

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Tradition

The persistent popularity of Orion Clemens in the Mississippi River towns of southeastern Iowa may have its origin in the fact that he was the brother of Mark Twain. But surely he is still remembered lovingly for his own sake by those who knew him intimately as neighbors and friends, especially the older people of Keokuk. So gentle, so whimsically charming, and in his later years so delightfully forgetful was he that he scarcely needed the fame of his illustrious brother to make him a memorable figure in Keokuk.

Unfortunately the impression has gone abroad that Orion Clemens was a rather ridiculous person. This opinion, however, is based upon a mistaken assumption that people laughed at him instead of with him. Orion was not ridiculous, nor was he even funny. But that he was witty, absent-minded, and often humorously inconsistent is attested by many

an anecdote. Somehow his more peculiar characteristics have come to be accepted as wholly indicative of the kind of man he really was.

There is the story about his wedding trip from Keokuk to Muscatine in the winter of 1854 when Orion, having stepped into the stagecoach and carefully arranged his bundles, leaned back in comfort to await the departure of the vehicle only to be apprised by a friend that his newly acquired bride, standing near-by on the platform with her bundles, was also to accompany him on the trip. Orion himself loved to tell this story and it later found its way into Albert Bigelow Paine's biography of Mark Twain.

But some of the modern versions are scarcely recognizable, having taken on curious accretions which tend toward the ludicrous. For instance, it has been alleged that Orion, happening one day to be in Keokuk, casually married there. Such casualness in so important an event would be interesting, indeed, if true, but much more interesting is the exquisite little note which disproves it — the note in which Orion asks for the hand of the young lady he wished for his bride.

Muscatine, Iowa, Nov. 21, 1854.

Mr. and Mrs. Wm. Stotts:

The object of this note furnishes a subject so entirely novel to me, that I hope I shall be excused for any blunders or awkwardness in writing.

Without further preface, I venture to inform you of my

attachment to your daughter, Miss Mary Ellen, and to ask your consent to our union in a few weeks.

An early answer is respectfully solicited.

Most respectfully yours,

Orion Clemens.

Then there is the story, with many variations, of the time Mrs. Clemens went to afternoon tea. Before leaving she told Orion there was a cup of salad for him in the pantry, which he was to eat in case she returned late. Heeding his wife's instructions, which, as gossip reports, he was in the habit of doing, he went to the pantry, took down a cup with something in it, and ate. Presently his wife returned and asked him if he had eaten his salad.

"Yes," replied Orion, "but it didn't taste very good, so I beat up an egg in it."

"And then how did it taste?" asked Molly suspiciously, as she stepped to the pantry.

"Rather yeasty," Orion said sheepishly as it dawned on him that he had eaten a cup of yeast by mistake — "sunshine vitamins" and all.

Molly's somewhat rigorous management of her husband is the theme of an anecdote that also reveals Orion's sense of humor. One day Orion was in the back yard cleaning a pair of trousers when Molly called out, "Orion, what are you doing?"

No answer.

"Orion, what are you doing?"

Still no answer.

"Orion, tell me what you are doing?"

Then rather meekly from the yard, "Molly, I am cleaning *our* pantaloons."

Or there is the story, again with many variations, of Orion's method of keeping books. One time when he had charge of the church funds, his books got into a hopeless tangle, so he went to an auditor to have them straightened out. Shortly afterward, when the two men met on the street, the auditor inquired of Clemens how he kept the church books. "Well, I put down everything I pay out," replied Orion, "and trust my memory for everything that is paid in."

Numerous incidents relate to Orion's law practice. One year when the city of Keokuk was involved in some important litigation, Clemens volunteered his services in behalf of the city without pay. The city accepted. Thenceforth it seems to have been as difficult to keep Clemens at work and to expurgate his jokes from the record as it was to win the case.

Stories of this nature the visitor at Keokuk encounters abundantly the moment he evinces an interest in the Clemens family. But if he is fortunate enough to talk with some of the older people who knew Orion, and if he is discerning, he can not fail to sense that there is affection in the telling of them.

FRED W. LORCH