arrival was anxiously anticipated. In the regular "Musical Notes" column in the *Brockville Evening Recorder*, for example, Professor Kaufman stated succinctly: "Fun in store. Mark Twain and Geo. W. Cable will appear at the Opera



Mark Twain and George W. Cable, 1884.

House on Monday evening" (14 February, 1885, p. 1). An advertisement in the same edition announced that ticket prices were 75¢, 50¢, and 35¢, and warned that the entertainment would be for 'one night only.' Even the top of

that day's "Local News" column, after noting that "Valentines are flying today," reminded readers: "Be sure to see and hear Mark Twain on Monday night" (p. 4).

Both Canadian and American audiences viewed authors reading from their works as a novelty. On the day of Twain's appearance, the *Evening Recorder* remarked that

since the character of the theatre has undergone a change which renders it no longer attractive to very many persons, it was only a question of time when a new form of popular entertainment would be developed to meet the general demand. What it would be was not easy to foresee... ("Mark Twain and Geo. W. Cable: Authors as Elocutionists," 16 February 1885, p.1).

Brockville was so excited about the appearance of Twain and Cable that even the Snow Shoe Club cancelled its tramp on the night that the authors would be in town ("Local News," *Brockville Evening Recorder*, 16 February 1885, p. 4).

Twain and Cable arrived Monday night, but because their train from Toronto had been caught in a large

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snowstorm, they were three hours behind schedule. It is hard to imagine what it was like to travel by train through a harsh southern Ontario snowstorm in 1885. Some insight can be gained from the letter that Cable wrote to his wife later that evening:

From hotel to hotel our journey today was a matter of eleven hours in a passenger coach. Snow pouring down all day long piling up, up, up. The storm roaring and blustering, the train losing time steadily, now and then making long, weary stops in the snow until the snow plow running on in should clear the way.

Waiting once for a train ahead, of five cars, all of them off the track, to get back on the rails and out of our way .... (Arlin Turner, Mark Twain and George W. Cable: *The Record of a Literary Friendship* [East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960], p. 108).

Brockville must have been a welcome sight to the weary travellers. When Twain and Cable arrived at the Revere House, which was owned by J.C. Bann and J.P. Mervin, they were quite hungry, and immediately sat down to dinner. Fortunately a reporter was nearby to record the conversation:

...They were met at the door of the hotel by Major (James B.) Pond, their manager, and Mr. Daniel Derbyshire, chairman of the property committee, and in a few moments the whole quartette were discussing beefsteak, pork chops, snow blockades and fast trains. A reference to fast trains generally leads to a discussion of monumental liars and it would seem that the occasion alluded to was no exception to the rule.

"Speaking of lies being told of fast trains, however," remarked the stalwart representative from the west ward, "reminds me that Canada can boast of a fast train and not encroach upon the liar's domain either. We have a train down on the Canada Atlantic road between Coteau Landing and Ottawa, whose schedule time calls for sixty miles an hour and she makes it right along."

Mark, who was doing his best to demolish a huge slice of beefsteak just at the time, choked for an instant, then recovered himself and without so much as a smile or even stopping the motion of his jaws, drawled out in his particular tone: —

"Wa'al, I'm not just exactly what you'd call an orthodox Christian, but in my travels around the world I don't think I ever feel as wicked as when I'm going around a curve at sixty miles an hour" ("Mark Twain's Wicked Moments," Brockville *Evening Recorder*, 18 February 1885, p.1).

Evidently well-fed, the Twins of Genius were ready for their performance at the Grand Opera House. The *Evening Recorder* of the following day does not identify the pieces read by Twain. Luckily, however, Cable frequently wrote letters home on the reverse of the theatre programme of whatever city they happened to be in, and these letters were ultimately filed with his other manuscripts. This has resulted in the odd situation that perhaps the only extant programme for the Brockville performance is now at Tulane University in New Orleans (Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Cable Collection 2, box 91).

According to the programme, Cable opened the evening's entertainment, as he normally did. Since Twain and Cable would each take a turn reading, Twain soon followed with "King Sollermunn," an extract from chapter 8 of his latest novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Twain's other selections that night included "Tragic Tale of the Fishwife" and "A Trying Situation" (both from *A Tramp Abroad*), the former poking fun at grammatical gender in German, and the latter relating Twain's predicament when confronted by a woman who reminisces about their long-ago adventures, of which he remembers nothing.

Unfortunately, the programme does not name Twain's closing selection. In performances in other cities, though, he usually concluded with "A Ghost Story," in which he assumed the role of a ghost, whispering "Who-o-o-o-o's got my go-o-o-o-olde arm?" ever more quietly, until finally he would leap into the air and scream, startling the audience.

Everyone who had the chance to see Twain perform said that while his writings were already delightful, they could not compare to the pleasure of hearing them delivered by their author, in a style that was frequently called "inimitable." Although the *Evening Recorder* was disappointingly brief in its review of Twain's performance, it nevertheless conveys some impression of the effectiveness of Twain's dead-pan presentation:

Notwithstanding the stormy character of the weather the opera house was well filled last night to hear Mark Twain and George W. Cable in their interpretation of their own works. Every reader of humorous literature knows Mark Twain, and his *Innocents Abroad*, and other well known works, (that) have made his name famous. The man's appearance is suggestive of humour, but he never laughs at his own wit, which fact helps to make others laugh the more. Of course his selections were humorous and were thoroughly enjoyed... ("Local News," Brockville *Evening Recorder*, 17 February 1885, p. 4).

The following morning, Twain dashed off a quick letter to a business associate and signed it with the initials "S.L.C." (his real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens), but he mistakenly identified his location as "Brockton" (Samuel Charles Webster, ed., *Mark Twain, Business Man* [Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1946], p.304). No doubt Twain's slip was due to the whirlwind pace of the lecture tour, which saw a different city almost every day. There was no time for Twain to linger here, either, since that morning he had to leave for Ottawa, and from there he and his companions travelled to Montreal. From what little is known about Twain's visit to Brockville, though, it is obvious that he enjoyed his stop here.

*Taylor Roberts is preparing a book with Philip V. Allingham about Mark Twain's travels in Canada, and their articles on this subject have appeared in recent issues of the Mark Twain Journal. They would welcome any new information pertaining to Twain's trip to Brockville, such as the diary entries of people who saw Twain perform at the Grand Opera House. If you have any such material, photocopies will be gratefully received and acknowledged. Write to: Taylor Roberts, Linguistics Department, C369 - 1866 Main Mall, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, V6T 1W5*

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