

## Literary Apprenticeship

None of the gossip touching Orion Clemens is more intriguing than that which associates him with authorship. Many are the stories of his habit of secluding himself for days in a little room in the upper part of the house and laboring over great heaps of manuscript. But what the nature of this manuscript was not even the nearest neighbors seem to have known. In general the impression was that Orion was writing fiction, but since nothing appeared in the magazines under his name, the belief finally became established that he was writing under a pseudonym. Had gossip stopped there, it would have been at least within hailing distance of probability. But curiously enough a new impression began to gain currency, namely, that Orion Clemens was not only writing fiction, but that he had a hand in writing some of Mark Twain's best books.

How much of truth lies at the foundation of such gossip is pretty much a matter of record. Of immediate interest are the definitely tangible evidences of Orion's attempts at literary expression. That he entertained through the years an ambition for excellence in writing is unquestionable.

The earliest piece of writing from the hand of Orion Clemens is a letter still preserved in the old files of the *Muscatine Journal* of 1854. It is dated



March 10th from Hannibal, Missouri, where he had gone, presumably on business. Only an extract is given below — a description of his trip down the river on the steamboat — but the attempt at literary effectiveness is obvious.

On Tuesday night, pale-faced Fog, that white robed messenger of Delay stealthily crept around our boat like a winding sheet. It spread out from shore to shore; it hid the river; it stole upon the deck; it hovered over the boat; it wreathed up between the chimneys; it was everywhere, gently whispering "Stop!" The Captain obeyed this noiseless, but superior power. Thus the wide world over, firm gentleness is always powerful.

After several hours the fog sailed off, leaving air, woods, and water clear. Then the McKee's head was turned down stream, and she was soon again pushing on toward Montrose. But ere long we were obliged to encounter another opponent. The wind rushed against our boat, shrieking and howling; threatening to throw down our chimneys, or lift off the cabin. It tossed the water into large waves, and at every stroke of the paddle-wheels it roared "Stop!" The Captain obeyed this boisterous superior power. Thus the wide world over, what gentleness fails to accomplish, force must.

A more widely known bit of writing, especially to Iowans, is Orion Clemens's brief "History of the Half Breed Tract". It was written in 1856 and served, quite appropriately, as introductory matter for his *Directory* of Keokuk, the first directory ever made for that city. The history is compact, clear,



and excellently written, and serves as an indication of Orion's possibilities in literary craftsmanship.

Whether in the early years Orion and Sam wrote each other occasional "literary" letters can only be conjectured, but certain it is that each was conscious of the good qualities in the letters of the other. Orion sensed Sam's descriptive talent as early as 1853 when he printed in the *Muscatine Journal* a portion of a letter from his younger brother, describing in great detail the water-works at Fairmont Park, Philadelphia, and immediately invited him to correspond regularly for the *Muscatine* paper.

And likewise, a few years later, Sam expressed his admiration for a letter he has just received from Orion. "It reminds me strongly", he wrote, "of Tom Hood's letters to his family. . . . But yours only remind me of his, for although there is a striking likeness, your humor is much finer than his, and far better expressed. Tom Hood's *wit*, (in his letters) has a savor of *labor* about it which is very disagreeable. Your letter is good. That portion of it wherein the old sow figures is the very best thing that I have seen lately. Its quiet style resembles Goldsmith's 'Citizens of the World,' and 'Don Quixote,' — which are my *beau ideals* of fine writing."

Again in 1871 Sam commended Orion for his writing. At the time Orion was the editor of the *Publisher*, a Hartford, Connecticut, newspaper, while Sam was still in the flush of nation-wide popularity as the author of *Innocents Abroad*. What it



was that Orion had written is not apparent, nor is it a matter of particular importance. More significant is the fact that the younger brother, then a recognized craftsman, was pleased with Orion's efforts as a writer.

Some months before this, Mark Twain had contracted to produce a new book. Naturally the publishers wanted something in the nature of travel literature to follow up the phenomenal success of *Innocents Abroad*. Twain did not have long to hunt for suitable material. Ten years previously he had made a thrilling trip overland in a stagecoach from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Carson City, Nevada Territory. The occasion of the trip was Orion's appointment as Territorial Secretary, and his journey west to fill the office. Sam, it will be remembered, accompanied Orion, acting, in a measure, as secretary to the Secretary. But since Sam had made the trip in a free spirit of adventure, he had taken no notes. Now, although his general impressions of the experience were vivid enough, he lacked detail. The new book had to be out in six months.

There was nothing to do but to write to Orion in the hope that he might be able to send a page of notes with the names of places where they had stopped, the names of people they had met, and such incidents and adventures on the trip as he might recall. Orion rummaged around and finally produced a little memorandum book that he had kept on the journey. It contained in abundance just the



sort of material that Mark Twain wanted but had despaired of finding. He was greatly delighted, for Orion's help would simplify his labors immensely. In return for this aid he promised Orion one of the first thousand dollar installments that should come to him from his publisher. Such, as far as the records show, was the nature and extent of Orion's collaboration in the volume that was later called *Roughing It*, and there is little reason to believe that here or elsewhere was his aid more extensive or more direct.

Mark Twain's meteoric rise in literature during the seventies must have produced in Orion an eager desire to try his hand at the same sort of career. He undoubtedly felt that he could write as well as Sam, but that Sam, like occasional prospectors he had known in Nevada, had struck a good lead and had suddenly become rich. In Mark Twain's letters of this period are frequent indications that Orion had sent him bundles of manuscript hoping to get the benefit of his brother's criticism and the stimulation of his suggestions. Unfortunately these contributions from Orion reached Twain at unhappy moments. In fact most moments were unhappy for this sort of business, for during those years Twain was in a frenzy of work and the least distraction irritated him.

But occasionally he took time off and wrote to Orion at considerable length. In one of these letters the fact is revealed that Orion had been piling up



manuscript on an ambitious burlesque of Jules Verne. Twain's comment seems sound, but the tone of it unpleasantly impatient. He objects to two hell scenes, which Orion apparently had treated at great length, on the ground of indiscreet manipulation. Next he proceeds to warn Orion that a novice can not hope to do what a seasoned writer like himself has been laboring for years to achieve.

The same letter instructs Orion how to get into print and recalls the gossip about Orion's use of a *nom de plume*. "If the N. Y. Weekly people know you are my brother, they will turn that fact into an advertisement — a thing valuable to them, but not to you and me. This must be prevented. I will write them a note to say you have a friend near Keokuk, Charles S. Miller, who has a MS for sale which you think is a pretty clever travesty of Verne; and if they want it they might write to him in your care. Then if any correspondence ensues between you and them, let Molly write for you and sign your name — your own handwriting representing Miller's. Keep yourself out of sight till you make a strike on your own merits." It is not likely that Orion acted upon his brother's suggestion. The modifications suggested by Twain would have involved tremendous labor even if he had had the heart to do it. But it is probable that the letter discouraged him and that he gave up the project altogether.

When Kipling visited America for the first time in 1889, he called at Elmira, New York, to pay his



respects to Mark Twain. The conversation between the two men finally turned upon autobiography and the possibility of a man sticking rigidly to the facts when writing about himself. "I made an experiment once," said Twain. "I got a friend of mine — a man painfully given to speak the truth on all occasions — a man who wouldn't dream of telling a lie — and I made him write his autobiography for his amusement and mine. He did it. The manuscript would have made an octavo volume, but — good honest man that he was — in every single detail of his life that I knew about he turned out, on paper, a formidable liar."

The author of that autobiography was Orion Clemens, and as far as can be ascertained it was the very last ambitious piece of literary work he attempted. It was also unquestionably his best. In the earlier stages of its composition Mark Twain not only spoke of it as model biography but was so enthusiastic that he sent portions of it to William Dean Howells, then editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, with a view to its publication in that magazine. Howells read the manuscript, but so soul-revealing were many passages that he felt haggard when he had finished and could not consent to publish it. It was all of two thousand pages in length. The best parts, according to Howells, were those that dealt with his illustrious brother. These, he believed, would eventually be valuable for their biographical information about Mark Twain, a prediction which



proved correct, for Paine admits that he found the manuscript almost indispensable for an adequate treatment of Twain's early life.

Practically nothing of Orion Clemens's extensive literary effort now exists. At least little is accessible. At Orion's death, according to relatives of the family, most of his papers were boxed and shipped East at Twain's request. Paine claims it was Mark Twain's wish that most of them should be destroyed, and is of the opinion that they have been. Such odds and ends as remain are deep in the dusty obscurity of a safe deposit and are not available. What a deal of interest many Iowans would find in a glimpse at those papers!

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