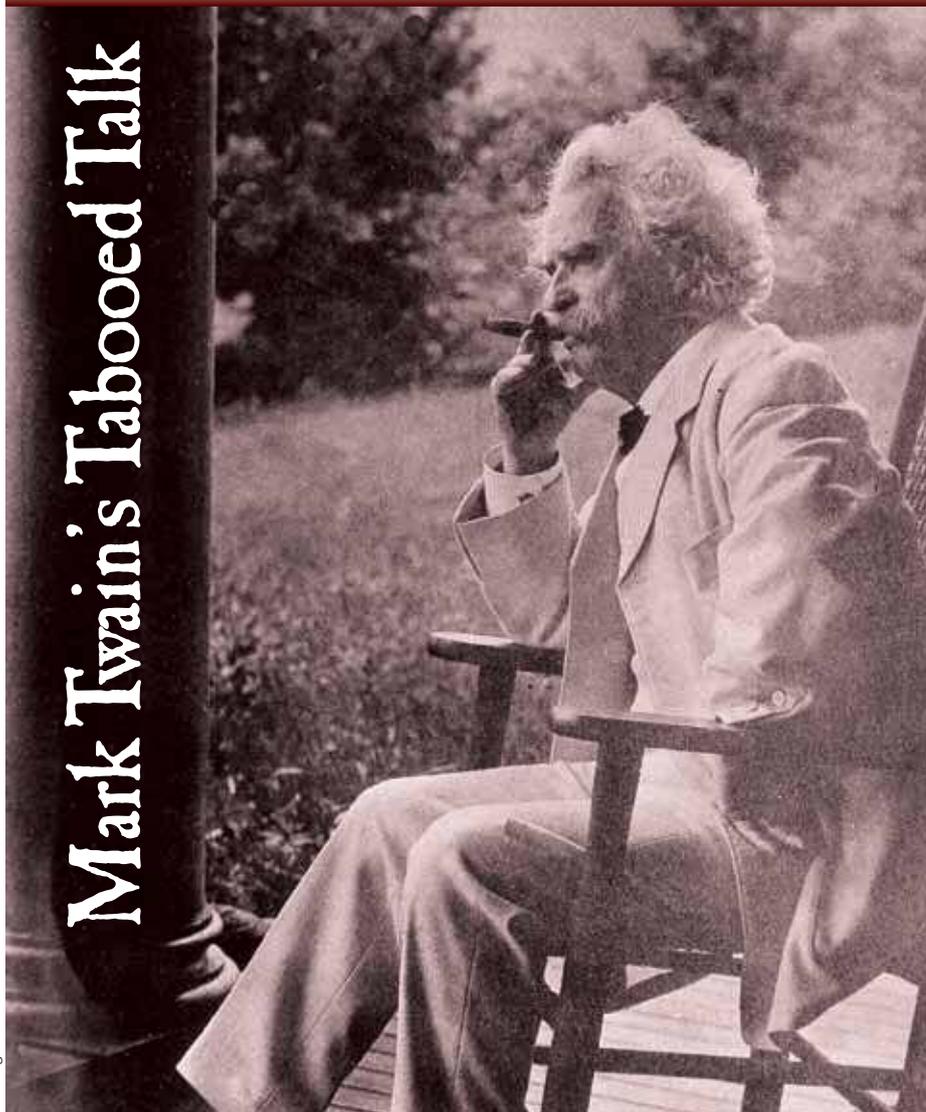


Mark Twain's Tabooed Talk

AP Images



Mark Twain directed his heirs not to release for 100 years some of his manuscripts that contained his unvarnished opinion about touchy topics — the time's up.

by Jack Kenny

It is sometimes said regretfully that many Americans today get their “slant” on the news from TV’s late-night comedians. But today’s “baby boomers” and Generation X-ers and Y-ers are not among the first Americans to find their politics strained through the filter of humor. More than a century before Jay Leno, Jon Stewart, and Stephen Colbert began coming into people’s living rooms via broadcast and cable television, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, known to readers around the world as Mark Twain, was infiltrating the same sanctuary via news-

papers, magazines, and books. In a 2008 article for *Time* magazine, humorist Roy Blount, Jr. showed just how topical, yet timeless, Twain’s humor was and is.

In *King Leopold’s Soliloquy*, Twain’s scathing 1905 satire on the Belgian occupation of the Congo, Blount found the kind of criticism that might have been aimed a few short years ago at a U.S. government embarrassed by the photographs of abuse at the American-run Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Twain imagined the frustration the Belgian King must have felt when photographers discovered natives of the Congo whose hands had been cut off by their Belgian captors. (In the days before

the coming of the camera, the King could avail himself of what became known in our Watergate era as “plausible deniability.”)

“Then all of a sudden came the crash!” Twain’s Leopold laments. “That is to say, the incorruptible Kodak — and all the harmony went to hell! The only witness I have encountered in my long experience that I couldn’t bribe.” At least King Leopold didn’t have to worry about a WikiLeaks exposing his skullduggery on the Internet.

“Whether Twain was talking about racism at home, the foreign misadventures of the Western powers or the excesses of the era of greed he initially flourished in after the Civil War,” Blount wrote, “his target was always human folly and hypocrisy, which turn out to be perennial topics for further study.”

On the centenary of the author’s 1910 death, the University of California Press late last year released the first of three volumes of Twain’s expanded biography, including material the author himself decreed should not be published until he had been dead for 100 years.

“From the first, second, third and fourth editions all sound and sane expressions of opinion must be left out,” Twain instructed his heirs and editors in 1906. “There may be a market for that kind of wares a century from now. There is no hurry. Wait and see.”

Some of those opinions might still be regarded in some quarters as something other than “sound and sane.” Twain referred to American soldiers in the Philippines as “our uniformed assassins,” though his invective was more often and more appropriately aimed at the government that sent them there. Still, it is not hard to imagine the outrage that description would provoke were it uttered today about our troops in Afghanistan or Iraq. Bill O’Reilly would likely have Mark Twain hauled off his set at Fox News, perhaps in one piece, if Twain dared to enter the “No Spin Zone.” And there would be a predictable and understandable uproar if Twain’s version of the Thanksgiving holiday were taught in our public schools:

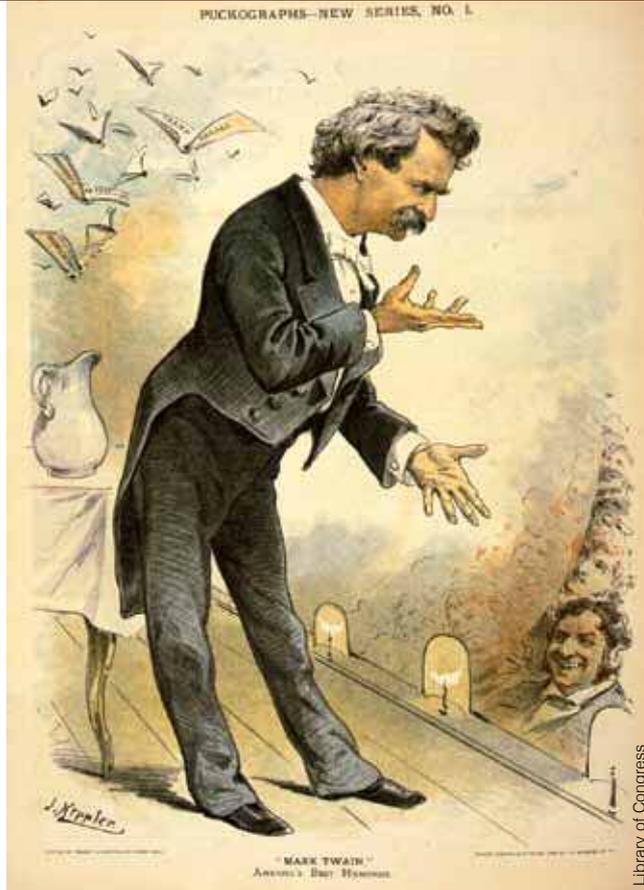
Thanksgiving Day, a function which originated in New England two or three centuries ago when those people recognized that they really had something to be thankful for — annually,

not oftener — if they had succeeded in exterminating their neighbors, the Indians, during the previous twelve months instead of getting exterminated by their neighbors the Indians. Thanksgiving Day became a habit, for the reason that in the course of time, as the years drifted on, it was perceived that the exterminating had ceased to be mutual and was all on the white man's side, consequently on the Lord's side, consequently it was proper to thank the Lord for it.

Skewering Imperialism

Killing, Twain wrote in his short story *The Chronicle of Young Satan*, is “the chiefest ambition of the human race and the earliest incident in its history.” Yet he was not a pacifist. He wrote favorably of the French Revolution, which in the name of liberty devoured it, and in his own time favored the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese War. Though he was later a founding member and vice president of the Anti-Imperialist League, he was initially a supporter of the U.S. role in the Spanish-American War, applauding it as a means of freeing Cuba. “Old as I am, I want to go to the war myself,” he wrote in a letter from Vienna. “And I should do it, too, if it were not for the danger.”

But he believed his country — or, more precisely, his government — had gone astray, both morally and geographically, when it used the war over Cuba as the occasion for also taking the Philippines from the Spanish colonists and then denying the Filipinos their promised independence. Benevolent American rule would “uplift and civilize and Christianize” the poor natives, a pious President McKinley declared. In fact, most of the “little brown brothers” McKinley wished to “Christianize” were Catholics. And the Filipinos, with ideas of their own about liberty and independence, revolted against their new overlords. During the war that followed, Twain bitterly denounced America’s “land-stealing and liberty-crucifying crusade.”



A cartoon that appeared in the magazine *Puck* in 1885 of Mark Twain standing on stage speaking to an audience.

“I am an anti-imperialist,” the author told reporters on his return to the States. “I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land.” His description of the nation’s first overseas imperialist adventure reads like a retrospective of the Vietnam War or the promised “cakewalk” in Iraq. We had, he said, “got into a mess, a quagmire from which each fresh step renders the difficulty of extraction immensely greater.”

While he deplored the slaughter going on in the name of civilization, “uplift,” and, especially, Christianity, Twain had particular contempt for “the water cure,” a method of “enhanced interrogation” we now know as waterboarding. The purpose, then as now, was to get the subject to reveal information his captors believed he was withholding.

“To make them confess — what?” Twain thundered in an argument strikingly similar to one often heard today. “Truth? Or lies? How can one know which it is they are telling? For under unendurable pain a man confesses anything that is required of him, true or false, and his evidence is worthless.”

If it is surprising to find echoes of today’s controversies in the polemics of 100 years ago, we can be reasonably certain that Twain’s views were no less controversial in his own time. The fact that he was the world’s best-known and much-loved humorist did not make his anti-establishment essays and speeches any less loathsome to men who wielded great power to their own advantage and, so they imagined, their nation’s advantage. When the United States, in a coalition of Western nations, invaded China to put down the Boxer rebellion in 1900, Mark Twain conspicuously did not “support the troops.”

“It is all China now and my sympathies are with the Chinese,” he wrote. “I hope they will drive all the foreigners out and keep them out for good.” Twain’s views on that subject inspired President Theodore Roosevelt in 1901 to label the esteemed author a “prize idiot.”

No doubt many Americans agreed with the popular young President. Many of Twain’s opinions were too much for his contemporaries. “None but the dead are permitted to tell the truth,” he lamented. Even at the height of his undisputed talent, he encountered rejection from fearful editors, and at the peak of his popularity, he dared the scorn of both press and public. He was, not surprisingly, as contemptuous of the gatekeepers of acceptable opinion and lions of the “fourth estate” as many Americans are today. “The awful power, the public opinion of a nation,” he wrote, “is created in America by a hoard of ignorant, self-complacent simpletons who failed at ditching and shoemaking and fetched up journalism on their way to the poorhouse.”

Twain submitted his now-famous “War Prayer” for publication in 1905, but its graphic description of the realities of war made it, in the judgment of *Harper’s Bazaar* editor Elizabeth Jordan, unsuitable for publication in that genteel journal. It was eventually published posthumously in 1923 in what Ron Powers, author of *Mark Twain: A Life*, describes as a “bowdlerized

form.” Little was heard of it from then until the Vietnam War era, when, Powers noted, “war protestors read it aloud in coffee-house protests and mailed it around to one another.” It has since taken on new life in cyberspace as antiwar bloggers have circulated it through the Internet. (“The War Prayer” is reprinted on page 38.)

Creating Wonder With Wit

Wit, observed G.K. Chesterton, “is a sword; it is meant to make people feel the point as well as see it. All honest people saw the point of Mark Twain’s wit. Not a few dishonest people felt it.” But it was not just the dishonest or the dull-witted that Twain skewered with his satirical swift sword. He claimed that most men, himself included, are moral cowards, and he found it ironic that the virtues of freedom were most often and most loudly praised by those who least favor their exercise. An unconventional Presbyterian, Twain was not above paying a left-handed compliment to God in order to castigate both the timidity and the intolerance of his countrymen.

“It is by the goodness of God,” he wrote, “that in our country we have those three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience and the prudence never to practice either of them.” Scorn and ridicule are not always adequate to silence unwelcome opinion, he acknowledged, but they are often the only weapons available.

“If the man doesn’t believe as we do, we say he is a crank and that settles it,” he wrote in *Following the Equator*. “I mean it does nowadays, because now we can’t burn him.”

At its most humorous, his wit always had some bite to it, as when he proclaimed George Washington “ignorant of the commonest accomplishments of youth. He could not even lie.” The low esteem in which the American public now holds the Congress of the United States would surely not have surprised Twain, who surmised there was “no distinctively American criminal class except for Congress.” Nor would the present-day concern over the shortcomings of

our public schools. “In the first place God made idiots,” he surmised. “That was for practice. Then he made school boards.”

“He is very much in the same position as myself,” wrote British playwright George Bernard Shaw. “He has to put matters in such a way as to make people who would otherwise hang him believe he is joking.” Few would have thought Twain joking, and some might have wished to hang him, if they had read his plain-spoken complaint, included in the new *Autobiography*, that “our people have no ideals now that are worthy of consideration; that our Christianity which we have always been so proud of — not to say vain of — is now nothing but a shell, a sham, a hypocrisy; that we have lost our ancient sympathy with oppressed peoples struggling for life and liberty; that when we are not coldly indifferent to such things we sneer at them, and that the sneer is about the only expression the newspapers and the nation deal in with regard to such things.”

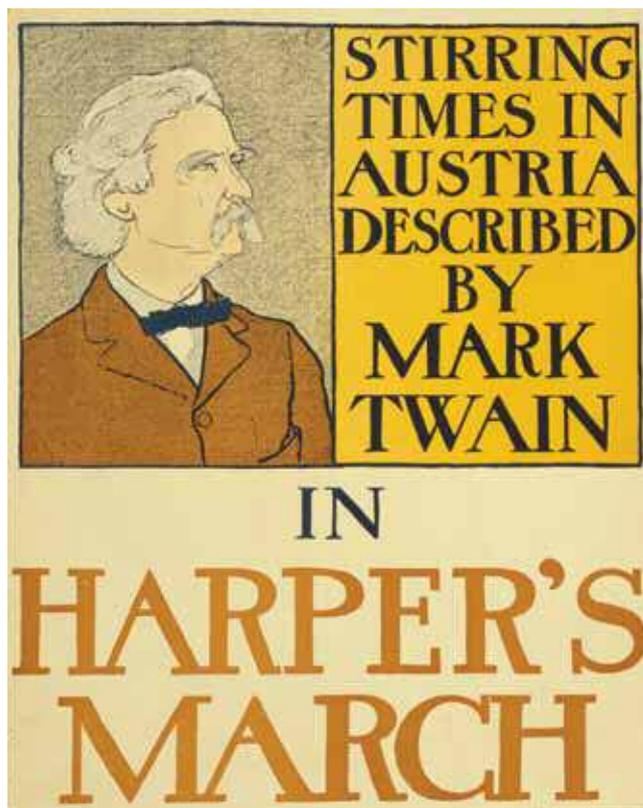
The author of such passages might seem a different fellow altogether from the humorist who responded good-naturedly to

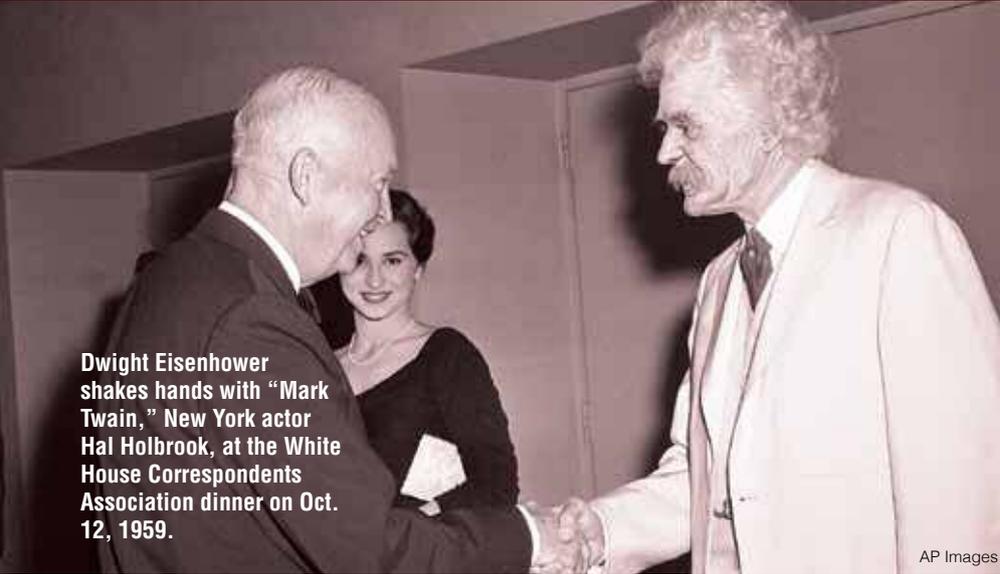
At its most humorous, his wit always had some bite to it, as when he proclaimed George Washington “ignorant of the commonest accomplishments of youth. He could not even lie.”

a premature obituary, noting, “Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” Perhaps by happenstance, perhaps by design, we have allowed the humor to overshadow and soften the sharp edge of his social criticism. Twain became “Colonel Sanders without the chicken, the avuncular man who told stories,” Powers told the *New York Times* in an interview in 2010. “He’s been scrubbed and sanitized, and his passion has been kind of forgotten in all these long decades. But here (in the previously unpublished works) he is talking to us, without any filtering at all, and what comes through that we have lost is precisely this fierce, unceasing passion.”

Hal Holbrook, who began his one-man show *Mark Twain Tonight!* in 1956, has been unearthing various levels of Twain’s wit and unique storytelling talents for more than half a century. In an article included in *The Mark Twain Anthology*, Holbrook wrote that it was during an historic battle over school integration in 1957 that he began to incorporate Twain’s political and social commentary into his shows.

“Until then I had been trying to put together a funny show, born in a nightclub,” the actor recalled. “But when President Eisenhower called out the troops to put down the racial explosion at Central High School in Little Rock, Mark Twain’s social conscience began to cast its shadow over me.” As it happened, he was scheduled to do his show near Little Rock shortly after the riots occurred. “I did not yet have material in my repertoire that specifically commented on racial injustice,” Holbrook wrote. “All I had was the Sherburn-Boggs selection from *Huckleberry Finn*, which ends with Colonel Sher-





Dwight Eisenhower shakes hands with “Mark Twain,” New York actor Hal Holbrook, at the White House Correspondents Association dinner on Oct. 12, 1959.

AP Images

burn’s blistering speech to the mob that has come to lynch him. Although a white man is speaking to a white mob, Mark Twain is making a thinly veiled statement about the Ku Klux Klan. The portrait of sudden violence in the shooting of Boggs, of ignorance and the mob mentality that sweeps people along was eerily appropriate to this modern-day crisis in Little Rock, and Twain’s setting did happen to be a town in Arkansas. So that was the selection I chose to deliver.”

Holbrook later worked into his routine what Twain called the “Silent Lie” of remaining quiet in the face of grave injustice. When he did his show in Prague, Holbrook recalled, two brave souls applauded the line about how “whole nations of people conspire to propagate gigantic mute lies” that serve only “tyrannies and shams.” The same line drew applause in Hamburg, Germany, in 1961 and in Oxford, Mississippi, on October 9, 1962, during the riots over the admission of African-American James Meredith to the University of Mississippi.

Words That Bleed

Twain’s “War Prayer” and other polemic essays of the 1900s are “the Rosetta Stone of dissent from American imperialist folly,” wrote Powers. There were, to be sure, other voices raised against that imperialist march, both within and outside the Anti-Imperialist League. But many of them spoke in such starched-collar, schoolmistress tones that they proved poor kindling to fire the conscience of a nation. “Have we a course of war so clear, so loftily imperative,” asked the weekly journal *Nation* in 1899, “that all

the hideous carnage and the fearful blow to civic progress must be hazarded in order to vindicate humanity and righteousness?” Even as outspoken and frequently harsh a critic of the Philippines war as Senator George Hoar, a Massachusetts Republican, referred to it at one point as “a policy of ruffianism,” a phrase more apt to describe a fistfight in a schoolyard.

Defenders of the “ruffianism” countered with charges of disloyalty or even treason, accusing opponents of undermining the mission and endangering the lives of “our boys” overseas. “Their work cost the lives of hundreds of American soldiers — stabbed in the back as they stood out there on the firing line, by their own countrymen,” charged Fred C. Chamberlin, author of *The Blow From Behind* (1903). “All up and down this great country the Anti-Imperialists made speeches of sympathy for the men who were shooting at our own soldiers.”

The fact that our own soldiers had been sent on a mission to conquer and subjugate a people in their own land seemed to neither enter the thoughts nor cool the ardor of those who, like Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana, saw the hand of God leading the Stars and Stripes westward o’er the great Pacific. It was the same hand seen by Congregationalist minister Josiah Strong, who proclaimed the mission of Anglo-Saxons to carry the blessings of civilization to inferior races. James M. King, a Methodist minister in New York, said unequivocally: “God is using the Anglo-Saxon to conquer the world for Christ by dispossessing feeble races, and assimilating and molding others.”

Not all the Americans fighting the Filipinos were as eager to carry on the war as some of the politicians, preachers, and journalists back home. “I am not afraid and am always ready to do my duty,” said a sergeant in the First Nebraska regiment, “but I would like someone to tell me what we are fighting for.” But some seemed to glory in the blood and guts and gore of the battlefield. In his 1962 biography, *Mark Twain, The Man and His Work*, Edward Wagenknecht quoted a letter from a soldier to his mother, published in an Iowa newspaper: “We never left one alive,” he wrote. “If any one was wounded we would run our bayonets right through him.” The Anti-Imperialist League published a number of letters from soldiers in the Philippines, including one from a volunteer from the state of Washington, who wrote: “This shooting of human beings is a ‘hot game’ and beats rabbit hunting all to pieces.”

Against such unbridled zeal for the bloodied glory of war, the *Nation’s* warning of “a fearful blow to civic progress” was of little avail. Even the magazine’s reference to “all the hideous carnage” merely hints at the hideous nature of the carnage. Twain’s “War Prayer” goes a good deal further with words that all but bleed from the page, describing bodies torn to “bloody shreds,” guns drowning out the “shrieks of the wounded,” and widows and orphans wandering from their war-wrecked homes, the white snow “stained with the blood of their wounded feet.”

It’s not a description of war we are likely to hear on either broadcast or cable TV news or read about in our daily papers. Nor are we likely to see a scene Twain wrote for a pageant called “The Stupendous Procession,” with the 20th century portrayed as “a fair young creature, drunk and disorderly, borne in the arms of Satan,” and Christendom “a majestic matron in flowing robes drenched with blood.” On her head was “a golden crown of thorns, impaled on its spine the bleeding hearts of patriots who died for their country — Boers, Boxers, Filipinos; in one hand a slingshot in the other a Bible, open at the text — ‘Do unto others,’ etc.”

There are, after all, milder, antiseptic ways to talk about war, and we have surely heard them all. As the humorist Blount concluded, “Old Mark, unvarnished, might be too hot for cable, even today.” ■

The War Prayer

Mark Twain was famous for his satirical treatment of serious topics, and his treatment of war was no exception.

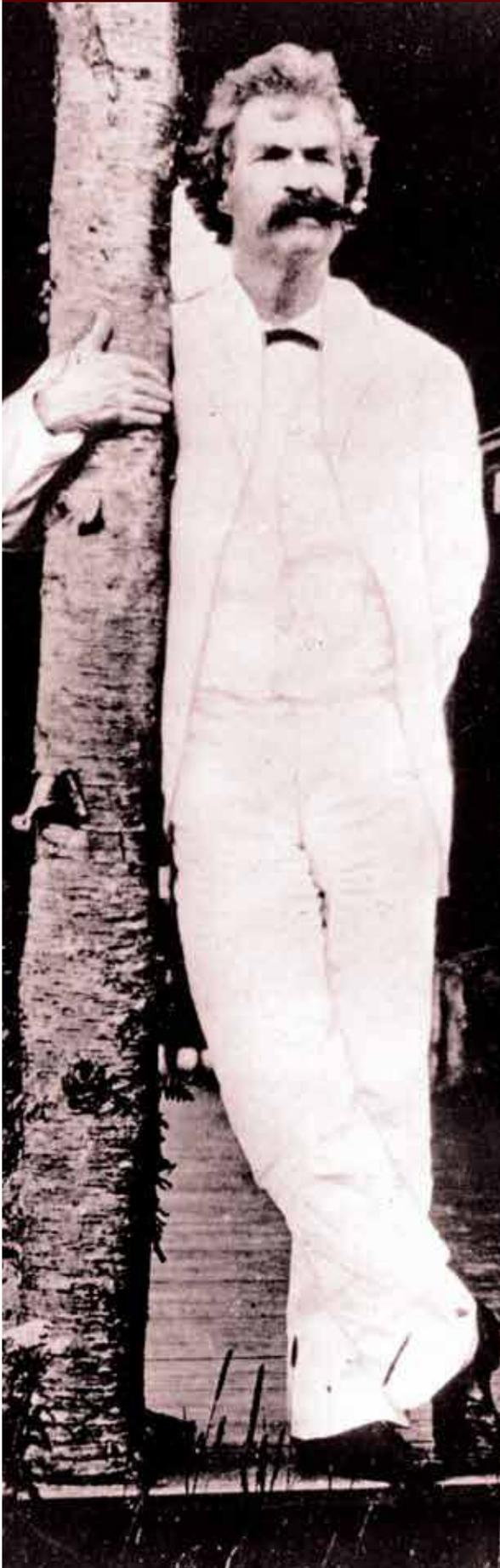
This short story by Mark Twain was published posthumously in 1923.

by Mark Twain

It was a time of great and exalting excitement. The country was up in arms, the war was on, in every breast burned the holy fire of patriotism; the drums were beating, the bands playing, the toy pistols popping, the bunched firecrackers hissing and spluttering; on every hand and far down the receding and fading spread of roofs and balconies a fluttering wilderness of flags flashed in the sun; daily the young volunteers marched down the wide avenue gay and fine in their new uniforms, the proud fathers and mothers and sisters and sweethearts cheering them with voices choked with happy emotion as they swung by; nightly the packed mass meetings listened, panting, to patriot oratory which stirred the deepest deeps of their hearts, and which they interrupted at briefest intervals with cyclones of applause, the tears running down their cheeks the while; in the churches the pastors preached devotion to flag and country, and invoked the God of Battles beseeching His aid in our good cause in outpourings of fervid eloquence which moved every listener. It was indeed a glad and gracious time, and the half dozen rash spirits that ventured to disapprove of the war and cast a doubt upon its righteousness straightway got such a stern and angry warning that for their personal safety's sake they quickly shrank out of sight and offended no more in that way.

Sunday morning came — next day the battalions would leave for the front; the church was filled; the volunteers were there, their young faces alight with martial dreams — visions of the stern advance, the gathering momentum, the rushing charge, the flashing sabers, the flight of the foe, the tumult, the enveloping smoke, the fierce pursuit, the surrender! Then home from the war, bronzed heroes, welcomed, adored, submerged in golden seas of glory! With the volunteers sat their dear ones, proud, happy, and envied by the neighbors and friends who had no sons and brothers to send forth to the field of honor, there to win for the flag, or, failing, die the noblest of noble deaths. The service proceeded; a war chapter from the Old Testament was read; the first prayer was said; it was followed by an organ burst that shook the building, and with one impulse the house rose, with glowing eyes and beating hearts, and poured out that tremendous invocation:

God the all-terrible! Thou who ordainest! Thunder thy clarion and lightning thy sword!



Then came the “long” prayer. None could remember the like of it for passionate pleading and moving and beautiful language. The burden of its supplication was, that an ever-merciful and benignant Father of us all would watch over our noble young soldiers, and aid, comfort, and encourage them in their patriotic work; bless them, shield them in the day of battle and the hour of peril, bear them in His mighty hand, make them strong and confident, invincible in the bloody onset; help them to crush the foe, grant to them and to their flag and country imperishable honor and glory —

An aged stranger entered and moved with slow and noiseless step up the main aisle, his eyes fixed upon the minister, his long body clothed in a robe that reached to his feet, his head bare, his white hair descending in a frothy cataract to his shoulders, his seamy face unnaturally pale, pale even to ghastliness. With all eyes following him and wondering, he made his silent way; without pausing, he ascended to the preacher’s side and stood there waiting. With shut lids the preacher, unconscious of his presence, continued with his moving prayer, and at last finished it with the words, uttered in fervent appeal, “Bless our arms, grant us the victory, O Lord our God, Father and Protector of our land and flag!”

The stranger touched his arm, motioned him to step aside — which the startled minister did — and took his place. During some moments he surveyed the spellbound audience with solemn eyes, in which burned an uncanny light; then in a deep voice he said:

“I come from the Throne — bearing a message from Almighty God!” The words smote the house with a shock; if the stranger perceived it he gave no attention. “He has heard the prayer of His servant your shepherd, and will grant it if such shall be your desire after I, His messenger, shall have explained to you its import — that is to say, its full import. For it is like unto many of the prayers of men, in that it asks for more than he who utters it is aware of — except he pause and think.

“God’s servant and yours has prayed his prayer. Has he paused and taken thought? Is it one prayer? No, it is two — one uttered, the other not. Both have reached the ear of Him Who heareth all suppli-

cations, the spoken and the unspoken. Ponder this — keep it in mind. If you would beseech a blessing upon yourself, beware! lest without intent you invoke a curse upon a neighbor at the same time. If you pray for the blessing of rain upon your crop which needs it, by that act you are possibly praying for a curse upon some neighbor’s crop which may not need rain and can be injured by it.

“You have heard your servant’s prayer — the uttered part of it. I am commissioned of God to put into words the other part of it — that part which the pastor — and also you in your hearts — fervently prayed silently. And ignorantly and unthinkingly? God grant that it was so! You heard these words: ‘Grant us the victory, O Lord our God!’ That is sufficient. The whole of the uttered prayer is compact into those pregnant words. Elaborations were not necessary. When you have prayed for victory you have prayed for many unmentioned results which follow victory — must follow it, cannot help but follow it. Upon the listening spirit of God fell also the unspoken part of the prayer. He commandeth me to put it into words. Listen!

“O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle — be Thou near them! With them — in spirit — we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with un-availing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames of summer and the icy winds

“O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain.”

of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it — for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet! We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.

(After a pause.) “Ye have prayed it; if ye still desire it, speak! The messenger of the Most High waits!”

It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said. ■

