

## The Closing Years

Orion Clemens was well over fifty before the hope of achieving more than local distinction or of earning a comfortable competence for himself definitely waned. He had tried business and had failed, and politics and lecturing and authorship. To each of these in turn he had brought much industry and enthusiasm. But somehow, though success often hovered at his very finger tips, the consummation of it always eluded his grasp just when he seemed most likely to attain it.

How far the causes for Orion's failures were the result of his own deficiencies of character and personality it is difficult to say. If Mark Twain's presentation of his older brother may be trusted the answer is not difficult to find, for his letters to Howells and his *Autobiography* supply not only an elaborate catalogue of Orion's follies and vagaries, but many references to his capricious and ill-regulated mind and to his instability of character in all matters save those touching his fundamental principles. It is true that now and again Sam expressed an appreciation of the fine qualities of Orion's character, and recognized the fact that Providence and unfavorable circumstances too frequently interfered with his success. Yet far oftener he was brutally disparaging.

But it would be unsafe to rely upon Sam's estimate of Orion. Although Mark Twain's spirit may have been of the very fabric of truth so far as moral intent was concerned, he made no real pretense to accuracy in his earlier autobiographic writings, while in later years an ever vivid imagination and a capricious memory made history difficult, even when his effort was in the direction of fact.

Furthermore, it is well to remember that Mark Twain had very little direct knowledge of Orion's later years. He knew of some of his plans and ambitions, for of these Orion had written Sam unreservedly. And he knew of some of his disappointments. But he did not know, and could not know at a distance, of the growing beauty of Orion's character. Only the people of Keokuk knew that, his neighbors and friends who saw daily evidences of it. For it appears that as Orion's long-cherished ambitions died out, his nature, always genial and kindly, developed in these qualities until during the closing years his person came to be regarded in Keokuk as a symbol of cheerful contentment and the virtues of charity, optimism, and good humor.

Many people still remember those last kindly years of Orion's life. "I boarded in Orion's home for a number of years and my association with him and his wife was very close", writes Jesse Benjamin, formerly of Keokuk and now of Washington, D. C. "I was well acquainted with his and Twain's mother. Orion and Molly commenced keeping

friendly roomers soon after the mother's death. I took the rooms formerly occupied by her. A little later, they commenced boarding us, — the widowed wife of our former Congregational minister, his daughter, and myself. Some 'pinch' seemed to prompt this, tho their sensitiveness about it was covered in the rare home spirit in which we tried to help them."

Others speak of Orion's devotion to his mother and of his fond care for her in those last years when the infirmities of life rested heavily upon her. Her child-like mind frequently made her, it is said, a difficult taskmaster, but if Orion ever displayed impatience or uttered an unkind word, the memory of it has entirely faded from the minds of those friends who were privileged with more than casual glimpses into Orion's home life.

Something of the affection old friends had for Orion and Molly Clemens is reflected in the following poem, the unknown author of which was one of the guests at the occasion of their fortieth wedding anniversary in 1894. The poet announces in a little prefatory note that "the many who have enjoyed the hospitality of that home will find my title a sufficient identity." Orion's well-known love for sugar in his coffee and the allusion in the last stanza to "the bride left by the way" serve as a further means of identification, while the whole poem expresses the kindly, whimsical good nature that was personified in the character of Orion Clemens.

**The Keokuk Pilgrim**

Put in a heaping spoonful, now, —  
You needn't stir it up,  
For you know I like the sugar  
At the bottom of the cup.  
It somehow so reminds me  
As I sip my coffee, wife,  
Of the sweets found near the bottom  
Of the bitter cup of life.

Forty years since first you sugared  
My morning cup for me, —  
Forty years since first you sweetened  
The days then yet to be.  
Put in another spoonful,  
And, while I drink it low, —  
Our minds will watch life's phantoms  
As they swiftly come and go.

Forty years! I can remember, —  
Not much, though I'll be blessed,  
About that day, — except I know  
How queerly you were dressed.  
Queer as dress in these days —  
A big sleeved, low necked gown,  
With waves and bands and folds  
Of white and gold and brown.

Of myself I don't remember —  
Forgetfulness is kind;  
A few points have, however,  
Been kept green in my mind.

I'd forget, though, if you'd let me,  
How on our wedding day,  
I started for my honey-moon  
My bride left by the way.

Orion Clemens died on December 11, 1897, aged seventy-two years. He had got up early in the morning, as was his custom, to build a fire in the kitchen stove. The end came quietly while he was waiting for the house to warm and was in the act of jotting down some notes on a brief for a case then pending in court.

His passing was deeply mourned. Newspapers from Muscatine to St. Louis noted his death and gave tribute to his lovable character. Typical of such tributes is that of the Reverend W. L. Byers, of the Congregational church, an old friend of the Clemens family. "I knew him for a genial, happy, kind-hearted man who said no ill word, did no wanton unkindness, and who went through the world making it brighter. . . . What worry he had he locked in his own breast and gave to his fellows only and ever a smile and a sunny word. He was the man who walked through the snow to buy wheat for the sparrows when the days were cold and bleak. That is the parable of what he was at home and everywhere."

Mark Twain was in Vienna when the cablegram announcing Orion's death reached him. That night he penned Molly the note which follows. It was

undoubtedly sincere, even in its utter pessimism, and many of his friends wish that it might have stood as Twain's final expression concerning that unique and lovable character.

Hotel Metropole  
Vienna, Dec. 11/97.

Dear Molly:

It is 10 in the evening. We sent you our cablegram of sympathy half an hour ago & it is in your hands by this time, in the wintry mid-afternoon of the heaviest day you have known since we saw Jenny escape from this life thirty-three years ago, & were then too ignorant to rejoice at it.

We all grieve for you; our sympathy goes out to you from experienced hearts, & with it our love; & with Orion, & for Orion I rejoice. He has received life's best gift.

He was good — all good, and sound; there was nothing bad in him, nothing base, nor any unkindness. It was unjust that such a man, against whom no offence could be charged, should have been sentenced to live 72 years. It was beautiful, the patience with which he bore it.

The bitterness of death — that is for the survivors, and bitter beyond all words, it is. We hunger for Susy, we suffer & pine for her; & if by asking I could bring her back, I could stoop to that treachery, so weak am I, & so selfish are we all. But she & Orion are at peace, & no loyal friend should wish to disturb them in their high fortune.

I & all of us offer to you what little we have — our love & our compassion.

Sam.

FRED W. LORCH